

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Feb 9, 2023

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/book-review-essay-disorganization-and-sex-by-jamieson-webster/>

Isabel Millar

## Book Review Essay: “Disorganisation and Sex” by Jamieson Webster

**Review of *Disorganization and Sex* by Jamieson Webster, Divided Publishing, 2022, 240 pp.**

When trying to define the exact distinction between philosophy and psychoanalysis, we could say that at their core they seem to have a divergent relationship to ‘truth’ on the one hand and ‘knowledge’ on the other, given their respective approaches to the problem of the singularity of the subject. Another way to look at this would be to say that whilst for philosophy the notion of the subject is constantly *in question*, for psychoanalysis meanwhile, the subject is structured *like a question*. The classic hysteric’s question “*am I a man or a woman?*”, the obsessive’s question “*am I dead or alive?*”, and (arguably) the psychotic’s question “*what is reality?*”, when confronted in the clinic, each successively peels a layer from the ontological veils constructing existence.

But as any good existentialist will tell you, these proto-questions operate at the base of all of our “existences” regardless of our so-called clinical structure. It is a task for philosophy writ large to determine how these structures operate universally, historically, and genealogically and indeed “march in the street”. But what psychoanalysis is so good at however, is looking at the minutia of everyday life, the dreams, the fantasies, and the sexual ‘disorders’ we all live with, in order to draw out the multifarious nuances between these bombastic existential positions. To discern how, why and in what way a subject orients their suffering (and enjoyment) around such ludicrously impossible concerns. A task that can only be done, in singular, one by one.

And the place at which these questions coalesce most frequently in the clinic (and in life) and show their real intractability is, yes you guessed it, in the dastardly matter of sex, the territory of nothingness, the space of negativity, the deadly abyss around which our fundamental fantasy is constructed. And it is this deathly matter of sex which Jamieson Webster wants to bring to life, as it were, in her latest collection of fascinating essays *Disorganisation & Sex* (2022). Many psychoanalytic books have broached the famous Lacanian sexual non-rapport as the site of a radical disjuncture in being which is at the heart of our trickiest political, social and ontological debates, however often without the flavour, specificity, accessibility and tangible context that Webster’s writing offers. Deliberately blurring the boundaries between the highly theoretical and the more public facing language, the book neither excludes, lectures nor patronizes the audience, be they analyst, theorist, or general reader. After all sex is about everything and for everyone as Freud showed us.

As a psychoanalyst first and foremost Webster’s writing is anchored in her own wranglings with the perpetually discomfited existentialism that the practice of “true” psychoanalysis really requires. She abides by Lacanian dictum 101: Don’t follow me, do your own thing! As we know, a good analyst should never be complacent in their position of masterful knowledge and should never reify their conceptual toolbox in order to apply it by rote to every phenomenon they experience inside and outside the clinic. Facts that woefully

too many psychoanalytic thinkers and practitioners often forget.

What marks Webster's work as well as its scholarly yet lyrical quality, is a resistance to theoretical stagnation or complacency within a discourse, be that Freudian, Lacanian or other more esoteric psychoanalytic frameworks which she playfully draws on. This lends a freshness and urgency to her work that is underscored by her confessional and auto-theoretical style. Not only does Webster lay bare her clinical practice but she also shows us glimpses of the ways her own insecurities, anxieties and imperfections continue to plague her in her daily life and work, like any healthy human being. This is not the fabled and absurdly perfect superhuman analyst of "The Pass" who has reached beyond the point of no return in their own analysis, eschewing the emotional pitfalls of mere mortals and their petty concerns with jealousy, rivalry, desire, rage etc. (I'm sure we all recognize how these delusions of grandeur can manifest among the many psychoanalytic sects.) This is a real human being, talking to other real human beings. And Webster lets us in on some of the moments in her practice when she experiences these, sometimes painful, ambiguities of working with the transference, and they are all the more illuminating and compelling for it.

Throughout the book she zig-zags between vignettes from her practice combined with close readings of Lacanian texts and cool, pithy summaries of Freudian case studies. The "disorganised" organization of the pieces serve to mirror the inherently restless nature of sexuality, the impossibility of giving it a neat edge, a tidy ending or a conclusion.

A reflection on the conceptual relationship between Adorno and Lacan leads Webster to read the dream journal of Adorno which he kept between 1932 and 1969 (published posthumously under the title *Dream Notes* in 2007) as a philosophical counterpart to Freud's inaugural dream of psychoanalysis, *Irma's Injection*. Here both men are haunted by scenes of (structural) beheading which she reads as the acephalic subject of the unconscious. For Webster, however, when Adorno's melancholic science meets the science of melancholia, his tone falls into the sort of moralistic critique his work always sought to avoid. Again though, we are here confronted with the differing stakes of psychoanalysis and philosophy and the question of whether they can ever be reconciled when it comes to the self-analyzing figure of the philosopher (Plato, Boethius, Descartes, St Augustine, Rousseau, Hegel, to name a few). Real psychoanalysis is only ever an (extimate) dialogue, a transference relationship predicated on (impossible) desire, absence and loss: can it ever truly be done alone?

Another essay recounts Webster's own feelings of shame around an analysis in which she felt that she had succumbed to interpretation too quickly (a big Lacanian boo boo). Stereotypes and preconceptions haunt us all and they have to be worked through constantly, she reminds us. However, the job of the psychoanalyst demands rather more than so called impartiality or neutrality. It demands a recognition of the desire of the psychoanalyst themselves, a desire that must become an active part of working with the transference, not a malignant tumour to be cut out of the clinical space.

Webster also takes up Paul Preciado's challenge to the psychoanalytic institutions in *Can the Monster Speak?* (2021) and enters into a discussion with him on the ambivalent posture he adopts with respect to the purported aims of clinical practice, all the while flirting with psychoanalytic discourse and self-analysis. Whilst Preciado condemns psychoanalysis for its normativizing and colonizing history, Webster draws to light the common aims that she sees the best forms of psychoanalytic practice have with Preciado's emancipatory project. One which places the contested body at the forefront of clinical work. In fact, so influenced had she been in her previous work by Preciado's 2013 book *Testo Junkie* she wanted to:

Translate these aspects [of Preciado's work] into the lens of the everyday practice of clinical psychoanalysis: looking at the way soma erupts in the consulting room, the conundrums of agency and identity and so many objects of frustrating satisfaction, the biopolitics of the psycho-pharmaco-pornographic present in our symptoms, the unravelling and mutation necessary for paradigmatic shifts and epistemological rewrites, a longing for a future. (Webster, 2022, p. 169)

Ultimately Preciado and Webster's projects are really not so far removed from each other, although we could certainly say the journey from Freud to Preciado is one many clinicians in the hallowed and frusty psychoanalytic institutions still have to make.

Particularly entertaining (if that's not too exploitative a word to use) in my view are the anonymous examples Webster gives of her patient's masturbation fantasies which she uses to break down the elements of Freud's 1919 paper *A Child is Being Beaten*. The paper is especially significant according to Webster, not just because we now know that it was in fact written about his daughter Anna Freud, whose masturbatory fantasies he supposedly tried to pass off as a discussion of a clinical case. But most significant about the paper is that it is here where Freud begins to correct what he sees as a dangerous trend in psychoanalysis, the tendency to see masturbation and the fantasies supporting its activity to be a form of perversion or distortion of the natural or normal course of sexual development. On the contrary Freud sets out to show that these fantasies are in fact common and represent the 'scar or afterbirth' in what inevitably fails in our attempt to become adult sexual human beings. A failure that he will later recognize as fundamental to human subjectivity itself. This becomes apparent when he later abandons his theory of childhood sexual trauma, leading to neurosis in favour of the view that sexuality is inherently traumatic, without the need for there ever having been empirical sexual abuse on the part of a caregiver or anyone else. In short, we arrive at what is now the well-worn, but nevertheless worthwhile repeating Lacano-philosophical idea: *sex is the onto-epistemological deadlock of the speaking subject*.

In Webster's breakdown of the essential elements of *A Child is Being Beaten* masturbation fantasy, she identifies the following criteria:

The fantasy: *I am being beaten by my father.*

The vaginal orifice: *Where is the mother and her desire?*

Answer: *There is no woman in this fantasy.*

The inseminating role of semen: *What is the father, the symbol of authority and the law, in this fantasy?*

Answer: *The father is a sadist in this fantasy.*

Intercourse: *What are sexual relationships, commitment, love in this fantasy?*

Answer: Sex and love are pain and punishment in this fantasy. (p. 139)

Webster then goes on to adapt these three questions to a range of anonymous masturbation fantasies recounted to her, in every case identifying the specific mutations of enjoyment that each of the patient's sexual life is structured by. Whether it's a classroom of severe older school mistresses observing and admonishing a lesbian tryst, a sad hetero break up girlfriend crying in the shower guilt fantasy, or a homoerotic gangbang humiliation fantasy, Webster pinpoints the differing subjective questions underpinning each of these intense forms of jouissance. How do these fantasies attempt to resolve these questions and where in each case is the subject positioned with respect to these elements?

Whichever way we swing it, the structural position of father, mother, semen and vagina just won't seem to go away. Even if our gender roles and psychological conformity with biologically determined bodies are no longer set in stone and whilst there may be greater symmetry between the sexes in the representation of mothers and fathers, the same elements always persist in the fantasy. What she notes however is that in each case no one engages directly in the act, every attempt at coitus is reachable only via an assault course of obstacles not quite getting to *the thing*. And most striking to Webster is the "powerful negation of the phallus in the form of the penis that cannot appear. It simply isn't there either for the men or the women" (p.130).

It is this absence of the phallus which perhaps best sums up the evanescence of contemporary sex most powerfully. It used to be the case, as the famous Lacanian saying goes, that *Woman Does Not Exist* due to the lack of a signifier for woman in the unconscious... but now it seems the only signifier we do have for it won't show itself at all, even in our fantasies!

## **Bio:**

**Dr Isabel Millar** is a philosopher and psychoanalytic theorist from London. She holds a PhD in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis from Kingston University, School of Art. She is the author of *The Psychoanalysis of Artificial Intelligence* published in the Palgrave Lacan Series in 2021, and *Patipolitics: On the Government of Sexual Suffering* forthcoming with Bloomsbury in 2023. She is associate researcher at Newcastle University, Department of Philosophy and research fellow and faculty at The Global Centre for Advanced Studies, Institute of Psychoanalysis. As well as extensive international academic speaking and publishing, her work can be found across a variety of media, including TV, podcasts, magazines and art institutes.

isabel.millar@gmail.com / [www.isabelmillar.com](http://www.isabelmillar.com)

## **Publication Date:**

December 9, 2022