



PROJECT MUSE®

---

PROSE AND POLITICS

Molly McQuade

The Yale Review, Volume 105, Number 4, October 2017, pp. 159-171 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

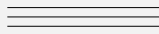
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tyr.2017.0116>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/792472/summary>

P R O S E   A N D   P O L I T I C S



M O L L Y   M c Q U A D E

A funny thing happened as I began to read the insistently dispassionate interpretive pages of Adam Phillips's latest book, *Unforbidden Pleasures*. I felt an impulsive series of small explosions taking place in my bloodstream. Why? The book carries no subtitle, but I will suggest a couple: "Disobedience and Its Discontents" or "How (Not) to Make the Rules Work for You in Your Life."

Usually I would expect from myself a more measured response to Phillips, following a heady slow ramble through his typically meted ratiocinations, ratiocinations such as "Originally there were other people we wanted to murder; but this was too dangerous so we murder ourselves through self-reproach, and we murder ourselves to punish ourselves for having such murderous thoughts." While we're at it, why not also consider an even more adamant adage from his pages: "Omniscience is always prohibitive; and prohibition always smacks of omniscience."

Absolute statements can more easily get away with what they

---

*Unforbidden Pleasures*, by Adam Phillips (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 198 pp., \$25)  
*Life Breaks In (a mood almanack)*, by Mary Cappello (University of Chicago Press, 408 pp., \$29)

say when they are well written, earnest, and seemingly insightful, because then they sound too pure to fight with. We don't want to pause to observe skeptically how or why they're imperfectly fictitious.

So is omniscience "always" prohibitive? Not predictably. It can be heartily affirmative. Does prohibition "always" smack of omniscience? Not when, let's say, a racist beat cop is prohibiting something or someone; prejudice, defined partly by ignorance, is then narrow and narrowing, rather than omniscient.

Even by ever so briefly questioning a sentence, I am disobeying the authority at stake in it. With this astute writer, must my effrontery constitute a forbidden pleasure? I feel like Jane Eyre struggling chastely to refute Mr. Brocklehurst. We both command a kind of purity, and we both fail it. I find myself picturing insolently the person with the pen as one who carries a wobbly tall white powdered wig above his brain; his vest, I know, is flashing. His rhetoric is dimpled, like a story, with subjective partial "truths" and whims embedded, embroidered. I can't quite trust him. He's a worthy much too worldly to be heedlessly, ideally honest. How much does he enjoy summoning decorous irony after irony? I don't know, for he's British — and a Freudian. All bets are off, aren't they?

Let me confess, this cerebral sort of authoritarian rigor, even if intended ironically, makes me want to slap someone, whether myself or Mr. Phillips. And perhaps it is the stern mental exertion required to compare, and to keep comparing, forbidden with unforbidden pleasures in his new book that helps get my combustion going. As Montaigne wrote in an essay supposedly titled "How Our Mind Tangles Itself Up": "It is a pleasant thought to imagine a mind exactly poised between two parallel desires." But how are we to make that mind up?

The explosions tickling my bloodstream thanks to Phillips made me want to inspect them, fathom them, test them — and burst into flame along with them. Days later, I still want to do those things. In fact, the ornery, aptly aloof little volume makes me want to do a lot of things; thinking is only one. Has Phillips perhaps accomplished the unforeseeable, composing a moral how-not-to book for the age of Trump? If so, it is fortuitous, since his work was published first in Great Britain in 2015.

To me this essayist was, and sometimes still is, more like a modern-day Montaigne who may well sieve his life meticulously for insights before marinating them in the chilly juices of philosophy, psychology, and literary criticism. The meal is far from unsucculent or unsavory. But it is willfully plotted and tightly organized. No more logical author occupies a bookshelf. Quite likely Phillips has lived by, with, and through his aphoristic wisdom, extracting it hard-won from the nettlesome demands of daily experience, to wit: “Conscience is intimidating because it is intimidated.” Yet he himself is now rarely present in his prose, which seems to live without him a brainy, wanton, sequestered life which resents and rebuffs a narrator resolutely. The writing could hardly be less intuitive.

Ask it again: Why do I react this time to Phillips with a personal and righteous intemperance, when I never did with his other books?

One reason: his earlier books preserve an “I” in them here or there. The beautifully constructed *Houdini’s Box: The Art of Escape* (2001) offers the author as a recurrent figure in a theme-and-variations geography. Even when Phillips executes the pirouette of a paradox or an apothegm there, it feels warmer: “Like anxious parents, my symptoms keep an eye on me; my suffering provides stability.” A mensch may be seen to wave his hand in greeting to all and sundry, although the knightly “we” speaks for him, as in “If we are having a primary relationship with anything, it may not be with other people but with our own desire.” A decade or more past, Phillips was tempted by the absolution bequeathed to him by sweeping and debatable universal statements, such as “Things are not frightening because they are real, they are real because they are frightening.” But he yielded to temptation less often. In the good old days, Mr. P. was a great deal more like Seigneur de Montaigne than he is at present.

Perhaps something else is at work, also. Perhaps his subject in *Unforbidden Pleasures* has drawn from Phillips a variation in narrative tone. Perhaps I respond disobediently to that tone. Maybe when the undercurrent of a sober two hundred pages offers the option of disobedience the invitation can feel paradoxically prurient. If an author maintains his authority in pared, selfless long paragraphs while paddling upstream with the oars of a quietly

sedition rhetoric, one might well wish to rock that boat. I would seriously doubt that Phillips recognizes the potential for insurrection aboard his neat, seaworthy craft. Rebellion is not his purpose. But for those of us forced to bear witness each day via newspapers to executive heresies, which are performed with the brio of Wile E. Coyote, *rebellion* can sound like a new word. The word burns on without burning out.

I feel as if I'm being ignited when I read the following discontinuous passages from *Unforbidden Pleasures*.

"The tyranny of the forbidden is not that it forbids, but that it tells us what we want – to do the forbidden thing."

"The thing, the real thing, that the forbidden has stopped us thinking about is the unforbidden; unforbidden pleasures have suffered at the hands of the more privileged forbidden pleasures."

"We may want more from life, more from ourselves and other people, than can be given. And it may be impossible for us to want less."

All of this strikes me as indelibly political in its implied consequences. Phillips rarely considers politics except obliquely. Nor need he. By training he is, after all, a psychoanalyst. But his circum-spect reflections unearth for me, as though from under a strobe's strong tick, a repugnant series of cartoon faces. Honoré Daumier, anyone? My conclusion: the international members of that rogues' gallery are currently forbidding anyone and everyone except themselves from finding pleasures worth having. Most of the pleasures they take are vile or obnoxious, killing the very idea of ever being pleased by anything. The unforbidden pleasures, such as beer, mean little to me, even though Phillips stumps for them occasionally. (If it is Obolon beer, that's another story.) What would he have us do about those rogues and their pleasures, anyway?

The three passages I quoted exasperate me partly because they disregard or disdain little things of the world. I'm one. I am just a creature. That is all. A writer's laws, like those of Phillips, when bestowed and published, seem to forbid *me*. As Montaigne opined in "Of Experience," "There is little relation between our actions, which are in perpetual mutation, and fixed and immutable laws." He added, "I am even of the opinion, that we had better have none at all, than to have them in so prodigious a number as we have." Even though the deportment, the ambition, and the founda-

tion of Phillips's laws appear irreproachably moral, an authorial arrogance presides, like the swashbuckling of presidential tweets. Oh, get me an oligarch. At least that guy will probably abide at times in someone else's company, no more a solo dictator. What has happened to the Adam Phillips of yesteryear, who could write with compassion in *Darwin's Worms*, "Everyone is shocked by how much suffering there is in the world, as if we really believe there could, or should, be much less"? Compassion is always relative, of course.

To put it another way, the math teacher in the soul of Phillips would seem to be informing his test-taking students that we're bound to make mistakes, no matter what. But he won't; and he never does. He'll not sit for his own exams, after all. Some people are uncomfortably exempt from the standards they have wrought.

I don't intend to rebuke or decry Mr. Phillips. His writing is far too intelligent. Still, there is a meanness in it.

Ours is, no doubt about it, a negative era. Yet for now negativity is not a true pleasure, whether forbidden or unforbidden. For there are too many things around us to be justly negative about, diluting the power and waylaying or deranging the scope of negative discussion, whatever it may regard. In Jane Fonda's shrewd assessment, even the leader of the free world is "a sore winner," to say nothing of those others bound to lose a lot, or a little, sometime in the near future, including myself, because of him. The Great Forbiddler is like a superego run wild – wilder even than the id is said to run. He is doing exactly what we were told never to do. What happens to someone who takes whatever he craves, especially when it seems to be forbidden, and doesn't look back? He gets elected. We, and he, apparently approve of that.

The mere fact that almost nothing is forbidden to himself by himself will do little to reify or reinstate our less contentious pleasures, those mild amusements which might have calmed and diverted us from going without good reason down forbidden paths. In one sense Phillips is, arguably, incorrect: at the moment, what lies before us are mainly forbidden paths. I don't like any of them.

Is a pleasure a pleasure largely because it was forbidden? Or was it forbidden largely because it was a pleasure? Another way to ask the

same: Why have we been taught to worry so much about whatever might possibly feel good to us, thus revoking our right to it?

To simplify the subject to this degree might seem like an affront to Phillips, if only because the urge to do so challenges the assumption that his (or any) complexity can satisfy us. It's mostly better to be complex, isn't it, especially if you have achieved much? When people in power who don't know enough debunk someone who does, what might be an adequate – or better – response? Nothing seems more difficult, sometimes, than to be just simple enough.

Of course, there is a way to duck out from under the autocracy of forbidden pleasures. One can always say to oneself as the presumptive monarch of one's own life, Well, let's make a forbidden pleasure legal and see where that leads us. Don't forbid it any longer. Do the wrong thing. Last fall I did, once, and consciously, even conscientiously. What did I learn as a result? That I can. That I could. Lifting the burden of the forbidden from myself was accomplished without too much flex of muscle. Whether what I did meant or means anything more remains to be seen. Although I have looked for advice from Phillips about this, I did not receive it.

The steadfastly abstract Adam Phillips rarely considers specific acts or examples in *Unforbidden Pleasures*, which would persuade or prove themselves more readily than a law or a subjective proposition can. Life is not lived only in the head, though I like to think that it is also lived there. True, the head is ingenious. The head is mysterious. My head is my home. And home to Phillips is certainly his head, which welcomes us visitors into the fairly Spartan comforts of its quarters. The mind is what we have left after pleasures leave us. Pleasure *is* the mind.

I finished my first reading of *Unforbidden Pleasures* while curled up in a toddler's armchair in the children's department of a public library, ensconced there in search of random innocence. The fashion statements of young children have become rosily incantatory to me, as if only children were capable of perceiving color in its entirety. "It is the adults," remarks Phillips, "who do the terrible forbidden things; in growing up natural innocence is replaced by unoriginal sin." Sorry, no. My sin, I declare, will not be unoriginal. There I must disobey.

The rattling sounds abounding in the children's wing give read-

ing a very physical quality, with the constant low din suggesting some curious work in progress, headed optimistically for completion. That work in progress, naturally, is reading.

Roaming Phillips's final pages while eyeing the scuffle of little pink dresses and neon-green anklets attached to very small people who are mumbling and cooing near me, I begin to wonder, If only forbiddenness could extend for some adults as far as anklets, then we might have a better shot at solving it. Therein lies pleasure.

And if neon-green anklets might seem to resolve or relieve larger problems posed by Phillips, then how can I regard these as exclusively hard times for being human?

With pronounced differences, Adam Phillips and Mary Cappello both like thinking – very much. Each has given my own thinking a good shake, although their latest books are not their best. I can't imagine any conversation they might share; perhaps neither could they. For that reason, I would hurry off to hear it, ASAP. Whatever I cannot imagine is what I most wish I could. It's dear to me. If only for an instant, that idea makes me happy, or happier.

"I'm one of those people who mistrusts a really good mood," confesses Cappello five pages into her plumply, amply meditative new work of nonfiction, *Life Breaks In (a mood almanack)*. Like Phillips in *Unforbidden Pleasures*, she strikes at the right time. Probably only codgers or teenagers who are getting good sex at long last could now imagine their mood of glee persisting.

If Phillips taps us on the shoulder like a persnickety Montaigne to get our attention, then the motley, nervous, intermittently brilliant oeuvre of Cappello swarms and stuns the reader. Yet Montaigne is still her man. Her essay, "Of Thumbs," remarking and remarking on Montaigne's of the same name, was among the most inspired and accomplished to be included in the 2015 anthology *After Montaigne: Contemporary Essayists Cover the Essays*. There Cappello's ability to dance with a peerless finity of subject, the thumb, without letting her subject slip, seems to invent again the rules of the game. Montaigne's essay about thumbs, as translated by Charles Cotton in the 1947 Doubleday edition, and illustrated by Salvador Dalí, runs to a grand total of 310 words. It is even shorter than hers.

"Of Thumbs" by Cappello sounds each thought as though it



were the one and only note musically possible. She asks, “Can we run counter to custom while also celebrating the customary?” She answers, “Montaigne and I agree that this is a question worth asking the essayist.” After releasing in a versatile series of enchantingly concise paragraphs a tenderly half-mocked array of facts from history about the thumb, she declares modestly, “But what do I know? I know that I don’t know. That’s what Montaigne’s essays always teach me. I give you ‘Of Thumbs,’” she concedes, “as a partial contribution to the infinite play of non-knowledge.” Immaculate touch and selfless focus: these were her paradoxical guiding principles in that essay.

The Cappello of her *Almanack* is markedly and deliberately different. She can be intellectually abrupt. She can be intellectually promiscuous. She can be bossy. She can be pretentious. She can be unforgivably coy. She can be annoyingly intuitive. She can write badly – as if that were the objective. This book is, inside out, heavily gauzy. And yet, the infinite play of non-knowledge, of knowing that she doesn’t know, continues to write with her and write for her, with a suspenseful, tumultuous virtuosity.

A critic in *Rain Taxi* has kvetched, “To a large extent, her analysis consists more of questions than answers, and many of the assertions she does make are mutually contradictory.” But what did Montaigne say? “Our life, like the harmony of the world, is composed of contrary things – of diverse tones, sweet and harsh, sharp and flat, upright and solemn.” He decided, “The musician . . . must know how to make use of them all, and to mix them” (“Of Experience,” trans. Cotton). By contrast, Cappello’s willfully transitional prose resembles the famished mongrel offspring of Virginia Woolf and Walter Benjamin, pleased to survey, infer, surmise, lollygag, slurp, and ransack in the mind. Not incidentally, she misquotes T. S. Eliot. Nonfiction as genre is something for a postmodernist to shoplift, then recycle and repurpose as tenure ammo?

Excuse my gallivanting gigue of mixed metaphors. They step out to meet the unruliness that is an innate part of *Life Breaks In*. In fact, Cappello’s writing reminds me of the time when two big men on a sunny Saturday knocked me down for no apparent reason but their own entertainment in full view of a long line of would-be bus riders, who either ignored the stunt or snickered at

me. I got up, screamed at the two men, frightening them, and failed to get the police seriously interested. But the mishap at least gave me something else to think about: superior strength, rage, smarts, and the wispy body politic. Because of two thugs I found another me. My imagination accepted a sting. Cappello writes to make that happen again.

She considers “what I’m doing here” in the book as “a form of essay-writing – that nongenre that allows for untoward movement, apposition, and assemblage, that is one part conundrum, one part accident, and that fosters a taste for discontinuity . . . sidling up to a reader and intimating, reluctant to explain.” Unsurprisingly, she declares, “I like writing that resists its reader.”

In her work, which she refers to as “my mood trek,” Cappello conceives of “the page” as “a mood space upon which a multitude of forms gathers and converges.” She holds out hope for finding “mood rooms” in that space “for the prospect [they] might offer to enter a state of feeling, the condition of possibility for a feeling, if not of a particular feeling per se.” She cautions, “If moods are rooms, feelings are the objects in those rooms; art their rearrangement.”

What, then, is a mood? Two hundred forty-five pages in, she announces, “*Mood: it was the sound of a person about to think.*” Or “Moods are cubbies and we are their cubs.” Actually, I find her most persuasive definition to be something else: “Moods . . . are the things we turn to in order to express what we cannot narrate and have no words for.” In other words, one might conclude, no book can navigate mood.

Nonetheless, Cappello summons a technique for assaying mood as her subject. Clouds cue her as muses and models. For “if mood materializes in these pages, it just as surreptitiously vanishes.” She elaborates: “Cloud-writing and essaying meet at points of attention and drift, inviting us into the precincts of immersive absorptive planes, inciting altered states.” She asks, “Is cloud-writing tantamount to a writing that stays in the mind after the words evaporate . . . , and in that sense is cloud-writing a mood evocateur?” She admits, “The trick where cloud-writing is concerned may be to let a cloud pass through you rather than assume that observation alone is the route to understanding.” Cappello is just such a cloud to me. I mean that mainly as a compliment.

I quote generously because without the evidence, it might be

impossible to appreciate what the author's up against: no less than giving voice to throngs of water droplets. I don't envy her effort of working through this stuff or of playing with it, and I have read her acknowledgments section with pangs of hunger. What I learned: she thanks upward of one hundred thirty people, on several continents, for helping to support and refine and fund and publicize her mood trek.

Perhaps they are clouds, also.

Vagaries inhere in clouds, and sometimes vice versa. To complain about the vagaries in this volume might be beside the point. I tend to fix on something else entirely as a critical objection: escapism as a *sine qua non* and as a troubling subplot; political escapism, in particular. Even though *Life Breaks In* was composed before November 2016, it was published in that very month, and the absence of a world and a worldliness in it makes me ponder whether too much is missing from all those mood rooms and clouds of Cappello. As Phillips commented with prescience, "One makes the world one's own by forgetting oneself." Temporarily, at least? The closest she comes is, "If we're to write clouds, we must hope to liberate them in the same measure that they liberate us."

True, some of the water droplets emerge from and depend on facts. That is a kind of world, though devoid of politics. There are the facts of an author's autobiography, for instance. We learn that she grew up in Darby, Pennsylvania, that her father's family came from Palermo, and that she lives in Providence, Rhode Island. Her aunt Frances was "chronically depressed." Her father, a sheet-metal worker in the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, was a "perpetual yellor." Her mother, a poet who loved to sing, "made [her] into a listener of the highest order." She is gay and has fought a cancer diagnosis.

Moreover, in certain chapters, Cappello gets enthralled by research, which allows particular worlds to enter. Her fascinations include a philanthropist, the Reverend George W. Hinckley; taxi-dermy; the L. C. Bates Museum in Fairfield, Maine; Charles Daniel Hubbard, who designed and built natural-habitat dioramas; and Margaret Wise Brown, the author of *Goodnight Moon* and many other children's books. Though this is not a work of cultural theory, Gilles Deleuze and Roland Barthes are duly trotted out for a com-

munal curtsy. No one could with fairness fault Cappello for not trying to reach. The question is for what, and what for?

The author's prowess is to fly and flicker from one aurora to another, wondering all the way. Her ability to invoke the infinitesimally physical raptures of completing a thought, or a tremble of thoughts, recommends Cappello as a most unusual stylist, both emotive and cerebral, and unwilling to compromise at all, ever. Consider this paragraph:

Unintentionally, at first, infant mouths create bubbles from tiny pearly types that dribble undistinguishable from food or milk but resonate with sound without the privilege of vibrating teeth. Lip-buzzing bubbles unleash delight, a redounding tickle on the surface of our tongues. In not too long a time, a baby practices making bubbles form-fitting to the mouth's *O* between the lips. A translucent lid as interface, it intermingles with a yawn or a husky baby cough, expellant, until it bursts then starts again. A baby's eyes at this time, afloat in their sockets, more liquid than sighted, are not so different from a bubble in the mouth. To introduce soap into this scenario seems like a civilizing leap – bubbles as objects of detached contemplation, or as playthings that we can take or leave: can you balance one on a stick? Can you pop it before it drifts off, can you bear or unloose its relationship to you?

The prose is fastidious, timeless, unfashionable; and it is Cappello at her most characteristic. Also, it is classic. I'm convinced that Montaigne would have liked it very much. As he put it in "On Experience": "No powerful mind stops within itself: it is always stretching out and exceeding its capacity. It makes sorties which go beyond what it can achieve. It is only half-alive if it is not advancing, pressing forward, getting driven into a corner and coming to blows."

If America now is in a bad mood, or if America *is* a bad mood, as sometimes seems so, then why not hunker down, as soon as possible, and tunnel all the way to find a proper "mood throne" lurking high up somewhere over the rainbow in our peculiar land?

Even though their most recent books suggest few shared affinities, I persist in my faith that Phillips and Cappello have something

significant in common beyond the conviction – all too uncommon – that writing is good for thinking with, and that thinking is good for writing with.

In her essay “Of Thumbs,” saluting Montaigne, as in *Houdini’s Box*, by Phillips, the authors, in different and yet allied senses, adjust the entries and the exits for a reader through the words themselves: the entryways to a mind, the author’s, and the backdoors leading from it, too, which can beckon with an equal grace, an equal urgency. Because these authors are fiendishly gifted, one can read her essay or his book as a kind of disquisition, conducted mostly indirectly by implication, on how to make that series of adjustments, on how to work things so that just because the exits and the entries to or from thoughts are designed with such a finicky aplomb, we are faced not with one mind, the author’s, but apparently with many minds belonging to one alone. Since to me it seems quite difficult to manage or be managed by a single mind, and not by many, the possibilities these authors raise impress me.

The manner of the motion in their prose is what convinces me, because motion is what conveys me through it. One entry in the writing will open just a little, as when Cappello notes in a complete paragraph no more than the following: “A thumb is a sort of finger and yet not a finger at all.” Or consider another small aperture, only a tad less little, also occupying an entire paragraph: “Thumbs are as ugly as penises are beautiful.” The backdoor then snaps shut very quickly, because the entry was tiny. But another entry, the next, will open upon a long paragraph, like a great cave, with room and scope for larger discourse. A reader sidles cautiously into the cave, looks around at crags and streams and shadows, and begins stealthily to climb, finding unsuspected stalagmites, albino scorpions, and more. The exit from the cave of this paragraph must be more gradual and hazardous than many. One pauses to appreciate that. Perhaps there is no door at all.

In that way, too, *Houdini’s Box* is laden from within by small or larger points of access and egress. Readers are summoned into a sunny solarium of dialogue, for example, without another to follow. Or we’re motioned into the close scrutiny of an abstract idea, thanks to a swanky little crimson turnstile. Extended anecdotes of people entice our footsteps forward into parlors or double parlors. From those we saunter at a convivial pace. And so forth. *Houdini’s*

*Box* seemed to provide the author with an ideal opportunity to explore the genre of a book-length essay flexible enough to support internal architecture and footpaths for traffic, perhaps because the metaphor of making adroit escapes from Houdini's magnificent bonds mimics the successful labor of a very good writer.

But what are we to do with all of this before us?

Without looking for any messianic goal, or for any messianic writers, either, I'd say that at their best, these two, Cappello and Phillips, can and will grant us the right and the means to think better than the worst of our time, which also entails the right and the means to imagine with more breadth and spirit a much better time than our own.

"Imaginative life is almost exclusively about elsewhere," Phillips has warned. So, go there, and come back altered. I did.