

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Aug 18, 2022

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/book-review-essay-through-the-looking-glass-darkly-on-jouissance-sexuality-suffering-and-satisfaction-by-darian-leader/>

David Lichtenstein

## **Book Review Essay: Through the Looking-Glass Darkly, on “Jouissance: Sexuality, Suffering, and Satisfaction” by Darian Leader**

**Review of *Jouissance: Sexuality, Suffering, and Satisfaction* by Darian Leader, Routledge, 2021 138 pp.**

As I write this, we are witnessing the invasion of Ukraine ordered by President Putin. Whatever might be the political and economic reasons for this invasion, the fact remains that Putin initiated the mass killing and destruction of his neighbors. He chose this action. There is some sense in which he saw it, indeed continues to see it, as a good thing to do. In spite of the fact that his choice involves the killing and terrorizing of people very close to his own, he chooses to do it. If he succeeds in dominating Ukraine, he will presumably be pleased with the outcome. He wants to destroy Ukraine in order to have it.

These contradictions and their awful truth challenge the psychoanalyst to consider once again the meaning of violence in human actions. As Lacan (1992) quoted Freud from *Civilization and its Discontents*:

Man tries to satisfy his need for aggression at the expense of his neighbor, to exploit his work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to appropriate his goods, to humiliate him, to inflict suffering on him, to torture and kill him. (p.185)

The idea that there is a “need for aggression” as Freud put it, is one reason he was unsure whether his libido theory was complete as an explanation of people’s motives. The drives were for both life and for death and the interplay between these two would be an ongoing challenge to consider.

When Lacan proposed the idea of *jouissance* in place of *libido* it was precisely to capture this contradiction. In discussing Kant’s example of the rational agent who would choose to give up the most desirable sexual pleasure if the consequence of having it would be his death, Lacan (1992) points out that if the sexual pleasure is instead thought of as *jouissance*, we can imagine a different outcome “given that *jouissance* implies precisely the acceptance of death” (p. 189). How it is that death can not only be accepted but somehow at the very heart of what is desirable is the paradox of *jouissance*, a paradox, or contradiction that will not be resolved, that is likewise at the heart of Freud’s death drive.

Darian Leader (2021) has a problem with Lacanian thought and with how Lacanians think. The latter problem is perhaps easier to identify than the former. Like other specialized groups, Lacanians use jargon and suffer the collapse of thinking that accompanies its use. Leader who knows the Lacanian scene as well as any Anglo-American charts the points of obscurity that have developed around the term *jouissance*. The tendency in Lacanian circles to “explain” every act of any sort as an instance of *jouissance* so that indeed there is nothing gained by the explanation is the sort of problem that Leader has in mind. How the term first

arose in Lacan's teaching and then how it took on this overuse is the story at the heart of this book.

One irony of course is that how the speaking subject is an effect of language is a central principle in Lacanian thought. That those who accept this idea may yet fail to note when their words lose meaning shows that theory absolves no one of the responsibility of continuing critique, as though it could.

Leader (2021) doesn't address the concept of *jargon* as such, but it is a useful one to consider. Its etymological roots refer to the throat, *garg*, as in gargle. Jargon, thus suggests a kind of gargling where the possibility of sense gets lost in the mere making of sounds. It is rooted in the bodily fragility of our verbal sense-making. One might say that that jargon arises out of the pure *jouissance* of the utterance—but that would be falling prey to the sort of facile terminology that Leader is decrying.

"Lacan of course had a lot to say about the limits of sense" (p.4) observes Leader at the start of the engaging and important extended essay that comprises this book. Indeed, Lacan was not one to avoid the invention of terms that take on specialized meanings, meanings that often run to the point of nonsense and beyond. Lacan's neologism in the 1970's, *lalangue*, is invented jargon that plays on the act of speaking. Lacan was a great lover of nonsense which takes us back to the question of Lacanian thought as opposed to the thinking of Lacanians. The problem of course is how can Lacanians think with the sense and nonsense of Lacanian thought. When do Lacan's neologisms, aphorisms, and words-play turn into a gargle of jargon? Is it necessarily a problem when they do? In his neologized "*lalangue*" and his celebration of Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake*, etc., Lacan gargles his jargon. Does that mean we should follow suit? To consider the term, *jouissance*, we must explore the play of sense and nonsense. And I think we must look from both sides, from the side of sense and from the side of nonsense, to do it justice. And to do justice to *jouissance* brings to mind that it has a history as a judicial term as well.

Why did Lacan have to enlist the term *jouissance* in the first place, not in the casual and phenomenological sense that Freud used the German term, *Genuss*, to refer to pleasure/enjoyment, but instead turning it into a technical term (Braunstein, 2020). Lacan gives the term a technical and conceptual importance in working out the question of motivation (to employ a psychological term that Leader examines more fully as I will describe below) especially as it comes up in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII* (1986/1992). There Lacan suggests that we need a new term to articulate the essentially paradoxical character of human motivation that psychoanalysis introduces into the history of ethics. The paradox introduced by Freud is that law and prohibition are established through the symbolic death of the primal leader. In order to make Eros available to all subjects it must be founded upon Thanatos.

Here Lacan is proposing a new and distinctive reading of Freud's passing beyond the pleasure principle. For Lacan the collapse of the old pleasure principle in the face of the repetition compulsion and the problem of masochism is not solved by the conflict between *libido* and *destrudo* as alternative and opposing motivational systems, but instead by a unitary principle *jouissance* that paradoxically refers to both. This is the primary reason for Lacan's proposing the term as an addition to the vocabulary of psychoanalysis. It is to mark a paradox at the core of psychoanalytic thought. Neither a Jungian monism, nor a Freudian dualism, Lacan introduces *jouissance* as a paradox, a single motivational principle that contains within itself an impossible contradiction.[1] No wonder things get muddled in its use.

Leader (2021) recognizes this formal contradiction at the core and origin of the term for Lacan. Referring to Lacan's treatment of *jouissance* in Seminar VII, he writes, "It is thus a dialectical concept, in its 1950's usage, inscribed within a relation, and situated in a rather Kantian way: as a positive object, it appears as absence, and as a negative object it appears as a limit or virtual point" (p. 72). The loss of this dialectical/paradoxical framework in the contemporary usage is exactly what Leader is decrying, viz., "Note how this use differs quite radically from how we employ it today in Lacanian circles, where anything that a person particularly likes doing is characterized as an idiosyncratic *jouissance*, from knitting, to dining in fine restaurants, to collecting comic books. Where *jouissance* had once indexed a disturbing beyond to pleasure...today it is often synonymous with, precisely, any private, or indeed shared, pleasure" (p. 72). So

here the problem is less in Lacanian thought than in the lack of thinking in Lacanian circles. Indeed, here we find Leader almost wistful about the “disturbing beyond to pleasure” at the paradoxical core of *jouissance*. It seems that at times Leader wants to get rid of the term and at other times wants to restore its original radical intention.

By common agreement, the French term *jouissance* as used by Lacan and by those working in his theoretical orbit, is left untranslated in English. As a result, for Anglophones, its meaning and usage is entirely that of a technical term lacking semantic associations other than those that have now developed around its use in the Lacanian discursive community. This is part of the problem Leader is addressing since its use in that community has become facile and overextended.

For the French speaker, the situation would seem to be somewhat different since the French word *jouissance* already has a meaning and usage outside of the Lacanian use. That “native” semantic resonance might also have been so in the Anglophone community as the word “enjoyment” is a possible translation for *jouissance*. Indeed, some scholars have recently chosen to use that English concept instead of the untranslated term (cf Le Gaufey, 2020). The result of course has a different effect. Even if we understand that we’re using “enjoyment” as a term of art with a particular psychoanalytic sense, the semantic resonances, including the various differences and nuances of use, are available to us as native speakers in a way that they are not with *jouissance*.

Consider for example the translations of the sentence from Lacan’s “Guiding Remarks for a Convention on Female Sexuality” in *Ecrits* (2007) first by Fink using *jouissance* and then by Gallagher and Le Gaufey using ‘enjoyment’:

“...female sexuality appears, instead, as the effort of a *jouissance* enveloped in its own contiguity”  
Vs. “...an enjoyment enveloped in its own contiguity” (p. 15).

There are various semantic effects in the second translation that allow a play on the multiple uses of “enjoyment”. One effect is perhaps to shift the semantic weight from the idea of a substance to that of an event, that is to restore temporality and the idea of use. These are dimensions of the concept that Leader correctly argues are important to its meaning, just as he argues that the slippage into the notion of *jouissance* as a substance—what he calls the ‘jelly model’ (p. 108) is a loss of its dialectical subtlety, i.e., if it is a jelly-like substance that can move about in some imaginary body, the radical significance of the active context, the relation to prohibition, transgression, and ethics is lost.

Néstor Braunstein in his recent book, *Jouissance: A Lacanian Concept* (2020) puts it as follows: “*Jouissance* in the discourse of the law refers to the notion of usufruct, the enjoyment (*sic*) of a thing inasmuch as it is an object of appropriation” (p. 32). It is important to note that this remark appears soon after Braunstein comments on how *jouissance* in the Lacanian sense usually remains untranslated in English and, as he notably puts it, “Never enjoyment” (p. 28). There is a striking contradiction between the general meaning of the term (as enjoyment) and the restricted Lacanian sense (“never enjoyment”). This is not only a reflection of the restrictive aspect of the Lacanian usage but reflects a complexity and ambiguity that is in the usage and history of the word enjoyment itself. It can refer to both simple pleasures and to the more serious juridical right of usufruct. Words in general and not only Lacan’s neologisms are notoriously fickle. Thus “enjoyment” can be both a very good and a very poor translation of *jouissance*. It depends on its usage.

One could also go back to Leader’s own *Freud’s Footnotes* (2000) where we find him using enjoyment as the translation of *jouissance*. Thus, in speaking about what is generally referred to as “the Other *jouissance*”, Leader writes, “The problem of the relation of an enjoyment (*sic*) to a knowledge was formulated by Lacan in his seminar ‘Encore’, when he argued that a particular form of enjoyment is not linked to knowledge” (p. 149).

Both enjoyment and *jouissance* (as an untranslated term in English) are located within the semantic range associated with the idea of pleasure (Cassin, 2014) the complexities of which are not easily resolved by choosing one word over another. For instance, in salutations, when one customarily replies to an introduction by saying, “My pleasure”! It is not at all clear in what sense that is to be so and yet it is generally said with little fear of misunderstanding.

Freud’s, and indeed the general psychoanalytic world’s, uncertainty about the pleasure principle is in part a reflection of this semantic uncertainty surrounding the entire semantic range of this concept and is the background of Lacan’s coming to propose and then continually rework the idea of *jouissance*. In that sense, replacing it with enjoyment in English, used as a term of art and including the paradox associated with the French term would ultimately lead to the same problems.

This matter of Lacan’s decision to appropriate *jouissance* for his own purposes is addressed at length in *The Dictionary of Untranslatables* (Cassin, 2014) where we find the following appraisal.

Among the reworkings of the concept of enjoyment in which contemporary thinkers have engaged, we must give a special place to the one that Jacques Lacan introduced into the field of psychoanalysis, which poses a problem for any translator. It even seems that the French word *jouissance* was included in the 1988 edition of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* simply because in this unusual sense, it seemed untranslatable in English. Not only does the Lacanian concept of *jouissance* break away completely from the register of pleasure, but in addition, although it was elaborated on the basis of the juridical vocabulary, it detaches itself from all the conventionally accepted meanings in any domain whatever of language. (p. 795).

According to the view expressed here by Cassin et al., the Lacanian term *jouissance* is not only untranslatable into English but it is strictly speaking untranslatable in French as well, detached as it is “from all the conventionally accepted meanings in any domain whatever of language” (p.795). If this is so then Lacan deploys the term in a way that while it draws both from the juridical sense of use and enjoyment (*usufruct*) as well as the subjective sense of a bodily experience it essentially departs from both of them into a semantic realm understandable only within the psychoanalytic realm of Lacanian thought. It is a radically reconceived concept that can be understood within the Lacanian framework if at all, but not by reference to the semantic field of general usage.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master — that’s all.’ (Carroll, 2018, p. 2160)

Of course it is the absurd and enigmatic prospect of the fragile egg-shell Humpty Dumpty claiming the position of master that is precisely Lewis Carroll’s point. And indeed, it is quite like the mastery that Lacan evokes as well:

I am master enough of *lalangue*, the one called French, to have arrived at what fascinates in witnessing the *jouissance* that is properly part of the system. An opaque *jouissance* because it excludes sense. We had suspected it for some time. To be post-Joycean is to know it. (Lacan as quoted in Cassin, 2020, p. 93)

There are thus two opposing principles that frame the possibilities of a semantic analysis of the term *jouissance*. One (only?) apparently represented in this instance by the translation as enjoyment suggests that we can reconnect *jouissance* with its etymological roots as a particular take on the interplay of pleasure and use. The other represented by Cassin et al. is that Lacan effected a radical break in his reconception of the term and that efforts to clarify its meaning by linking it either to the subjective meaning of pleasure in any form or to the objective juridical meaning of the right to use and enjoyment (*usus et fructus*) will indeed be misleading and likely to take one away from the Lacanian sense of the term. The first approach invites us to situate not only Lacan’s use of the term *jouissance* but his teaching in general within the traditions of logic

and philosophy that would place some constraints on how words are used, constraints of non-contradiction as well as respect for general usage. The second, in effect recognizing and indeed appreciating Lacan as a (post-Joycean) Sophist, grants him a performative license in the use of language.

The psychoanalyst, Lacan in particular, is the presence of the sophist in our time. He is not fucking or looking to fuck the truth, unfuckable in any case. As a sophist it is a matter with him of a discourse that acts more than it expresses, and not through persuasion but through performance: a logos-pharmakon with an effect on the other and a world-effect, via the same Anti-Aristotelian stipulations—performance-enunciation and homonymy-signifier. (Cassin, 2020, p. 125)

Darian Leader (2021) navigates these straits of Scylla and Charybdis by first declaring that if it were up to him, he would get rid of the concept altogether. He doesn't directly say that the problem arises from Lacan's position as a Master in the manner of Humpty Dumpty but the implication is there. Like Alice, Leader notes that the word has taken on too many different meanings to ever again be restored to clarity. While a careful and dedicated reader of Lacan, Leader is not, like Cassin, inclined to grant Lacan license for his sophistic performance. Yet there is in Leader's reading enough appreciation of Lacan's project to leave me wondering. Is he really opposed to Lacan's sophistry or rather is he instead disappointed in the Lacanians failure to recognize and continue to think with the subtle dialectic that Lacan is deploying in his performance. For indeed Lacan's sophistry is itself repeatedly subverted by his relation to logic, philosophy, and science. As a refined sophist, Lacan is not always locatable as such. Indeed, this is the very substance of the debate between Badiou and Cassin (2017), two Lacanians considering the play of language and truth in psychoanalysis and its relation to Lacan's philosophy/antiphilosophy. i.e., the status of his sophistry.

Returning to Leader (2021), "I think that we are better served by a plurality of concepts rather than one catch-all term..." (p.7). That is to say that he views Lacan's effort to establish a unique psychoanalytic term for the aim of the subject beyond the pleasure principle to have failed. However, in Leader's rich and detailed analysis of the vagaries of the term and especially the many ways that the "Lacanians" have failed to maintain its rigor, one detects the other view as well, one that accepts Lacan's wager on behalf of a distinct psychoanalytic concept and is dedicated to clearing away the confusion and degeneration in the concept's use so as to restore the possibilities of its rigorous use. He bemoans the incoherence that the concept has fallen prey to but in fact seems repeatedly to be suggesting where that coherence might be restored. He never quite comes out and says it, but he quotes Braunstein in support of the view that the problems with the concept multiplied in the years after Lacan's death and are thus the problems of the Lacanians and what they made of Lacan's term.

In this extended essay where Leader (2021) on the one hand critiques the jargon and sloppy thinking of Lacanians and on the other surveys other psychoanalytic and indeed psychological theories of motivation to see where corrective ideas might be found, there are a number of brief but pointed moments where he indicates how he thinks the concept should be used. Thus in talking about Lacan's development of the concept later in the 1960's we find,

This is without doubt an important observation—that a cut or inscription of lack must occur to render the body more habitable—and is verifiable clinically. Yet at the same time, it reinforces the questionable view that jouissance is some sort of electrical juice or slime within the organism that needs to be emptied out...It would surely be more correct to say that the patterns, rhythms and processes that generate certain forms of innervation and activation are affected by language and relational structures: 'jouissance' is thus less a thing hidden inside of us...than a product. (Leader, 2021, p.105)

Leader's rhetorical form is thus to declare that the concept is hopelessly lost as a result of sloppy overgeneralization by the Lacanians and that the best course would be to retire it altogether; however, since that is unlikely perhaps some rigor can yet be restored. How he does so is telling. Not only does he highlight those moments in Lacan's elaboration of the concept that he feels are its strengths, the dialectic (or paradoxical) logic in the Ethics seminar, the reworking of that dialectic in the Logic of the Phantasy, but he

suggests a certain principle by which he determines those moments of strength. It is the idea of *jouissance* as an outcome, or product, of an encounter that interests Leader. It seems to me that Leader's project is to relocate *jouissance* as the limit term of the subject's dialogic, relational structures. In referring to Lacan's definition of *jouissance* as the relation of the speaking being (*parletre*) to the body, Leader writes, "The key here is of course the notion of relation, as this implies that the body has been constituted and taken as some kind of object-itself—suggesting how patterns of innervation in the body are built and mediated by structures" (p 133).

When Leader (2021) makes this point near the end of the book, it rests upon his survey in the preceding pages of numerous psychoanalysts and psychologists who have considered this relation and their theories about the mediating structures. In a way that Leader has done before, and that is one of his great contributions to the "Lacanian field", his study of the problems of Lacanian thought moves well outside the identifiable customary borders of that field.

Leader (2021) supports his project by turning to research and theory that is not only outside of the Lacanian circles but by writers who are typically considered anathematic to the Lacanian approach. For instance, Erich Fromm, whose affirmation of an innate humanistic ethics, indeed an innate human inclination to be loving and good, is quite opposed to Lacan's (and Freud's) views on the matter is nevertheless cited by Leader, in a footnote regarding a book by Anita Izcovich, for the resonance of Lacan and Fromm's views on Desire:

The Lacanian use of the term 'desire' is actually closer to that of Fromm and Karen Horney than it is to Freud, indexing less a repressed chain of signifiers linked to loss than a positive aspiration that the subject may have felt forced to give up or relinquish due to an appropriation of the Other's demand. (p. 63)

It may be that Leader is summarizing Izcovich's argument here, but he is citing it in agreement and indeed makes a number of similar links to Fromm in the text. Leader's intent seems to be, on the one hand, to take Lacanians out of their isolated sphere, to challenge them to read other analysts, and on the other to genuinely place the Lacanian concepts of Desire, *jouissance*, etc. up against related ideas in the work of people like Fromm, Erikson, Horney, the child development research of Annie Reich, Rene Spitz, Martha Wolfenstein, and Jean Piaget and others. This is rarely done by Lacanians. Although Lacan clearly read other psychoanalysts including those whose orientations he disagreed with, he was generally scathing in his critiques of them. The Lacanians act quite chastened, dutifully accept Lacan's dismissal of these others, and generally don't read them. Leader shows that Lacan's notions do not operate only in their own sphere but can be placed in the wider discourse of psychoanalysis and even psychology. To my reading, Leader's interest in doing this for the sake of opening up the lacanian discourse leads him at times to exaggerate the similarities and minimize the differences with these other traditions. One hopes that we can accomplish this goal of invigorating the Lacanian field without eliding or simplifying the critical debates.

In general however, Leader, in a mostly open and intelligent reading, is willing to consider resonances as enriching our understanding of what Lacan was up to. This is refreshing and promotes new possibilities to work with Lacanian concepts. Even when I find that I don't agree with the resonances that Leader finds, the points are interesting and worthwhile to consider. Thus, in my view, it is possible to reject Fromm's naturalistic humanism and still find value in aspects of his ethical project. Leader is not a purist and he makes a strong case for the view that to be one is to not serve the project that Lacan opened up, to paraphrase Leader's conclusion.

In considering the relationship between *jouissance* and phantasy as Lacan developed it in the 1950's, Leader refers to the work of George S. Klein a psychologist and psychoanalyst associated with David Rapaport at the Menninger Foundation and with Robert Holt at NYU. Klein's links to ego psychology and to experimental research in cognitive psychology would typically make him suspect in Lacanian circles, a *persona non grata*. Leader is instead able to show how a nuance in Klein's view, related to the contradictory character of phantasy, would instead enhance the Lacanian perspective on *jouissance*. It is not only the specific issue that is interesting but the general point that Lacanian theory suffers from its isolation. A

broader critical reading in psychoanalysis and psychology is to be recommended as a way to work on the lacanian concepts and to counter the tendency to repeat insular formulations.

As Lacan addressed different topics in his teaching the concept of *jouissance* was brought to bear in new ways. Whether these constitute altogether new formulations, that is whether the concept is being fundamentally reconceived is not always easy to determine given Lacan's style. Leader is a superb reader of these changes and a careful scholar in testing their meaning against other work. When considering how Lacan addresses *jouissance* in the 1970's in relation to sexuality, sexual difference, and the famous Other *jouissance* (feminine), Leader once again points to work outside of the Lacanian field to challenge and enliven the consideration of the issues Lacan is addressing, "analysts may learn something from sexologists if they bother to read the right works" (p 122).

Lacan's sophistry and especially the enthrallment of his followers in his capacity to make words mean just what he chooses is challenged by Leader's turn to other writers who are addressing related ideas. In its best effects this study challenges us to think more critically with Lacan. That this critical reading may lead to recognizing those moments where his thought goes astray through his own over generalization is one benefit. However, Lacan's style, his playful exaggeration and deployment of poetic effects makes it difficult to know what to make of such moments. Those who want to work with his ideas must instead decide how to use them. Mimicry and imitation of the Lacanian rhetoric is the greatest danger and Leader's critique is an excellent antidote.

## **Bibliography:**

Braunstein, N. (2020). *Jouissance: A Lacanian concept*. SUNY Press.

Badiou, A. & Cassin, B. (2017). *There's no such thing as a sexual relationship*. Columbia University Press.

Carroll, L. (2018). *Through the looking glass*. In *The complete works*. Open Library.

Cassin, B. (2020). *Jacques the sophist: Lacan, logos, and psychoanalysis*. Fordham University Press.

Cassin, B., Apter, E., Lezra, J. & Wood, M. (2014). *The dictionary of untranslatables*. Princeton University Press.

Lacan, J. (1992). *The ethics of psychoanalysis, 1959-1960: The seminar of Jacques Lacan book VII*. Norton.

Lacan, J. (2007). *Ecrits: The first complete edition in English*. Norton.

Le Gaufy, G. (2020). *Lacan and the formulae of sexuation: Exploring logical consistency and clinical consequences*. Routledge.

Leader, D. (2021). *Jouissance: Sexuality, suffering and satisfaction*. Routledge.

## **Note:**

[1] cf Braunstein's (2020) discussion of the trauma of seduction in Freud as the origin of the paradox of *jouissance, avant la letter* (p. 36).

## **Bio:**

**David Lichtenstein**, Ph.D. is a psychoanalyst and psychologist in private practice in New York. He was a founding member of the Group for a Radical Human Science (1979) and The Après Coup Psychoanalytic Association (1985). He is currently teaching at The Inst. for Psychoanalytic Training and Research (IPTAR), NYU PostDoc, The Psychoanalytic Inst. of Northern Cal., and Pulsion(NY), as well as independently in New York. He was the founding editor of DIVISION/Review, co-editor of The Lacan Tradition (Routledge,2018), and author of articles and reviews.

## **Publication Date:**

May 20, 2022