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Psychoanalysis

Melvyn Bragg : It's a hundred years since Sigmund Freud the founder of psychoanalysis, a term which he coined, published "The Interpretation of Dreams". Six years after his death, Freud's influence and the influence of that book has been felt in the 20th century in everything from the arts, history and anthropology to of course psychology and even science. But at the end of the 20th century has psychoanalysis become too fractured and too insistent on privileging the past over the present, to go forward into the future?

Joining me are Dr Juliet Mitchell, one of Britain's foremost feminine thinkers and theorists, a practising psychoanalyst, she's a fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge, and is in the department of Political and Social Sciences there. Her many works "Psychoanalysis and Feminism" to "Whose Afraid of Feminism" are renowned for their challenges to orthodoxy, even as central tenets of orthodox feminism itself.

Adam Phillips has been described as "our leading proponent of the validity and vitality of the Freudian ideal". He's been described as an anti-Freudian Freudian psychoanalyst, who's fascinated by the literary and the ambiguous. His collection of essays on psychoanalysis, the latest being "The Beast in the Nursery", published last year, have established his reputation as the leading writer in his field. He said, "Psychoanalysis is only just beginning to get the kind of public scrutiny, the intelligent hostility it needs, and that will allow people to decide, both the people who can afford it and the people who can't, whether it's worth keeping". Adam why do you think it needs intelligent hostility?

Adam Phillips: I think one of the problems about evaluating psychoanalysis has been the inevitable privacy of it as a therapy. That is to say that nobody can know, other than the participants what goes on in a psychoanalysis, and even they have a limited sense of what's going on. So if you haven't actually undergone analysis or practised it, it is as though, from the position of the orthodoxy, you're not quite in a position to evaluate it, which means effectively it can be only evaluated by those who do it.

That inevitably, I think, limits the field, and I think psychoanalysis has gained a lot from being read by and being interpreted by people who have all sorts of other kinds of interests in other things as well as psychoanalysis itself.

Melvyn Bragg : Given the position that you put there, that it is between two people privately, for an hour, and the condition is that this will not be spoken about in public in any way, even if this is recorded as a case history, the person is called X or Y or whatever. Isn't it always going to be like that? How can it be subject to any kind of scrutiny at all?

Adam Phillips : Well, it can be... the only scrutiny that's available for, I think is people talking about their experience of analysis. People writing about their experience of analysis. both as practitioners and as so-called patients.

Juliet Mitchell : But I don't see how this differs from so many other subjects, I mean we can't test what a cell-biologist does, I mean we can't test what most scientists do, and I know you don't want to use the word science for psychoanalysis, and I couldn't care less whether we do or don't in one sense. I think we can use it in a very general sense, we can, and if we restrict it we can't, but it seems to me, just, that's an inevitable factor that one cannot know a specialist's work, except by being involved in it, and though I agree with you that widening it out and people from other fields coming in and making use of it, does contribute something, I do still think, and I would argue for, the necessity of that private, very confidential relationship, which can only be known, in one sense by the two people involved, but of course it's replicated by other people who come. . . . are doing the same. . . . repeating the same sort of thing in their own private consulting rooms, and coming up with comparable information, which is then compared in the write-up.

Melvyn Bragg : But this is actually the nub of Freudianism isn't it really, whether it is or not a science, which was very important to him? Surely you can test what a cell-biologist can do, another cell-biologist can test it. You as a cell-biologist can say "look the cell behaves in this way, which gives us this result, which is very important. Adam you try that, if you find the same thing, we're on to something". You can't do that in analysis, you can't say. . . .

Juliet Mitchell : You can to a certain extent, actually Melvyn, I mean you can actually say "look X number of

people are showing this, this and this as response", let's say to a typical response to trauma or something. You can say, "now we have seen over many, many generations, this type of psychological response to this type of trauma", just give that as an example, you can then make a comparable assumption, from that comparability you can make an assumption. It's not identical and I think that what we've got to do now is be much more wide in our application of the term science, than Freud was at the time he was writing, and I think most scientists would agree now, that there is a lot that is intuitive in science. There's a lot that is imaginative in science, and we have to broaden that field. Feminism itself very much went into the scientific field and said "look this is a very masculine conception of science, it's a very limited testability or non-testability, and we've got to take many other factors into account". If you take a broader view of science, which is being done now, then psychoanalysis perfectly well fits in.

Melvyn Bragg : Yes, I mean and people as differing as Susan Greenfield and Oliver Sachs are both reclaiming Freudian analysis for science. Adam Phillips is it the institutionalisation of psychoanalysis you're objecting to?

Adam Phillips : No I don't object to it, I just think the problems of institutionalising it are part of the project of doing it. That is to say it's not that I think that psychoanalysts, or people interested in it shouldn't group together, or share views or anything like that, I just think it's striking the fact that if you produce a description of something called the "unconscious" which seems to be something that disrupts coherence, if you like, it's very difficult to, in a sense, institutionalise the unconscious. So when Juliet says psychoanalysis is a specialism, I think what's perplexing is what exactly that specialism is, as in "what are psychoanalysts specialising in? ".

Juliet Mitchell : The unconscious.

Adam Phillips : How can you specialise in the unconscious?

Juliet Mitchell : Well of course you can, you can specialise in techniques for enabling you to have some access to unconscious modes of thinking. It's not a "thing" the unconscious, it's a way of thinking. It's not just that it disrupts our. . . what we call our secondary process thinking, our rational discourses as we're ha. . . hopefully having it now! It's that it actually has other forms of discourse itself, such as dreams, and symptoms for example that if you think of your dreams, and I mean we. . . this is the ABC of it, that if you think of your dreams, they don't follow in logical sequences as our speech hopefully does now, they form juxtapositions, condensations, displacements, whatever you like saying, symbolisations etc. They work differently and you can have access to that mode of unconscious thinking. It's not the unconscious itself which is just a hypothesis. It's something that we see manifest in alternative ways of thought.

Adam Phillips : But if there's a technique, are psychoanalysts effectively, in your view, technicians of unconscious thinking, that is to say, "people who have a special sense of how to tap, get access to, re describe unconscious processes"?

Juliet Mitchell : Well I wouldn't put them as technicians, I think there is a technique and therefore people who use it are if you like technicians of it yes.

Melvyn Bragg : Is this technique markedly different from that used by certain artists?

Juliet Mitchell : It's markedly different from anything in one sense, and I think here from what I know of Alan's work he and I would disagree on this. I think that if you're really doing a psychoanalytic treatment, and a psychoanalytic practice, what you're doing is *not* listening to a story or a conversation or anything like that. What you're doing is asking for the analyst and the patient to suspend anything that they can of conscious censorship of what they're saying and just say what comes into their head, when you can actually say something that is what we call free association then you've really in some sense *have* suspended the censorship and something comes in which will produce contiguity with something else and from that you get a whole system of associations.

Melvyn Bragg : Adam?

Adam Phillips : I think the problem is in the phrase, "what we're really doing". When Juliet says, "when we're really doing psychoanalysis we're doing X", I think one of the interesting things about psychoanalysis is that there really is a diversity of view about what it is to really do it, and that I think one of the things that psychoanalysis is

interesting about, is this question of authority, of how it comes about that people feel in a position to speak authoritatively, or what in themselves feels authoritative. In other words, it seems to me as much about working out which voices inside oneself are privileged and why, and the history of that process, and I think that it's inevitably, it defies conventional causality, that when you're talking about the unconscious, you're talking about other ways of thinking, non-instrumental ways of thinking, in which consequences are not predictable, and to free associate seems to me is to be able to see where your words happen to go, and the analyst then has to intervene, and the question then is, "What does the analyst do with ? At what point do they punctuate? What's the nature of the intervention, or what is the purpose of the intervention?" In other words, "What's the analyst persuading the patient of?". Now I think that . . . I think Juliet and I would disagree about this, because for me psychoanalysis is much more a form of moral education, and a rhetoric of persuasion, than it is a release of something.

Juliet Mitchell : I definitely disagree I think it's absolutely. . . if it's that then it's gone down even quite a dangerous track, in a sense, if it's to be moral persuasion, I really do profoundly disagree with almost everything you've said there actually!

Melvyn Bragg : But it does seem from what you're saying, I'm just slightly playing devil's advocate that this act of free association, this releasing the unconscious, this is the holy grail, once that this comes then the whole human being can be described and set right. . . . ?

Juliet Mitchell : Absolutely not at all. It's a very modest claim that you get at something. I think perhaps I'm emphasising it more because I think there's a lot of misunderstanding, that people. . . there's such a fashion for the narrative and the story at the moment that people think that psychoanalysis is about getting a story and perhaps I'm trying to say "look it's not about getting a story", that's the mistake the recovered memory therapists and people are making is it's getting back to a story of original abuse or original trauma or something, it's not. Once you start listening to the story in psychoanalysis, you've stopped being a psychoanalyst.

Melvyn Bragg : You said something very striking, Adam Phillips, you said that, "Psychoanalysis is paid conversations with people as to how they want to live", which I think will surprise many listeners, they would think, "Gosh, it's much grander than that, it's much broader than that, it's much more resonant than that", I mean that sort of puts it in

Juliet Mitchell : It's much more *difficult* than that that's the point! That just would be so easy, it's a painful difficult process, that not many people want to take on.

Adam Phillips : Is it easy to have a conversation about how to live?

Juliet Mitchell : It's easy to have a conversation, whether it's about how to live is another matter, but it's easy to have a conversation relatively speaking. It's much more difficult to go through an analytic treatment. . .

Adam Phillips : Does the difficulty in itself make it of value?

Juliet Mitchell : Yes.

Adam Phillips : And what's the significance about the fact that it's difficult? Why does that matter?

Juliet Mitchell : Because one of the things that many people are doing when they're having difficulty. . . having symptoms, is I think, protecting themselves, a symptom is a protection, against something that is too painful to take on, that's too unbearable, and the difficulty is a mark of the degree of pain that people, have necessarily and understandably had to avoid, but they're not any longer avoiding efficaciously, if you like, and so in that sense, the difficulty is commensurate with the pain that they have been avoiding, so yes it has to be difficult.

Melvyn Bragg : Why is the paying so important Adam? Paid conversations. . .

Juliet Mitchell : Because he doesn't. oh paying.

Adam Phillips : Pain.

Melvyn Bragg : Paid.

Juliet Mitchell : Paid!

Melvyn Bragg : Paid conversations.

Adam Phillips : Well I think that. . . I think it's an interesting question this, because one of the questions is , "well what does the so-called patient give the analyst", I think if you live in a certain culture there are certain kinds of contract and I think it's inevitable, I mean in many ways I would prefer to live in a world in which people could you know, if you were very good at making cakes or knitting you would knit me a pull-over and I as it were, would give you psychotherapy. But since we don't, I think it's very important that people pay because there's a symbolic exchange because it in a sense frees people. It also means that, in a sense, psychoanalysis is, as it were, contaminated by the criteria of the culture, as in it becomes part of the culture. People can ask questions like, "Am I getting my money's worth? ". Now in a sense, from one point of view, this is nonsensical, I mean are you getting your money's worth if you're cured, if you're happier, if you feel more authentic, it's not obvious. But it seems to me quite important that people are, have. . . can argue from some position about the **value** of what they're receiving. That seems to me to be important.

Melvyn Bragg : It's interesting.

Juliet Mitchell : I don't mind about pay!

Melvyn Bragg : You don't mind about pay?

Juliet Mitchell : No I think there's a history of being paid.

Melvyn Bragg : What about people that can't pay?

Juliet Mitchell : There's clinics where you can get means related psychoanalysis.

Melvyn Bragg : So this reduces the activity. If you have an unpaid conversation is this less of a conversation.

Adam Phillips : No.

Juliet Mitchell : I don't think it's a conversation, and I don't think the paying. . . . that we have a culture in which the history of psychoanalysis is that there was a choice to go into the health service after the war, and the choice was not to because of retaining independence from controls and. . . . and questions like confidentiality. . . .

Melvyn Bragg : Yes but actually I was. . . one has read often, sorry to cut in I didn't mean to be rude, that the paying was an important part of the act.

Adam Phillips : It depends what one means by "important". I don't think it's integral; to the process of doing it at all, and one of the wonderful things for example about child psychotherapy was that it was in the health service, it was available, and I don't think anyone has found, that I've come across, that psychoanalysis is better or worse paid for or not. I do think though that it's a factor in the treatment if you're paying. It can't help but have some significance.

Melvyn Bragg : As this is the 100th anniversary of "The Interpretation of Dreams", d'you think that, Juliet Mitchell, do you think that what Freud said in there, largely, has still got central relevance to the way we should think about ourselves today?

Juliet Mitchell : I think it's extremely important about dreams, and whether you think dreams are relevant to us, is a matter of choice in a sense, I think dreams are very relevant. Take people invalided out of war situations, with severe symptoms, which have no organic basis as they can find out, like you know paralyses etc and they have terrible nightmares. One stage of recovery is often when you get an absence of dreaming and then once people start

to dream again they're actually on the way to recovery, something. . . we do process something, rather important in our dream lives.

Melvyn Bragg : Or could that just be time-lapsing though couldn't it?

Juliet Mitchell : Yes but the dreaming itself is important, and what Freud did. . . .

Melvyn Bragg : Can we **prove** that, as a matter of interest?

Juliet Mitchell : I think you can, probably, I mean that it actually does protect sleeping. . . . er

Melvyn Bragg : Is it? Because there's a report I read just the other week, that it didn't at all.

Juliet Mitchell : I know, this is in debate at the moment, but nobody is actually proved either way, but can I just get to the Freud part about it? What Freud did was to understand how dreams work, and I think that still does hold good, and so it's understanding or you can say it's another language or whatever you like, I mean you're using "language" in a very loose sense there, but there is a dream mechanism, a dream method, if you like, which is utterly other than our waking methods of thinking. It's an alternative system of thoughts.

Melvyn Bragg : Is it?

Juliet Mitchell : and I think Freud understood, not definitively, you can add many more things to it, you can criticise it in all sorts of ways, but he understood something absolutely crucial about the method of thinking there.

Melvyn Bragg : Or is it just an edited and highlighted way. er of ourselves?

Juliet Mitchell : No!

Adam Phillips : Well, there might be another way of answering the question you see, I think which is that William James once said "The question to ask of any idea is, "How would my life be better if I believed it? "" , now I think it's more interesting to think along the lines of "How is my life better if my dreams are meaningful? " Now obviously that question can be answered in lots of ways. Now Freud shows us ways in which if you take dreams seriously in the way he wanted us to, certain kinds of meanings emerge, that are surprising or shocking to the person who's dreamt them. Now that seems to me to be both of interest and practically, that is to say, people, in my experience are struck by how inventive they are in their dream-life, how this is , as it were, another way of thinking about the things that preoccupy them.

But you might think. . . . you see, there might be a way of addressing that, I think, which is, there's a very interesting French psychoanalyst called La Planche, and he has, in a way, a very simple idea, which is that the reason childhood is important is that because, as an infant and a young child one is extremely receptive to the influence of one's parents, and yet very undeveloped, as in , very unable to process whatever it is that parents and the adults are communicating to the child. In other words the child is the recipient of very perplexing messages, which he or she can't help but work on and work out. So that I think that there's something very important about the child's relative immaturity, and the fact that the parents are grown-ups, and there's a kind of, as it were, a mismatch, there's an inevitable match between these two developmental stages.

Melvyn Bragg : But can I just ask you about the romantic notion of Freud, which you seem to me to continue forward from words through Freud, to yourself that everything. that growing up is a loss. What. leaving childhood is an inevitable process of disillusionment, and entering the culture, learning even to talk elaborately, to tell narratives is something that is a deprivation of certain things.

Adam Phillips : Not as straightforward. it's. from my point of view a process of illusion and disillusionment and reillusionment, this is an ongoing process. That there is an inevitable jarring between my wishes about the way I want, and think I need the world to be, and what I experience, and my life is the way in which these are negotiated. It's not that growing up is a process of disillusionment, you might say that growing up is a process of, as it were, increasingly satisfying illusionment, or increasingly realistically satisfying illusionment, or something

like that. But I think the life story that suggests that basically life is a process of mourning , seems to me to be rather misleading, and to rather load the dice, and I think maybe one of the disagreements I have with Juliet, is that I don't think of life as a process of pain management, or of development as being a question of how one manages psychic pain , I think the problem of managing pleasure is, for many people, as difficult, and I think that psychoanalysis, in some of its forms, has erred on the side of the "veil of tears" approach.

Juliet Mitchell : Well, I of course don't think that's. . . . that's just one aspect of it I think. I want to just return and look at the last question about this romantic view of childhood to what Adam was saying previously about La Planche's work, well of course what Freud was emphasising, and we are in a sense talking about 100 years of Freud, is the importance of what's called "neotony" the premature birth of the human infant in conjunction with the development of the mind and the other sort of evolutionary developments that mankind has had, and it is that condition that being born prematurely makes us utterly dependent on our first keepers, our first carers, the people who first look after us, feed us etc, we're utterly dependent, we would die without them.

Melvyn Bragg : Because we're unfinished when we're born?

Juliet Mitchell : We're unfinished when we're born, that's right. We're born absolutely unfinished and therefore we have to have a rather intensive relationship with somebody who will look after us, for us to survive, and that's what, in a sense, is the precondition that makes those first years so important , and in a sense makes them an area for possible acquisition of human culture within a very short amount of time. I mean it's remarkable if you think how early a baby learns to speak , and to understand. A baby understands things long before they even speak, and so you know, it's a very amazing concentration.

Melvyn Bragg : Adam's worried that their speaking sometimes. . . . learning to speak sometimes gets in the way of their better understanding. (Juliet laughs)

Adam Phillips : Well I. . . . it's complicated this. I just think that there's. . . . because it can only be spoken right in words this, but I think it is extraordinary as Juliet says, that one goes from a state of not speaking, but clearly feeling with a great intensity , to speaking, and what happens in that process. Now I'm mystified, as mystified as anybody by this, but it just is extraordinary than one acquires something called language, in which one then reconstructs what it is one might have been feeling, as a baby or a child, and that's fascinating, that process.

Melvyn Bragg : Do you think that psychoanalysis privileges the past over the future too much?

Juliet Mitchell : Yes in some senses I think it can do, and I think it's terrible if people get caught as I said in the sort of recovered memory thing of just, you know, "solve the past, and the future will take care of itself", no I think that's a terrible dimension of it. It can do and it shouldn't do.

Adam Phillips : I think it. . . at its best it privileges the past to make the future possible. That in a way it's trying to enable people, or to release people into their futures.

Melvyn Bragg : Finally, is there a sense in which in the last particularly 20-30 years, there's been a sweeping forward of Darwinism into every discipline that one can think of almost, and Freud is being seriously marginalised, although there are comebacks, but Darwin seems to be the bigger explanation, a stronger explanation, and psychoanalysis has had, especially in America to fight for its respectable life in a way. Do you think that there is a sense in which it has served its time, had its time rather? Juliet Mitchell.

Juliet Mitchell : No, actually I think the American situation is particular in that it's had to undergo a major switch from being a very medicalised psychiatric profession to being a much more lay profession with many different types of practitioners now involved and interested in it. I think it's going through a change, I think I'll make a. . . . bit of a prediction that it's going to. . . . that Freud's going to come back, actually, that as we get more and more concerned with changing family structures, with violence and all these sorts of issues, there are so many insights and explanations that you can gain from psychoanalytic research that I think there will be some sort of comeback. Whether it's actually in the name of Freud or in something else. . . from. . . emanating from him, I'm not sure, but,

. . .

Melvyn Bragg : Freud's insights and Freud's views about the society and those which you can extrapolate from his writings, I agree with you, but Adam in the one to one which we began this, in the one to one relationship between a person going into analysis and the analyst himself, has that, very crude, but has that got a future?

Adam Phillips : Oh I think it's certainly got a future. I think that. . . I think you need Darwin and Freud, I mean Darwin says the aim is to survive and reproduce our genetic material.

What Freud adds to this equation is the notion of happiness, of pleasure. Darwin doesn't have a theory of happiness. Once you put happiness into the Darwinian equation, you have a very interesting problem on your hands, and I think that we should have both. I think it would be a shame to lose the way in which. . . because of course Freud, apart from being a bit of a Lamarquian, he was also a Darwinian.

Juliet Mitchell : Well I think that Freud's Lamarquianism which is famous, nevertheless addresses a very real question which is, "How do we inherit characteristics? ", such as emotions and these sorts of things, so it's an important question.

Melvyn Bragg : I think it's a question.

Juliet Mitchell : Actually Darwin's emotion and Freud's are going to come together, because Darwin, of course did write on emotion, and I think Freud and Darwin will come together on that.

Adam Phillips : I agree.

Melvyn Bragg : And sadly we'll have to draw this to a close, thanks very much to Juliet Mitchell and Adam Phillips, and thank you for listening.