

Excursions Journal

Volume 3, Issue 1 (June 2011)
States of Emergence / States of Emergency



Joanna Kellond, 'Deciding How to Live: *The Life and Death of Psychoanalysis: On Unconscious Desire and its Sublimation* by Jamieson Webster', *Excursions*, 3, 1 (2012)

URL: <http://www.excursions-journal.org.uk/index.php/excursions/article/view/71>

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Deciding How to Live:

The Life and Death of Psychoanalysis: On Unconscious Desire and its Sublimation by Jamieson Webster¹

In a recent interview, Jamieson Webster locates the impetus behind her first book in repeated claims, made in the US media and medical circles, that psychoanalysis is on the verge of death.² Considered in these discourses something of an ailing discipline, psychoanalysis is cast as a failed experiment, a doomed love affair with Freud. These assertions seem to have touched a nerve. Webster, a psychoanalyst in private practice and a lecturer at both Eugene Lang College and New York University, has gone so far as to stage a ‘Funeral for Psychoanalysis’, which took place on Friday 13th January 2012 at Cabinet in Brooklyn, featuring eulogies from the likes of her husband Simon Critchley, Ezra Feinberg, Patricia Gherovici and Ben Kafka to name a few. The event received the following description:

In commemoration of the recent publication of *The Life and Death of Psychoanalysis* by **Jamieson Webster**, you are invited to a funeral for the talking cure, conceived by Freud in 1895. As wanted or unwanted as its passing may be, the anxious wait is over. We no longer have to declare it still living or slowly expiring. Enough of this endless flirtation with death! It

¹ Webster, Jamieson, *The Life and Death of Psychoanalysis: On Unconscious Desire and its Sublimation*, (London: Karnac, 2011).

² Interview with *New Books in Psychoanalysis*, <<http://newbooksinpsychoanalysis.com/2011/12/16/jamieson-webster-the-life-and-death-of-psychoanalysis-on-unconscious-desire-and-its-sublimation-karnac-books-2011/>>, [accessed 20/01/12].

is time to bear the consequences in mind, to risk a life without the great beast that is psychoanalysis. We invite you therefore to join us on a cold January evening close to the Gowanus Canal as psychoanalysis is finally laid to rest.³

When I first read an advert for this event something about it riled me. Who was she to say that psychoanalysis was dead? In my own life and research it didn't feel like I was constantly resuscitating an unwilling corpse, but rather taking part in a discourse that extends, as Freud predicted in *The Question of Lay Analysis*, far beyond the consulting room. Freud himself made the point that 'the use of analysis for the treatment of the neuroses is only one of its applications; the future will perhaps show that it is not the most important one'.⁴

I think it is important to acknowledge and think about the anger which Webster's funeral-cum-book-launch aroused in me. Perhaps it was a defensive response to an unacknowledged anxiety that what I do – and what psychoanalysis more generally does - might not be relevant or worth pursuing. It is natural to have doubts. Those doubts, however, might just be the risk that must be acknowledged, if one wants to take psychoanalysis seriously, to see what it can do, or what can be done if we keep its discoveries in mind.

In reality, what Webster seems to want to kill off is not a discipline whose legitimacy is always in question, but one which has forgotten that the crisis in which it always already embroiled, might just constitute its very essence. This laying to rest is thus undertaken in the spirit of renewal and return, concepts to which psychoanalysis is no stranger. What Webster desires is a rebirth which might also be a return to the original precariousness and self-consciousness which animated the discipline.

Nowhere does the ambiguous, liminal status of psychoanalysis, somewhere between art and science, seem to unsettle as much as in the USA. The reception and transformation of Freud's technique in the United States has been at times both enthusiastic and guarded. Freud's visit in 1909 came at a strategic moment, addressing concerns about sexual morality and mental illness which were already taking shape.⁵ When he famously spoke at Clark University, Freud took a pragmatic attitude, focusing on the somewhat simplistic (and by that time superseded) model of catharsis and cure he considered might be of immediate use to American physicians. Whilst recommending more openness about sex, Freud's personal attitude towards sexual reform remained elusive. Instead, the beguiling quality of dreams and

³ Text taken from *Cabinet* website, <<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/events/webster.php>>, [accessed 20/01/12].

⁴ Freud, Sigmund, *The Question of Lay Analysis*, Volume XX, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, (London: Hogarth 1964), p. 248.

⁵ Hale, Nathan, *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans 1917-1985*, (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995), p. 4.

the unconscious took centre stage.⁶ This heady mix, concocted with the US in mind, lent itself to interpretation, unsurprisingly spawning both radical and conservative readings of psychoanalysis.

Although psychoanalysis was to become the most popular form of psychotherapy by 1920, hailed for its energy and optimism, its status as a science remained in doubt.⁷ There was something of a literary quality about Freud's writings, which lent themselves to multiple interpretations. The analytic method itself seemed resistant to positivistic scientific definition - depending as it does, on listening and interpretation; on understanding the figurations through which the unconscious presents itself.⁸ Under the pressure of such concerns psychoanalysis suffered a crisis of legitimacy in the USA, which was manifested in an insistence that those entering the field should have undergone medical training, a prescription which Freud himself argued against in *The Question of Lay Analysis*.⁹

The Second World War brought psychoanalysis to the US mainstream as the country received émigré analysts fleeing the threat of Nazism, and the military began to return, often having experienced 'shell-shock' and psychiatric treatment for the first time. 'Knowledge and acceptance of psychoanalysis' was fostered by American analysts, who wrote popularising articles in *Time* magazine and *Newsweek*.¹⁰ Freud came to be seen as a liberal hero, the founder of 'modern' views about psychology, education and childcare, sexuality and psychiatry.¹¹ Yet this enthusiasm also produced a backlash. A neo-somatic movement, developing during the 1950s, began to insist on the primacy of quantitative methods privileging experiment and evidence. Whilst many of the discipline's tenets (such as the importance of childhood or the role of the unconscious) remain deeply embedded in popular understanding, psychoanalysis continues to cause anxiety.¹² Denied the status of a science, expected to operate in a field of mental health dependent on empirical research, yet seeming to offer to those who take it up a powerful and appropriate means of treatment, psychoanalysis remains in a precarious position in the USA.

⁶ Hale, p. 5.

⁷ Hale, p. 6.

⁸ Hale, p. 380.

⁹ Freud, Sigmund, *The Question of Lay Analysis*, Volume XX, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, (London: Hogarth 1964), pp. 179-258.

¹⁰ Freedman, Jonathan, 'From *Spellbound* to *Vertigo*: Alfred Hitchcock and Therapeutic Culture in America', in Freedman, Jonathan and Millington, Richard eds., *Hitchcock's America*, (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999), pp. 80-81.

¹¹ Hale, p. 382.

¹² Hale, p. 385.

Quoting Derrida's seeming incredulity at the origins of psychoanalysis – 'how can an autobiographical writing, in the abyss of an unterminated self-analysis, give to a worldwide institution *its* birth?'¹³ Webster turns the assertion on its head: 'It did. Isn't it marvellous?' An irreverent, generous move that raised a smile whilst concurrently, in its celebration of the contingency and sheer *unlikeliness* of something like psychoanalysis, highlights the inherent wager involved in such a discipline.

The type of psychoanalysis that Webster is critical of would try to make itself fit the mould of science, seeing in the idea and practice of 'research' a route to verifiable truths, the equation of knowledge with mastery. Webster exhibits a certain disappointment with theoretical work that doesn't take risks. There seems to be a tension between a scientific-psychoanalytic discourse which claims to know what it means and mean what it says, and one of the basic premises of psychoanalysis – we never know exactly what we are saying, or what we mean. In refusing to let go of the clarity of its statements and meaning, there is a sense that contemporary theoretical and clinical work in the USA fails to risk itself in the way that is constantly and necessarily required of the psychoanalytic analysand.

Theoretical work today, in Webster's opinion, too easily takes up the position of the *subject supposed to know*, a locus Lacan was keen to criticise as a fantasy of mastery which ignores the circulation of unconscious desire. Belief in the unconscious places all claims to mastery in question. As Webster asserts, rightly to my mind, 'the debt which psychoanalysis engages in with respect to the unconscious must remain. It cannot be paid off'.¹⁴ Psychoanalysis, and psychoanalytic writing, must continue to risk itself in a belief in the unconscious, however far beyond the scope of empirical research such an entity may be.

In this spirit, Webster seeks to enact a new type of psychoanalytic writing. This is a personal, risky enterprise that resists, for itself and its reader, the tendency (the lure of the ego) towards mastery. You could say this is a type of writing inspired by, and undertaken in homage to, Lacan. It's no surprise, then, that reading Webster's book produced in me many of the same feelings I experience when reading Lacan. I feel inadequate, even angry and impatient at times, because I am unable to master the text. Webster is no doubt aware of the potential effect of her prose, asking her reader from the outset to approach with 'patience and tolerate a little dislocation' in the hope that something may come of it.¹⁵

What does come of it, as with reading Lacan, is a certain awareness of the experience of listening and reading, of listening to desire, and a concurrent dawning awareness of the

¹³ Quoted in Webster, p. xi.

¹⁴ Webster, p. 86.

¹⁵ Webster, p. xxiv.

anxiety which the failure to master can produce. Webster is asking psychoanalysts in the US not just to think and work, but also to write in this Lacanian-inflected way. At the same time, she is evoking a method of reading in which we again lay ourselves open to risk. She illustrates this idea by engaging with – reading with – three theorists who have been of importance to her: Adorno, Lacan and Badiou. These very personal readings are each coupled with an analysis of one of the author's own dreams, taking the text back, again and again, to the site of unconscious desire.

Adorno was Webster's 'first love', in an intellectual sense, beguiling her with his 'extreme disenchantment', his theorisation of a cultural malaise and failure reaching its peak in the twentieth century.¹⁶ Reading Lacan, however, leads Webster to perceive the excess of mastery in Adorno's critique. Adorno always seems to be able to say what is wrong, to get at and know the truth, if only in the negative. What psychoanalysis teaches is that, out of loss, out of negativity, comes the only possibility for the positive, for the subject and for desire, yet Adorno is unable to take the positive step and ends up losing Webster.

Next, Webster takes up her engagement with Lacan. He occupies the central chapter of the text, physically evoking his pivotal role in this whole work. I like the way Webster engages with Lacan. Her writing does not lean heavily on his own disarming barrage of terminology, but instead brings out his humour and playfulness. Dare I say it; she made me like Lacan a little more? As we have discussed, Lacan offers Webster a new way to think about writing and truth. His chapter is entitled 'Angels of Disenchantment' and the focus is on women, on the potential which Lacan saw in women – they are closer to the unconscious, he claims – to tell psychoanalysis something. Lacan famously asked the women in his seminars what they had to tell psychoanalysis, and received little response to his direct interrogations, yet the women present in those seminars - Catherine Clément, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous - went on to *write*. Webster does not wish to rehabilitate the practice, or gendering, of *écriture féminine*, but she finds in Lacan, as these women writers did, the inspiration for a type of writing which remains true to the risks of psychoanalysis.

Finally, Webster turns to Badiou, a philosopher interested in Lacan, but one who has refused to write about psychoanalysis. After Lacan's inauguration of a philosophical turn which destabilised and placed in question ideas of truth and subjectivity, Webster turns to Badiou as a source of inspiration for psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis, like Badiou, must listen to Lacan, but it must also, like Badiou's philosophy, retain some conception of the subject and

¹⁶ Webster, p. 15.

of truth, although this is a subjectivity not premised on coherence, nor a truth concerned solely with mastery.

As someone interested in psychoanalysis, working in the context of cultural and critical theory in the English department of a British university, the ideas Webster expounds do not, in themselves, feel ground-breaking. I am familiar with the unstable discourses of French feminism and deconstruction which Lacan's work has inspired. Having said that, I'm not sure that creating a totally new way of writing is really what is at issue in Webster's book. What Webster seeks to do through her writing is not to present a new psychoanalytical theory, but rather to raise awareness, within the psychoanalytic community in the US, of the limitations of a discourse/ discipline that has forgotten the importance and consequences of the unconscious. In orientating itself towards a notion of knowledge as mastery, psychoanalytic research which invests in quantitative methods has adapted itself to a model which could seem antithetical to the spirit of psychoanalysis. Webster's text is attentive to, and celebratory of, the anxieties that recur for psychoanalysis and for psychoanalysts involved in a seemingly 'impossible' profession grounded in a necessary failure to master and know all.

As an afterthought, almost, I have one criticism of Webster's book: There are quite a few typographical and grammatical errors. I counted eight, including the - to me inexcusable - 'patient's come looking for a cure they do not want' on page sixty five. I sense this is an issue with copyediting, but in a text written in the spirit of Lacanian *écriture*, the ability to tell the difference between linguistic playfulness and grammatical error seems important. Although, perhaps, on second thoughts, the presence of errors just underlines the main argument of the book: Total mastery always eludes us, we must fail. So I move to think with, rather than against, the textual errors, allowing the spirit of the book, its celebration of imperfection as an endless source of inspiration, to get the better of me.

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