

Seduction and the Subject of the Unconscious: Kierkegaard and the Anxious Question of Desire

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How can one speak of seduction and anxiety in the same breath? A surprising answer would be that we might already do so when we discourse on affects. The study of affects has been one of the recent waves of research in the arts and humanities, in different areas such as queer theory (Sedgwick), literary theory (Terrada), anthropology (Surrallés), as well as psychoanalysis with the timely French publication of Lacan's seminar on anxiety (2004). When we think about feeling anxious we ask ourselves why we feel the way we do, but we often fail to ask whom or what is responsible for such a reaction, since anxiety – as Kierkegaard and Freud agree – is without object. This autoreflexivity of anxiety is precisely the point of departure I want to establish before turning to seduction, a stance which seems to be contrary to anxiety as it is constantly turned towards an other for its own defining attitude. I will then continue by examining this paradoxical combination of anxiety and seduction in Kierkegaard. As I returned to Kierkegaard in preparation for this paper, not necessarily to *The Concept of Anxiety* but rather to *Either/Or*, I was struck by uncanny similarities in Johannes' diary and Lacan's *Chè vuoi?* from *Seminar V* and "The Subversion of the Subject." My project is to read Kierkegaard and Lacan in order to tease out the relations between desire, anxiety and seduction. If my hunch is right, by the end of this paper, it should be clear how seduction is not merely interrogative in nature, but more importantly, an answer that covers up an absence of meaning.

I will start by going over Lacan's conception of the subject of desire that you can find in "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire" in the *Écrits*. An earlier elaboration can also be found in *Seminaire V: les formations de l'inconscient*. Although such a summary of the theory will necessarily be incomplete, this will refresh the memory of those who have already read Lacan and give others a minimal way of understanding the crux of my argument. I will concentrate on describing the emergence of the subject of the unconscious, because as Lacan says in *Seminar V*: "You will see things singularly clarify themselves at the moment when you will start centering your questions on the child as subject, that of whence emanates the demand, that where desire is formed – and all this analysis is a dialectic of desire." (Lacan 1998: 189, my trans.) Although Lacan's graphs of desire are not to be understood in a purely developmental fashion, using the example of the child's entry into language will make the graphs much easier to understand.

Lacan thinks that the formation of the unconscious takes place with the infant's entry into language. If you consult Graph I (Lacan 2002: 681), you will see a model of how the infant's needs meet with the law of desire its mother or caregiver represents, the infant being the empty triangle where the whole thing starts.¹ The other's own needs and desires make her come from somewhere outside the baby's presence to take care of it, before moving on (Lacan 1998: 191-192). In the same context, the signifiers, the sound-image of speech, are first differentiated. With

¹ One may also consult the graphs of desire online. The following Internet site has the merit of posting them next to each other, which will facilitate the reader's consultation of the graphs: http://nosubject.com/Graph_of_desire.

Graph II (Lacan 2002: 684) we reconstruct the scene of the baby seeing itself in the mirror, realizing that its body is separated from that of the parent's. This scene sets the stage for the child's entry into language, since it creates the minimal conditions of differentiation required for language to function. In the graph, the symbol $i(a)$ represents the image the infant forms of the parent in the specular consciousness separating the originary mother-infant dyad. Because it still cannot tend to its own needs, the infant will try to emulate the image of the other (alter-ego), which gives rise to its own ego (m on the graph for "moi"). The child acts instinctively by reflecting its image back to the Other, in hope that they will reunite, hence fixing the problem of the infant's survival once and for all. This is to say that although the child realizes that where there was one there is now two, it is still completely dependant on this signified other – $s(A)$ – to satisfy its needs. However, just like the infant has given way in the graph to the barred subject – $\$$ –, the law first made known to him by the mother is here signaled by the father who busies the mother, taking on the role of the Other – A – since he represents symbolically the one who puts this law into motion.

At this point, what both mother and father have, and not the infant, is language. Language becomes the advantage the child needs since its initial proposition is not received. When the baby hears the sounds of the voice of the Other, "the treasure trove of signifiers" (682), these do not yet make sense. But when the signifier, the sound of speech, makes the signified Other – $s(A)$ – change its course, then this signifier becomes a signifier for something. This is what Lacan means, when he says the treasure trove of signifiers is Truth's witness: you once heard how a sound made your caregiver move towards the Other. This is the promise of language located in the Other: it gets what you need. Thus, in the paternal metaphor, Lacan makes reference to this function of the Other as the Name-of-the-Father and not simply "daddy": "And while the somatic *ananke* [necessity/destiny] of man's inability to move, much less be self-sufficient, for some time after birth provides grounds for a psychology of dependence, how can that psychology elide the fact that this dependence is maintained by a universe of language?" (Lacan 2002: 372) As the infant enters language – Graph III (Lacan 2002: 690) – its needs meet the necessity of being formulated in a demand that can never fully express what it is we do not know: "Desire [d] begins to take shape in the margin in which demand rips away from need, this margin being the one that demand [...] opens up in the guise of the possible gap need may give rise to here, because it has no universal satisfaction (this is called "anxiety")" (689). On this subject Bruce Fink notes that "due to the fact that we must express ourselves in language, need is never fully expressed in demand... There is always a leftover—a leftover Lacan calls desire" (Fink 2004: 118). However, we must remember that this graph maps the logic of unconscious subjectivity: "For it is clear here that man's continued nescience of his desire is not so much nescience of what he demands, which after all may be isolated, as nescience of whence he desires. This is where my formulation that the unconscious is (the) discourse about the Other fits in..." (Lacan 2002: 689-690).

I should add here a word to the English translation. The English word "about" does not give the full resonance of the French "de", since "de" also means "originating in or from". The French reads "*l'inconscient est discours de l'Autre*", but we are cut off from this origin. Therefore the unconscious is discourse *about* the Other but it also discourse coming *from* the Other, originating in it. This is why Lacan speaks of the subject of desire's revealed truth, which recalls Kierkegaard's qualitative leap. Although Kierkegaard uses this leap to express the limits of transcendental knowledge in *The Concept of Anxiety*, and although we know how Lacan makes

reference to this book in *Seminar X: L'angoisse*, I will nevertheless turn to *The Seducer's Diary* to tease out the links I see at work between anxiety and seduction.

In the preface to *Either/Or*, Victor Eremita, the fictional editor of the book, gives the reader a bit of insight into the psychological constraints its material exerted over its author: "It really seems as if A himself had become afraid of his fiction, which, like a troubled dream, continued to make him feel uneasy, also in the telling" (Kierkegaard 1987: 9). Accordingly, "A" writes in the preface to the Diary: "Hide from myself, I cannot: I can hardly control the anxiety that grips me at this moment when I decide in my own interest to make an accurate clean copy of the hurried transcript I was able to obtain at the time only in the greatest haste and with great uneasiness" (303). The anxiety, however, is not the sole experience of the reader, as the entries express the same kind of affective distress on the seducer's part. As we read the journal, it seems that the seduction game is not the complete answer to putting anxiety at bay. In fact, we are told exactly what it is that makes anxiety bearable for its writer: writing.

Before we get to the satisfying esthetics of writing, another word on translation imposes itself. Although the seducer's ways might vary from one culture to another, the language of seduction is ambivalent when it comes to a global/local polarity. If seduction is inherent to the subject of desire, as we shall see, the language in which it is spoken can be quite local and make for diverging contextual spaces of interpretation. I am sure the reader will appreciate the problem of translating the Danish word *Nydelse*. *Nydelse* can mean pleasure, indulgence or enjoyment (Axelsen, 340). *Enten-Eller's* French translation of 1943 by Prior and Guignot uses *jouissance* to translate *Nydelse*, while Howard and Edna Hong translate it by "enjoyment." *Jouissance* seems to have lost its *droit de cité* in English, even if the 1913 edition of *Webster's English Dictionary* lists it as an English noun. So does the *OED*, giving mirth and delight as synonyms, and, with a surprising blindness to the effervescence of Lacanian studies, the dictionary lists *jouissance's* last use in English literature in 1767. However, reading with an ear tuned to *jouissance* will provide us with a point of entry into *Either/Or*. Therefore, I will be replacing enjoyment in the English translation by *jouissance* wherever I can and delight or enjoy when *Nydelse* is used in its verb form.

Either/Or is written as a series of *mise en abymes* that blur the lines between author, narrator and character. While Victor Eremita finds the manuscript, these papers contain the story of another person – whom Eremita names "A" – who declares to have discovered a diary whose publication rests on the second copy made by "A". This "A" claims to personally know the author of the diary and thus can give us information about him personally and his style of writing: "How then can it be explained that the diary nevertheless has taken on such a poetic tinge?" (Kierkegaard 1987: 305), he asks. The reasons for the aesthetic qualities of the journal are to be found in its author's poetic nature, one that cannot dissociate poetry from reality:

The poetic was the [sur]plus he himself brought along. This [sur]plus was the poetic he enjoyed in the poetic situation of actuality; this he recaptured in the form of poetic reflection. This was the second [jouissance], and his whole life was intended for [jouissance]. In the first case, he personally [delighted in] the esthetic; in the second case, he esthetically [delighted in] his personality. (305, trans. modified)

You will remark how the English translation makes it impossible to employ the passive verb *delight* instead of *enjoy* in the second sentence's structure. Nonetheless, if we listen with our attuned ear, we understand that we have here the description of a psychological mirror, which seems to close the circle of need and satisfaction by tying them together aesthetically. Let us turn

once again to Lacan.

We remember how desire in our Graph III takes flight from the position of the signified Other, $s(A)$. Now we will examine desire's double structural constitution in the Complete Graph (Lacan 2002: 692). In the entry into language through the position of the Other, the subject of desire's drives split up into two different ways of making what it wants known: need and demand. Need is the realm of the *objet a* and inherits the fantasies of the partial objects the subject has lost and now finds in an other. In the curb of need, we find the images of the unconscious, its imaginary formation. If we like, we could call this part of expressed desire the remnant of the mirror stage in an unconscious structured by language. In the second curb, on top, we find the subject's desire for the Other's demand: *Chè vuoi?* If we are to return to our parent/infant metaphor, we understand it as the parent wanting the baby to speak to make his needs known. Here the drives meet with the signifiers and give rise to the chain of signifiers. The parent is asking the child something he does not understand. The parent's desire remains an enigma, as Jean Laplanche would put it, which constitutes one form of anxiety in the subject: how do I know I am wanting what the Other wants me to want? I say anxiety, for there is no precise answer to this question. Anxiety is the deferral of an answer to an impossible question. Thus, Lacan is faithful to Freud and Kierkegaard's conception of anxiety as a fear without object: in this theory, anxiety is an impossible answer to an unconscious enigma. With this form of anxiety, we can easily see how seduction, trying to play out the Other's desire, could be an answer to this anxiety. Not a single absolute answer, but an interminable interrogative game in which the stakes are of an essential importance to both seducer and seducee.

Turning back to Kierkegaard, we see how aesthetic sublimation is posited as meeting this exact seductive function of closing the gap between demand and need in a perfect poetic jouissance. In fact, *The Seducer's Diary* is full of need that causes him anxiety and that he alleviates through writing. When the diarist first sees the young woman in the green cloak, he is overwhelmed by her appearance, just as one cannot see something when one is blinded by a bright light:

Have I become blind? Has the inner eye of the soul lost its power? I have seen her, but it is as if I had seen a heavenly revelation—so completely has her image vanished again for me. [...] My eyes fixed unswerving upon her. They no longer obeyed their master's will; it was impossible for me to *shift* my gaze and thus overlook the object I wanted to see—I did not look, I stared. (Kierkegaard 1987: 323)

Further on, having gone through the pangs of not being able to find his beloved in the green cloak, our seducer comes to the conclusion that although meeting a young woman in the street is more enigmatic (326), meeting someone in society comes with useful information if one should like to find her again (328). In other words, the young lady would no longer be confined to his Imaginary but would also have a certain foothold in the character's Symbolic order. This, however, is merely a consolation. If we go back to their encounter, we read that "It was impossible [for him] to look down, impossible to withdraw [his] glance, impossible to see, because [he] saw far too much" (323). If we turn back to the Complete Graph for a second look, we see that the *objet a*, as the upholder of the gaze, is precisely to be found on the projectory of need. It is not desire expressing itself through signifiers but in the alienating potential of images, in the light that shines down on them in a chiaroscuro that reminds one of the ambivalent optic play of *fort-da*. We should remind ourselves that the *objet a* is not the object itself that is desired: it is the light absent in the object itself but that infuses it with what we find desirable. However, when the *objet a* threatens to manifest itself, we experience the second type of anxiety that I briefly remarked upon above.

In conclusion, I would say that Kierkegaard seeks to demonstrate how the writing of these events, their esthetical rendering, alleviates the anxiety they caused Johannes. Of course, my analysis of the text's poetic jouissance does not take into consideration the whole book and its developing narrative. My purpose in using these literary examples was to replace seduction in a wider psychoanalytic framework, namely as a repetitive answer to the anxiety present in the very constitution of the desiring subject. Furthermore, the sketching out of the seducer's structural economy of anxiety in regards to his object of desire points to the reasons why feelings or affects do not voice the origin to which they react: they have a way of covering up what we cannot handle, namely the Other's constitutive disinterest in our desire.

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