

Book review

The Examined Life. Steven Grosz. London, UK: Vintage, 2014, xii + 225 pages, £8.99 (softcover), ISBN 978-0-099-54903.

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Two prisoners languish in adjacent cells, wishing to communicate with each other. They learn that the most effective way of doing so is by exchanging taps on the wall that divides their cells. The prisoners connect through the very partition that separates them. In this way, the philosopher Simone Weil writes of her thought experiment, “every separation is a link” (1952, p. 132). The apparent contradiction in this proposition holds pivotal intrigue for London-based psychoanalyst Stephen Grosz in his debut book ‘*The Examined Life*’. The paradoxical link-separation function of Weil’s prisoners’ wall forms the cornerstone on which Grosz builds his collection of vignettes, each a short meditation on a particular topic animated by Grosz’s professional and personal experiences. Subtitled ‘*How We Lose and Find Ourselves*’, Grosz’s elegant anthology of thumbnail sketches provides example after powerful example of the links present in the walls we construct to separate us from ourselves and from others. By examining how we are lost and found, ‘*The Examined Life*’ lays bare the project of psychoanalysis, profiling the ‘what’ of its theory and the ‘how’ of its practice in a way that combines accessibility with intellectual rigour and theoretical integrity, ensuring that the book holds appeal for a broad readership.

“This book is about learning how to live”, claims the bolded tagline on the back of ‘*The Examined Life*’. After adumbrating Weil’s prisoners’ wall scenario in the preface, Grosz details his understanding of what learning how to live entails: “This book is about that wall. It’s about our desire to talk, to understand and be understood. It’s also about listening to each other: not just the words but also the gaps in between. What I’m describing here isn’t a magical process. It’s something that is a part of our everyday lives – we tap, we listen” (p. xii). True to his introductory words, over the course of five broad-themed sections – ‘Beginnings’, ‘Telling Lies’, ‘Loving’, ‘Changing’, ‘Leaving’ – Grosz delights in considering the tension embedded in Weil’s prisoners’ wall, his pages thrumming with the strain of its dual functionality. Inviting the reader behind the soundproofed door of the psychoanalyst, the characters and scenarios Grosz introduces leave us in no doubt that tapping on such walls in an effort to be heard is a part of our everyday lives; that there are multiple ways in which we lose ourselves.

And yet what of being found? How do we come to listen? Grosz’s book is fuelled by an assumption: that we are only able to find ourselves through the very ways in which we become lost. By becoming familiar with our defences, we expand their role; the methods through which we seek the most extreme forms of separation have the potential to become the paths through which we acquire the most intimate insights and self-

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knowledge. Yet such potential is only realised through an examination of our everyday lives. At the centre of an examined life is a realisation: that in which we are most invested is that against which we are most strongly defended. Gaps are at least as significant as the words they abut. Greater obstruction is inseparably linked to deeper connection. It is one and the same wall; every separation is a link.

Throughout 'The Examined Life', Grosz deftly demonstrates that such a revelation does not occur in isolation. We need help finding ourselves. Learning how to examine our everyday lives may not constitute an act of magic, but it most certainly involves a process and an interpersonal process at that. Psychoanalysis is an opportunity to be led by a professional on a backstage tour of our psyche; to be guided through our own private archaeology. By being listened to, we learn how to listen. As our taps on the wall finally fall on ears that have been trained to receive them, we might realise not only *that* we are tapping but also *why* and *how* we've come to do so. We may begin to map out the dimensions of walls we have constructed and to see the ways in which they can be used to link us back to the world and ourselves, rather than separating us from these domains. By providing punchy illustrations of how, held and guided by a professional, we can learn to talk *and* listen, Grosz gracefully navigates the intricacies of this complex process.

Grosz gently introduces a diverse sample of material that aligns with the 'what' of psychoanalytic theory. With a propensity to show rather than tell (and unafraid to echo Freud's phraseology; "Experience has taught me . . ." Grosz writes in the book's very first chapter), Grosz places at his reader's disposal both specific psychoanalytic ideas and the broader tenets from which they stem, fleshing out with particular concepts the thematic bones of psychoanalytic theory.

Of all the psychoanalytic concepts that Grosz profiles, he explicitly names only splitting and transference. He defines both terms precisely and economically. In doing so, he ensures that lay readers will be able to understand these terms easily while those better versed in the psychoanalytic paradigm will remain content. According to Grosz, transference is "how we all construct each other according to early blueprints" (p. 201) while splitting is "an unconscious strategy that aims to keep us ignorant of feelings in ourselves that we're unable to tolerate" (p. 69). The latter is encapsulated in a story Grosz had told to him by Abby, a woman he sat next to on an aeroplane. Although Abby's Jewish father disowned her when she married a blonde-haired, Catholic man, it later emerged that he had been in the midst of a twenty-five year affair with his receptionist, a blonde-haired, Catholic woman. Abby understands the events through a maxim she imparts to Grosz: 'The bigger the front, the bigger the back'. Grosz uses Abby's maxim to further expand the notion of splitting, believing it to be "more telling than the psychoanalytic term. Splitting is thinner, less dynamic; it suggests two separate, disjointed things. Abby's saying captures the fact that front and back are a part of each other" (p. 70). In this way, Grosz opens out to his reader the richness and usefulness of the notion of splitting without allowing the complexities inherent in the term to alter the straightforwardness of his explanation.

Grosz presents a number of other concepts central to psychoanalysis in a similar way. Remaining unnamed, each idea is unfurled with an ease of explanation that adequately honours its intricacies whilst avoiding becoming overcomplicated by them. The subtle sophistication and skill exercised by Grosz in achieving this is evident in his depiction of acting out: "I believe that all of us try to make sense of our lives by telling our stories, but

Peter was possessed by a story that he couldn't tell. Not having the words, he expressed himself by other means. Over time, I learned that Peter's behaviour was the language he used to speak to me...our childhoods leave in us stories like this – stories we never found a way to voice, because no one helped us to find the words. When we cannot find a way of telling our story, our story tells us...we find ourselves acting in ways we don't understand" (pp. 9-10). So too is it found in Grosz's commentary on displacement. This discussion arises from his interpretation of the motivations behind the chronic lies told by his analysand, Philip, who had a history of childhood bedwetting that was never explicitly acknowledged by his mother, although she washed and folded his bedclothes every morning. As Philip's outrageous lies are never believed, his motivations behind telling them appear, on the surface, futile and malicious. Yet, according to Grosz, they serve an important function for Philip. When his mother was alive and he was a child, Philip's "bedwetting and her silence gradually developed into a private conversation – something only they shared. When his mother died, this conversation abruptly came to an end...Philip's lying was not an attack upon intimacy...It was his way of keeping the closeness he had known, his way of holding on to his mother" (pp. 42-43).

Such clarity and economy of exposition and explanation are found time and again in Grosz's treatment of other psychoanalytic concepts. In just one sentence, Grosz conveys to his reader the mechanism of projection and its potential for substitute satisfaction when he says to a analysand, whose husband has become the receptacle for the anger and frustration she is feeling towards their new child, "It'll be hard to desire Paul if you're finding it useful to hate him" (p. 107). Grosz imparts the phenomenology and hazards of alexithymia with a similar efficiency when he uses the analogy of leprosy to capture how his teenage analysand's internal world was tapered by a history of neglect: "Matt suffered from a kind of psychological leprosy; unable to feel his emotional pain, he was forever in danger of permanently, maybe fatally, damaging himself" (p. 26). With comparable and consistent parsimony and care, Grosz brings forth other concepts relevant to the psychoanalytic paradigm, including dreams and their significance, transitional objects, fantasy and its value in everyday life, humour and boringness and their use as defenses, repetition compulsion, attachment and mirroring, silence and its uses, optimal frustration, intergenerational transmission of trauma and being scripted into unconscious roles.

The specific concepts Grosz delineates are united by a number of broader psychoanalytic assumptions. Of these, the tenet reiterated most frequently and with the greatest strength is that our lives are always inadvertently duplicitous. "Consciously, Sarah wanted to meet someone and fall in love, but unconsciously, there was another story", writes Grosz (p. 128). Examples of these other stories fill 'The Examined Life' alongside the cover stories by which they are masked, highlighting the multiplicity of meanings that bind behaviour and interpretation, words and intentions, and conscious and unconscious processes. While, in relation to a particular analysand, Grosz asks, "What possible psychological purpose could his behaviour serve?" (p. 41), his insights throughout the book reveal that this question is far from particular just to this analysand. A female analysand, raised in poverty, ruins in the washing machine the Prada wool suit she delighted in buying for her daughter earlier that day. According to Grosz, this is no accident but, instead, a sign of unconscious envy. A male analysand shares intimate moments, but not sex, with a prostitute he has just started to visit. For Grosz, his analysand is not unwittingly committing a mistake (as he claims), but, rather, enacting vengeance on his partner, the depth of the bond she shares with their newborn child unconsciously awakening his jealousy. Similarly, Grosz suggests that there is more to Language and Psychoanalysis, 2015, 4 (2), 64-71
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paranoid fantasies than that which initially meets the eye. Over and above their apparent signalling of a delusional break from reality, paranoid fantasies serve a protective function: “It is less painful...to feel betrayed than to feel forgotten...the paranoid knows that someone is thinking about him...[and is] shielded from the catastrophe of indifference”(pp. 83-85). Through his exploration of the assumption that anything is rarely ever as it seems, Grosz makes clear that a psychoanalytic lens rarely allows for coincidence; we are always in excess of ourselves.

The interrelatedness of the past, present and future is another broad psychoanalytic theme that recurs in ‘The Examined Life’. “Psychoanalysts are fond of pointing out that the past is alive in the present. But the future is alive in the present too...the future is a fantasy that shapes our present”, writes Grosz (p. 157). The interleaving of past, present and future is especially noticeable in the pithy observations that Grosz makes about his analysands’ behaviours. “You hoped having a baby would undo the unhappiness of your own childhood” (p. 106), he says to a woman struggling with the challenges of new motherhood. Grosz questions an elderly professor who had only recently started expressing his homosexuality about whether “part of the power of being held by a man was that it undid the rejection, the pain he’d suffered from his father” (p. 78). Grosz paints a picture of the past, present and future forming a Borromean knot: bleeding into and exerting inseparable influence over each other in a way that transcends linear time.

Also featuring heavily in the book as overarching psychoanalytic themes are the dialectics of absence-presence, lack-desire and change-loss, alongside the paradoxes that they encompass. Grosz posits that we often have a harder time accepting one polarity than the other within these polemics, even though both are unable to exist in isolation. Take Michael for example, Grosz’s analysand who feels unable to be in a relationship with his girlfriend and is continually tormented by the absence-presence dialectic. For Michael, the person he most wants, upon whom he is the most dependent, quickly becomes the person he most avidly avoids. Michael experiences love as an impossible requirement, a demand through which someone wants more of him than he is ever able to give. Michael as a young man sees Grosz for one session before Grosz refers him on to a more experienced analyst. Twenty years later, Michael revisits Grosz and reveals that he misses his old analyst, who has died recently. “I can’t do intimacy, but I can feel lonely” (p. 54), Michael states, touchingly. As is the case with the other dialectics that Grosz vivifies, he imbues his portrayal of Michael’s oscillation between two extremes with a high level of sensitivity. This allows the reader to sense tangibly the spectrum that lies between these two polarities, increasing the relatability of the analysand’s situation and engendering understanding and empathy for the analysand in the reader.

Alongside Grosz’s exploration of the ‘what’ of psychoanalytic theory sits his elucidation of the ‘how’ of psychoanalytic practice. Throughout ‘The Examined Life’, Grosz provides a nuts and bolts account of psychoanalytic practice, making clear to the reader the work of an analyst. Any reader wondering what it is that an analyst does or what the process of psychoanalysis entails will have a deeper understanding of answers to both of these queries by the end of Grosz’s book. The premise that the therapy room is a microcosm of an analysand’s everyday life forms the background against which Grosz outlines the process of psychoanalytic practice. “It seemed to me that Francesca wasn’t simply reprising her mother’s role as the betrayed wife – she was also putting me in the very same position she’d been in as a child”, Grosz reflects about the dynamics that drive his interactions with one analysand, “Was she, unconsciously, involuntarily, Language and Psychoanalysis, 2015, 4 (2), 64-71

communicating to me the frustration and isolation she'd once felt?" (p. 60). Similarly, Grosz hypothesises that, in her exchanges with him, another analysand "wanted to feel that she was the busy mother and I, along with her husband, was another demanding child" (p. 104). Through examples such as these, Grosz reveals the inextricable links between that which occurs within the therapy room and that which propels the world outside of it.

At various points in 'The Examined Life', Grosz expounds on some of the responsibilities that he believes form part of the psychoanalyst's professional skill set. Acknowledging his temptation to persuade an analysand to take a certain path when she faces a decision, Grosz writes that his job as an analyst is "instead to find a useful question" (p. 128). Myriad examples of such questions can be found in his work. Rather than providing an answer to his analysand's question about why a particular memory from her past has resurfaced in the session, Grosz responds with another question: "Why do you think?" (p. 89). Grosz purposefully asks for clarification from a analysand who is questioning his sexuality, "I'm sorry...I don't understand. Why do you think you're gay?" "So you don't think I'm gay?" the analysand responds. "I'm trying to understand why *you* think you're gay" (italics in original, p. 47). Grosz adopts a similar position when faced with an analysand who is trying to work out whether to leave her long-term boyfriend: "You don't think he'll make a good dad, do you?" she asked. "What do you think?" I asked. "He can change, can't he?" "What makes you think he wants to change?" I asked" (p. 153). Grosz shows the usefulness of an analyst meeting analysands' questions with further questions, maintaining neutrality while drawing analysands' attention to the possible reasons driving the questions that they ask.

Grosz likens the job of an analyst to that of tour guide when he reflects on a poignant journey he undertook with his father to the sites of his father's childhood in Hungary: "Sometimes, like Alex [the tour guide], I take my patients back to the place they started from, using whatever landmarks remain. I too help them pace out an invisible but palpable world. At times, I feel I'm a tour guide – part detective, part translator" (p. 187). For Grosz, analysts in their role as part detective, part translator – as conduits through which the past is unearthed and worked through – should adopt a stance that embraces benign harrying. Grosz likens an analyst's work to that of the ghosts in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. In their haunting of Scrooge, Dickens' ghosts provide motivation for him to change by making alive to him material from the past that he has been working hard to avoid. By dismantling the fantasy that a life lived without loss is possible, Dickens' ghosts bring about the realisation in Scrooge that he has the agency to make change in the present moment and force him to repair his relationship to elements from the past that have caused conflict and hurt on account of being lost, forgotten or prematurely terminated. "If, inadvertently, a patient lets me know what haunts her – the thought she knows but she refuses to think – my job is to be like one of Dickens' ghosts: to keep the patient at the scene, to let it do its work" (p. 115), states Grosz. Such imagery brings to mind the words of Epstein (2004) who, drawing on Hans Loewald, writes that, "the therapeutic process...is one that encourages...transforming the *ghosts* that haunt the present into *ancestors*" (p. 200, italics in original). Grosz makes clear that, by inhabiting the role of such a ghost and by engaging in a more benevolent haunting, an analyst is best able to scaffold analysands' reparation with their past and, in so doing, catalyse change.

In an excerpt Grosz includes from a conversation he has with a friend, the friend asks Grosz whether he takes difficult analysands personally. Grosz replies "Sure. I get

irritated, but hopefully I'll find the reason the patient needs me to be irritated. My job is to listen, then check what I'm hearing against my emotional reactions..." (p. 175). Grosz provides plentiful examples of this particular job of the analyst; a bespoke listening that involves hovering evenly between the content and the process of the conversation that transpires in analysis. "Matt's situation was alarming but, as he talked, I began to notice that I didn't feel particularly alarmed. Nothing seemed to be missing from his words; his speech was energetic and clear. But I found it difficult to get involved in his story...every attempt I made to think about Matt's story, to take note of his words, was like trying to run uphill in a dream", writes Grosz of one analysand (p. 24). Grosz uses passages such as this to highlight this vital craft skill of the analyst; that, at any time, she must be attending both to the on-the-ground subject matter of an interaction and to the higher-level dynamics of an interaction. Grosz's proficiency at this skill is especially evident. "I was angry because of something that had happened in my own life – and, as a result, there were times when I thought that I might be putting something of my own problems into Francesca's analysis", Grosz (p. 57) writes about one of his sessions. About another session with an analysand who harboured a secret and was acutely aware of making awkward remarks in social situations, Grosz states, "I tried not to show it, but I think he sensed how I heard this – that he could say the unsaid thing about others, but not himself" (p. 76). Through examples such as these, Grosz's high levels of self-awareness and self-reflexivity strike the reader. He is acutely aware of how forces that stem not only from the analysand but also from the analyst *and* from the analyst-analysand dyad shape the dynamics of an interaction. In her synthesis of the false dichotomy often constructed between emotions and rationality, McIlwain (2009, p.16) proposes that "rationality lies in having full acquaintance with feelings, [being] reflectively aware of the messages they have for us, rather than living palely and ignoring or suppressing them. To be rational is to be alive to the way emotions tinge our memories and our view of life..." Throughout 'The Examined Life', Grosz as an analyst seems rational in exactly this way, fully alive to his feelings and cognisant of the way in which his emotions shape his memories and experiences.

Although Grosz has a strong presence in 'The Examined Life', at no time does he fall prey to bestowing upon himself the status of guru or faultless expert. While a less humble analyst could readily occupy a grandiose, omnipotent seat, Grosz is unafraid of exposing his vulnerabilities to the reader. Grosz opens the book with the sentence "I want to tell you a story about a patient who shocked me" (p. 1). Throughout the text, Grosz generously shares a measured amount of doubts, regrets and self-recriminations with the reader. Grosz then closes the book with a sentence as refreshingly unassuming as his opening line: "Now, so many of the patients I saw when I was young are gone or dead, but sometimes, as when waking from a dream, I find myself reaching out to them, wanting to say one more thing" (p. 215). Phillips and Taylor (2009) define kindness as "the ability to bear the vulnerability of others, and therefore of oneself" (p. 6) and the reader is left with an impression of Grosz as a supremely kind analyst. Grosz is not ashamed to be found wanting, to tell of when an analysand has walked out of a session, when he feels he hasn't enjoyed what would typically be defined as 'success' or of when he feels he has made a mistake. Grosz portrays his analysands with deep respect, curiosity and compassion, honouring the accomplished character of their humanity and the complexities of their lives. Grosz, like the analysands he portrays, is present in 'The Examined Life' in a way that is radically, fallibly human, embodying a unique combination of strengths, weaknesses and vitality that calls to be held in high esteem.

According to minimalist artist Carl Andre (2005, p. xvii), "No matter what we say, we are always talking about ourselves". Grosz speaks to the truth of Andre's statement in 'The Examined Life' by neatly unpacking the 'what' of psychoanalytic theory and the

'how' of psychoanalytic practice. Opinions differ, however, on exactly what it is that we are saying about ourselves and the best ways in which we can decode this. The greatest strength of Grosz's book is that his prose is as easy to read as his thoughts are sophisticated, his exploration of psychoanalytic theory and practice containing insights that will benefit readers who range from those completely unfamiliar with the psychoanalytic paradigm to analysts, practicing analysts and psychoanalytic scholars. In doing so, Grosz transforms into a link material that has previously acted as a wall, opening up psychoanalytic theory and practice to a broader audience while ensuring that his message is clearly imparted to those who were already listening out for the taps.

Biographical Note

Based in Sydney, Australia, Andrew Geeves is a researcher, teacher and trainee psychologist whose passion for psychoanalytic theory and practice was sparked over a decade ago. He particularly enjoys the unashamed curiosity of the psychoanalytic paradigm; the ways in which its questions honour the rich mysteries of being human and speak to the wildness of the lives we lead.

Acknowledgment

In memory of the luminescent Doris McIlwain, no stranger to inhabiting the fullness of her feelings.

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