Jamieson Webster, *Conversion Disorder: Listening to the Body in Psychoanalysis*, Columbia UP, 2018 (Fernanda Negrete)

It is widely known that an analysis takes time, patience, and money. At least it is assumed by anyone who has ever heard of this practice and of Sigmund Freud, after whom, knowingly or not, in our current everyday chatter we talk about our egos, narcissism, and the things we "unconsciously" say or do. And perhaps this idea of an unconscious life that impinges on one's more recognizable self-narrative allows one to say that an analysis also takes courage—the courage to know something less widely known about oneself, and thus to unleash the consequences of such a thing, wherever they arise. What does it take to write about psychoanalysis, then? Jamieson Webster opens her book by asking, "[W]ho has the courage for psychoanalysis anymore?."[1] This question deserves to be read in detail, as it captures the stakes and spirit of *Conversion Disorder*. The need for courage implies, first of all, taking risks. Of losing something, an object? Of losing at some kind of game of love and chance played in the course of one's life?[2] Or is it, rather, the risk of loss that comes with a quest, in which psychoanalysis would place one, anyone, including the author of this book, an American Lacanian analyst who, late in the book and drawing on a dream of her own, names the experience of her quest as analyst the "incomplete transatlantic tunnel"?[3] The course of an analysis itself unfolds like a quest, dark and constricting like a tunnel at times, to be sure, and oriented toward a conclusive moment

[1] Jamieson Webster, *Conversion Disorder: Listening to the Body in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 1.

[2] Lacan liked to invoke the ancient game of morra, or its perhaps better-known version today "rock-paper-scissors," playing on the French homophony between "*la mourre*" and "*l'amour*," "love," and on the act of guessing through which non-knowledge plays a part in the interaction between players. He raises this idea in his brief homage to Marguerite Duras' *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, reading the protagonist's first name as paper (wings: "*ailes de papier*"), the initial for her middle name, "V," as scissors, and translates the German "*Stein*," "rock." The formula he discerns in this name and plot is "*au jeu de la mourre tu te perds*," "in the morra/love game you lose yourself/get lost." Lacan thus entitles his Seminar 24, "L*'insu que sait de l'une-bévue s'aile à mourre*," for which a more or less literal translation would be, "The unknown that knows of the one-blunder wings itself at morra," but where Lacan also makes audible, with a German word, "*L'insuccès de l'Unbewusst c'est l'amour*," "The failure of the unconscious is love."

[3] Webster, *Conversion Disorder*, 269

of decompletion that Freud named "castration." This word certainly calls to mind the painful loss of a body part, yet in the logic of the psychoanalytic quest, what results from the confrontation or traversal of a gap in knowledge is a loss of the body as a unit made up of parts, through a cut that opens a field of separation for a desiring subject. Committing to a process with such an ending—and Webster points out that the work of separation does not only emerge at the end of the analytic quest, but rather "again and again and again"[4]—does seem to require courage, and a certain degree of masochism, or at least a strong sense that change, a turn, conversion is somehow to be gained by this process. *Conversion Disorder* implicitly explores the possibility of writing a self-analysis to the point of castration (without which there is no analysis).

But let us come back to the introductory question. It seems to address present-day individuals for whom the stakes of undergoing an analysis seem, by default, too high: sessions of "forty-five minutes, three or four or even five times a week […] a decade, maybe longer, two."[5] In the very next paragraph, the flow of words turns from the potential analysand to the role of the analyst, to whom the same question applies, for different reasons. The turn toward the analyst, however, does not establish a single, stable perspective for the discussion, and this resistance to a single perspective may bespeak the distinction between the positions of master and of analyst, when the analyst knows something about the unconscious from the disruptions in "her own" body. An analyst is not merely a master of the psyche, but rather a particular effect of having undergone an analysis to its very end, there, where a unique formulation, such as an "incomplete transatlantic tunnel," might arise with the necessary force to move someone across irreducible gaps. The signifier "psychoanalysis"—in that first interrogative sentence and throughout the entire book—enables Webster's writing to simultaneously bear various different positions: theoretical, clinical, existential, ethical; as analysand and analyst, writer and reader, inheritor and improviser. This versatile attitude, of engaging theoretically with concepts from continental philosophers such as Agamben or Nancy, while maintaining all at once a clinical stance of "listening to the body," is infrequently found in psychoanalytic texts, and it is one of *Conversion*

[4] Ibid, 100
[5] Ibid, 1

Disorder's key virtues—closely linked to that of *reading*, with which this review concludes. The wide variety of positions include a self-analytic one in which the analyst interrogates her own place and experience of the unconscious, as much as she embodies an act of listening to her analysands' desires, which is no small undertaking (this mode of listening is, I would say, coextensive with reading).

The dexterity with which *Conversion Disorder* shifts across different roles regarding psychoanalysis evokes Freud's description of the simultaneous performance of opposite roles and gestures the hysterical body can take on, as an effect of representing a fantasy from all angles and actors. In "Hysterical phantasies and their relation to bisexuality" (1908), he highlights hysterical attacks where

> the patient simultaneously plays both parts in the underlying sexual phantasy. In one case which I observed, for instance, the patient pressed her dress up against her body with one hand (as the woman), while she tried to tear it off with the other (as the man). This simultaneity of contradictory actions serves to a large extent to obscure the situation, which is otherwise so plastically portrayed in the attack, and it is thus well suited to conceal the unconscious phantasy that is at work.[6]

The simultaneity of roles in *Conversion Disorder*, however, illuminates rather than concealing the remarkable plasticity of psychoanalysis and of its hysteric style and structure. Conversion disorder, Webster explains, is a psychiatric term that has replaced the "hysteria" Freud describes in the cited case. Freud himself, as Webster notes, proposed the term "conversion" in his early theory of hysterical symptoms, understood as operations in which unconscious psychical energy was turned into physical terms that expressed a fantasy in condensed form, and in which a sexual element was essential. This encounter Freud had with the embodied speech of certain women in fact lies at the origin of the practice and theory of psychoanalysis. To take Freud's cited case as an example, conversion there takes the form of a specific performance of sorts (Freud calls it an "attack," adopting the term

[6] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 9, ed. and trans. James Strachey et. al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 166.

of Charcot, who saw in these events four specific phases, including a "passionate" one). Momentarily abandoning social expectations, the woman stages a peculiar interaction between her dress and the body it covers, in which Freud discerns a man's undressing gesture against a woman's resistance to being undressed, and a simultaneity of contradictory desires sharing the stage of the woman's bisexual body—to undress, to be undressed, to resist being undressed. According to exactly this polysemy, defiant of any principle of non-contradiction, Webster suggestively claims that conversion can be read as not only the cause of psychoanalysis "but also its desired effect,"[7] inasmuch as it leads, precisely, to a turning point or shift in position, which at least sometimes goes from analysand to analyst.

But let us take another look at Webster's initial question. For it ends with an "anymore" that suggests some golden age when at least certain people did have the courage for psychoanalysis, an age that would now be lost, gone. It was, of course, both the analysts and the analysands who invented this practice. *Conversion Disorder* devotes attention to the time when Freud wrote to Fliess or worked with Breuer on a treatment for hysteric women who had sessions practically every day. That context appears within discussions about the present field of psychoanalysis, where Webster insists on the problem with the institution and its ways of failing. Yet it is not ultimately in a nostalgic and over-idealizing depiction of Freud or the beginning of psychoanalysis that the old days are invoked. Instead, the failings then and now are explored for a distinct kind of potential the author names "conversion." The book suggests that if embodying the figure of the psychoanalyst also takes courage today (and perhaps the question ought to specify "here, in the United States" after its "anymore"), it is because, just as there is a general impression that psychoanalysis takes years and a lot of money, there is a general opinion that its relevance has been overcome by scientific, technological, and even political progress, not to mention that to most people a commitment to sessions more than once a week probably seems excessive or daunting. This general view correctly judges that science and technology today allow us to see and know more about the body and its activities than was possible at the turn of the twentieth century, when Freud invented psychoanalysis and distinguished between organic and inorganic bodily symptoms, to show the latter's link to psychic processes. It is also true

[7] *Conversion Disorder,* 11

that his views on women's capacity to have a moral conscience and make significant cultural contributions did not exemplify a discourse of equal rights sustained by feminist activists and thinkers contemporary to him. Webster's book recognizes this setting, demonstrating at once that "being a psychoanalyst" does not mean absorbing and perpetuating Freud's claims dogmatically, and that Freud's writing offers insights that remain perfectly keen, about, for instance, causes for the persistence of generalized misogyny, or of unhappiness in marriage.

One important link Webster produces between the old days of psychoanalysis and the present concerns the problem of having a body. These early analysts and analysands had bodies, and they were put to a unique task, as are the bodies of those who still take the risk of analysis today. For the analysand, it has always been about a certain hystericization, about the body "joining in the conversation," as Freud said about a key moment in the treatment of the obsessional patient he called the Wolf Man, who delayed this process until the analyst, who was aware of the resistance, placed a limit on their work together. For the analyst, this task can be formulated as one of not only "listening to" but also "with" the body. The sense Webster gives to this task is worth considering carefully, against the reputation Lacan and Lacanians have as "intellectualizing," according to other varieties of psychoanalysis, psychotherapies, and many literary scholars. This body speaking *and listening* beyond knowledge is a key matter *Conversion Disorder* investigates through its fascinating combination of strategies, among which appear personal meditations on the "impossible profession of being a psychoanalyst," examples from individual cases the author has taken on as a clinician, textual comparisons on the notion of "conversion" across psychoanalysis and political theology, material from the author's own dreams and symptoms, and last but not least, close readings of a rich and refreshing variety of writings by Freud.

This takes us to the other aspect of *Conversion Disorder* I wish to highlight. While it remarks that psychoanalysis takes courage, it demonstrates through its methodology that reading takes courage, and bears a close relationship with the work of psychoanalysis. If, as I have mentioned, dogmatic reproductions of Freud do not make a psychoanalyst today, the work of reading Freud instead seems like a necessary condition. Like psychoanalysis, reading takes courage because it not only takes time, but also takes away unequivocal certainties and distinctions that disavow the

unconscious.[8] As a Lacanian, Webster engages herself in the work of reading Freud's texts beyond the papers and works consecrated by Lacan in his seminars. She thus considers, for instance, a less popular paper such as "The Taboo on Virginity" to retrieve important clues on the unconscious "as a kind of writing that organizes both the field of representation and the surface of the body together, that is, what we might call the sexual,"[9] offering an approach interested in "maintaining the separation between psyche and soma"[10] in order to avoid the view that an "idea or conflict gave rise to a somatic symptom," in a simple causality that, aside from appearing obscurantist in a scientific light, erases the interstitial spacing of the sexual, as "essentially what saves us, what preserves the psyche, and what moves us past the vicissitudes of possession."[11]

Just as the women who in Freud's "Taboo on Virginity" resist being possessed by a man, Webster's treatment of writing (by Freud and others) resists being possessed by a fixed meaning. It calls, instead, for reading "past the vicissitudes of possession" as an analytic act, in which *Conversion Disorder* invites its audience to participate.

[8] For a recent and compelling reflection on the courage and risk of reading, see Steven Miller's "Translator's Introduction: The Risk of Reading" to Anne Dufourmantelle's *In Praise of Risk*.
[9] *Conversion Disorder*, 109
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid, 100