



ESSAY

How J Lacan was inspired by Soeren Abye Kierkegaard and Anton Chekhov, or: Kierkegaard with Chekhov.

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Abstract: The text discusses anxiety by comparing Lacan's reference to Kierkegaard and Chekhov. In the former, Lacan finds the idea that desire and anxiety are of the same fabric woven by the desire of the Other, an infinite desire, in which there is no mediation; in the latter, a reduction of anxiety to the unknown that can be discovered since Chekhov's medical and naturalistic point of view opens the possibility to reduce the infinite down to a spare part: object *a*.

Key words: Anxiety; desire of the Other; object *a*.

Resumen: El texto discute la angustia comparando la referencia en Lacan sobre Kierkegaard y Chekhov. Lacan en el primero encuentra la idea del deseo y la angustia como hechos de la misma tela tejida por el deseo del Otro, un deseo infinito, en el que no hay mediación. En el segundo puede descubrirse una reducción de la angustia a lo desconocido, pues el punto de vista médico y naturalista de Chekhov abre la posibilidad de reducir el infinito a una parte suelta: el objeto *a*.

Palabras clave: Angustia; deseo del Otro; objeto *a*.

Among the numerous references to be found in J. Lacan's seminar on Anxiety, two are especially striking. More than references, they should more rightfully be considered as inspirations. What I would like to claim is that these two authors have a special role in the gallery of writers he considered as especially relevant. As such, they can be opposed to the traditional psychoanalytic research on anxiety, the paradigm of which is Rapaport. This does not mean that they should be seen as equivalent. Kierkegaard imposed the theme of anxiety in a cultural context where it was not exactly popular. His "paradoxical" career happened during the "golden age" of Denmark, and he was more perceived as a maverick than as a theology luminary. It is traditionally noted, in the North American Lutheran Church movement, that Kierkegaard provoked a division of his fellow citizens between the "singing Danes" (also called "singing Danes" because they were Nikolai Grundtvig's followers) and the "gloomy Danes" (Kierkegaardians). But whereas Kierkegaard identified himself with a specific subjective position which he termed "enkelt", and consisting mainly in the exploration of anxiety and guilt, Anton Chekhov seemed to do exactly the contrary.

Chekhov's art was extremely distant from what was generally perceived as specific of Russian esthetic tendencies, like the passion for the fantastic (especially, the theme of the Doppelgänger), the minute and description of complex forms of guilt, or an immoderate taste for mysticism. Chekhov shared his life-spans between periods dedicated to the writing of theatre plays and short novels (in fact most of them are short, but some are several hundred pages long; he wrote more than 600 altogether), and periods dedicated to the practice of medicine. Although he became quite famous as a novel writer (and hailed by Tolstoi himself), it was not before Stanislavsky organized a representation of one of his plays that he became famous as a playwright - in fact, one can wonder whether he would have achieved recognition on the stage without the expressionistic accent Stanislavsky impressed on his theatre, previously perceived as more or less frivolous.

It is not exaggerated to say that there is a kind of reductionism in Chekhov's art. Of course his plays and novels describe exquisitely the fluctuations of sensitive souls. But he always kept to what could be seen as a naturalistic shallowness. His characters are typically sensitive petit bourgeois, quite often civil servants, or professionals with a rather mediocre career, who never meant to experience tragic emotions but are struggling to maintain their authenticity against a destructive world; this is perhaps the only noble aspect in them. Similarly, the religious themes are typically reduced to popular folk-tales, and what strikes the reader at first sight is that when Chekhov comes to the theme of anxiety, he repetitively claims that "you are afraid of things when you don't know them". In Russian, *strakh* (fright, terror) has phonetic similarities to "*stranni*" (strange), which has the same radical as "*inostranny*" (foreign): "*stran*", a "*country*". In a way, Chekhov's thesis is that what is "*strashni*" (terrifying) is simply "*stranni*" (strange).

What I would like to suggest here is that the apparently total opposition between Chekhov and Kierkegaard, has been inspirational to Lacan; I will claim that Lacan has used Chekhov to criticize Kierkegaard's views at a certain point.

In his seminar held on the 28th of November 1962, J. Lacan discusses the famous passage of Hegel's *Phenomenologie des Geistes* that has so much fascinated the French intellectuals in the 1930ies under the influence of Alexandre Kojève: the so-called "dialectic of the master and the slave", which was mainly understood as a fundamental document on what was perceived as the most important topic of the time, intersubjectivity. Lacan examines whether the fundamental principle in Hegel's philosophy, mediation, rightly applies there.

For Hegel, he claims, the Other is most of all a consciousness, a consciousness which opposes itself to the subject's consciousness. Lacan opposes to this his concept of the Other as locus of the signifier, who "interests my desire inasmuch as he misses something and does not know it."

He then proceeds in writing four formulas, which are somewhat prefatory of the four discourses he will later expound in his 1970 seminar, *The Seamy Side of Psychoanalysis*.

The first formula represents the fate of desire in the dialectic of the master and the slave. The subject needs the Other to recognize him. In response, the Other will institute something, an object, which will crystallize both this recognition and the subject's desire. Now the subject cannot accept to be identified to an object, since the subject is a "*selbstbewusstsein*", a conscience of oneself. Consequently, there will be a struggle against the two *Bewusstsein*, the subject's and the Other's, and this conflict cannot be solved by anything else than *war* or *serfdom*.

The second formula is what Lacan describes until the 50ies as the construction of the symptom, i.e. the subject's desire is mediated, in its relationship with the Other, by the specular image of the Other, inasmuch as the image of the Other appears as an equivalent of the Other's desire. The Other's image becomes the object of the subject's

fantasy.

Of course this is what happens most of the time, for example in a love relationship, in which love can continue as long as the veil is not lifted - the classical myth of Eros and psyche can be considered as the paradigm of this.

The third formula is presented by Lacan as specifically Kierkegaardian. It is the formula of anxiety, which Lacan considers as the "truth of the Hegelian formula". It seems quite clear that with this formula ($d(x):d(A)<x$) Lacan alludes to such Kierkegaardian formulas as "The idea of philosophy is mediation - the idea of Christianity is the paradox" (Papirer, III A 108). The desire is here specified by (x), the unknown, the mystery, the "teleological suspension" (the sacrifice of Isaac) through which the subject appears as a victim, whose fate eludes comprehension, and whose being is best grasped as anxiety, guilt, etc.

The fourth formula suggests a mutation: from this Kierkegaardian concept of anxiety as the core of being, to the operationalization of castration as truth of this anxiety. Lacan had already given a hint on this in his seminar on Transference, claiming for instance that Socrates' refusal of Alcibiades' desire can be seen as a model of the analytic operation.

In fact, the very progression of Lacan's anxiety seminar is guided by Kierkegaard's *Stadier*. The operation of this seminar consists in re-establishing a new status of the object, in which it will no more be the guarantee of the subject's "enkelt" position as an eternal fiancé and an eternal victim, but it will be allowed to drop, renewing the situation of the subject's desire. Lacan had originally the project of focusing his seminar of the next year (1963-64), *The name of the father*, on Kierkegaard's "Gentagelse" and "Fear and shudder". He finally changed his mind, but of course we have some hints of what he meant to do: he devotes a whole chapter of his seminar on *Anxiety* to the sacrifice of Abraham. He does not quote Kierkegaard here, and explicitly uses Theodor Reik's article on the schofar instead. But it is quite clear that he had Kierkegaard in mind – incidentally, Theodor Reik considered himself as deeply influenced by Kierkegaard.

In fact, this issue of what is beyond anxiety is not absent in the life of Kierkegaard. Yves Depelsenaire has recently dedicated a book to this theme, and shown the difference between two positions in the philosopher's life. By abandoning Regine, Kierkegaard found a Mozartian solution to the guilt linked to his father's fault: creating anxiety in the beloved, to whom he could identify himself and bestow himself a paradoxical existence, and existence characterized by the extensive use of pseudonyms and a whole series of limitations. As an eternal fiancé, he could put aside the fact that Regine had finally got married. But this secret identification failed him the day when Regine's husband was nominated governor of the Danish West Indies: he was then expelled from his point of identification, and started a violent quarrel with Bishop Mynster - who had been his father's confessor - and publicly denounces the imposture of the Danish Church. His being was then reduced to what St Paul called "a splinter in the flesh"; in October 1855, he collapsed in the street and never recovered.

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In his seminar of March the 6th and the 13th 1963, Lacan discusses Chekhov's short novel entitled "strakhi", i.e. "panic fears". In it, the narrator explains in a dispassionate tone that: "During all the years I have been living in this world I have only three times been terrified".

The first time was one evening of July, when the narrator was fetching some newspapers, "the sultry warmth of the evening had been replaced by a grey dusk as the sun had gone down". The narrator is accompanied by a young boy, the gardener's eight-year-old son, sleeping behind him on a sack of oats. Then comes a delicate

description of the landscape and the curious colours painted in the clouds by the afterglow. Suddenly, a new picture emerged when they arrived at Lukovo, as the road abruptly went down and the narrator had to wake up the young boy for fear he would fall off the cart. He had to step down and to walk along the horses to lead them. When they got near the church, the narrator discovered that there was a light at the top of the belfry, and realized that the reason of this was "beyond his comprehension"; the light was not stable, but "like that of a smoldering lamp, at one moment dying down, at another flickering up". Now he was sure there was nothing there, no icons, for instance, before which the faithfully would light candles. He initially tries to conceal the dimensions of his discovery, but in fact, he "was seized with a feeling of loneliness, misery, and horror, as though I had been flung down against my will into this great hole full of shadows, where I was standing".

The little boy who accompanies him expresses his surprise too, and says he is afraid. At that very moment, the narrator becomes terrified; the whole landscape becomes terrifying, and he hurries the horses to his destination, finally noting that he still didn't know why there was some light at the top of this tower. The second example concerns a carriage that appears brutally on the railway along the road, as the narrator is walking on his own on a country road. Here again, he is shaken to the bones, until he comes across a railway-signal worker who explains that this carriage has just broken off from a freight train. In the third example, the narrator is walking back from a tryst late at night, when he hears a mysterious sound. A dark shadow rushes noisily towards him, and proves to be a dog. The narrator tries to get rid of it by all means, but the animal keeps sticking to him, making him feel more and more awkward, until he has the fantasy that it must be Faust's bulldog. He starts shivering and finally runs away to his destination, where he is told that the dog was accidentally lost by a party of hunters.

In his comments, Lacan insists on the specificity of the kind of affect change described here by Chekhov. In these cases, he claims, something, in the object (the shivering light, the carriage, the dog) has a powerful repercussion on the situation as a whole: it is as if the whole frame of the picture, which the narrator describes in a detached tone, was destroyed by an unexplainable peculiarity of the object. Suddenly, the peaceful picture surrounding the narrator becomes totally overwhelming; and at the same time, Chekhov insists that this is only due to a small detail, which otherwise would be perfectly explainable. In sum, Chekhov describes the disappearing of the frame of the picture through the loss of the lack limiting the object. At the beginning of the second seminar in which he discussed this short novel, Lacan wrote on the blackboard a few sentences in Russian, which he thought relevant to illuminate the ambiance of it, especially this old saying: "*U strakha glaza veliki*", literally, "Terror has big eyes", i.e. when you are terrified, objects lose their limits.

But another aspect is put to the fore by Chekhov, the fact that in each case, the terror is determined by the impossibility to rely on someone else; that is, the imaginary relationship, that normally contributes to attenuate the mysteriousness of the object, fails. This is all the more true in another of Chekhov's novels, in which the role of the little other is brilliantly illuminated. It could be seen as a sort of a reverse of Kierkegaard's love story.

This novel has two titles: "My friend's story", and "*strakh*", and it is quite clear that in this case, fright and friendship become absolutely equivalent.

The narrator explains at the beginning of the story that he used to visit a friend of his, Silin, living in a remote countryside quite far away from S. Petersburg, every month. Not really for this friend, but because he felt a curious interest for his wife; an interest he describes as rather neutral and desexualized. In fact, this novel could be seen as an equivalent of Visconti's famous film "*Senso*", or its later Hollywoodian clone, "*The postman always rings twice*". Except that in Chekhov's short novel, there is

no murder... just anxiety.

While he is visiting his friend, the latter decides to go and run errands, and he goes with him; during the trip, the friend starts lamenting over his life, the failures he has experienced, and the absurdity of his marriage. He explains that he feels that life is totally absurd; he fell in love with the woman who was to become his wife; after he had courted her for some time, she eventually accepted to marry him and since then he realized that she is a total mystery. As they are approaching the store, they come across a curious character, called "Forty Martyrs" whose life has been a continuous series of failures although his mother belonged to the nobility, to such a point that after failing in a variety of trades, he has hired himself as a servant, a position from which he has even managed to be dismissed several times, due to his immoderate consumption of alcoholic liquors. Silin, who has employed him once, is begged to give him one more chance, which he finally does, commenting endlessly on the absurdity of existence, and explaining that this feeling of absurdity obsesses him to the point that he feels that the real content of life is a nightmare. As they come back to Silin's house, he explains that he must retire early, having to wake up at three o'clock the next morning. The narrator is left alone with the wife, who complains that her life is empty, that he cannot understand her: he is probably bored without his friend, but she feels bored all the time... She says that he doesn't have to keep her company just to be polite, and humorously threatens to seduce him one day: "you'll be terrified; that would be interesting!" Gradually, they feel closer and closer to each other, she declares that she is seriously in love with him, and they finally fall in each other's arms, but not before they have taken a walk in the garden, where they could hear Forty Martyrs muttering against the misery of life. This cry of cowardice prompts the narrator to take Silin's wife to his room, which happens to be Silin's office. But when she finally walks away, a shadow appears at the end of the corridor: it is 3 o'clock, Silin has just woken up. The wife walks past her husband without a word, and Silin, still muttering that life is totally absurd, enters the office saying that he has forgotten his cap. Which upon he gets on his cart, whips the horses with a strange look in the face, and rushes away as if he was scared of being run after. The narrator goes away immediately and never comes back, finally expressing his total perplexity about this grotesque situation.

The whole story can without any doubt be read as a parody – a parody in which anxiety is not so much linked to some metaphysical exploration rather than to a lack of courage, and the fact that man's desire finds its apparent solution in the desire of his best friend. Chekhov treats in naturalistic style what Kierkegaard treats with irony.

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I would like to conclude with a short clinical vignette: a young woman comes to see me because she is terrified by a repetitive nightmare, in which she is standing in a room, alone, and she knows that somebody is coming. She cannot describe who. It must be a man, or some men. She knows that he or they are coming to get her. What she does not know is what would happen next; the nightmare stops there; all she knows is that she wakes up terrified. She has very few mental associations about this nightmare at the beginning, until she manages to tell her story in the full. The elder of five daughters, she has always felt to be in a position of responsibility vis-à-vis her little sisters. What gradually emerges is that her mother has always rejected her husband, going as far as to leave the house for several days, without clear reasons except her "dissatisfaction" with her husband. As a girl, the patient was sometimes dissatisfied with her sisters too, and she went as far as threatening the younger one to abandon her; but there is more than that. One day, she remembers a terrible story that happened when she was five. There was one girl in the neighbourhood who liked her and admired her very much. But she had decided that this girl was stupid. In fact,

her affect was stronger than that: she was obsessed by the idea that she would kill that girl, and she even threatened publicly to do so. The girl's mother, informed of this, had publicly scolded her. She is now certain that this is why she has to be punished in her nightmare. What has also appeared is that behind this passion for the little other was her own position in the parental couple, and the fact that she had to react to the passivity of the father. Behind the uncontrollable desire for the little other, the desire of the parental Other is there, from which she cannot escape. It was only when the insecurity of her own mother's desire was finally deterred that she could take a different position.

Kierkegaard with Chekhov: in the first, Lacan finds the idea that desire and anxiety are of the same fabric, a fabric woven by the desire of the Other; an infinite desire, in which there is no mediation - at least in Hegel's sense; there is only an "*onkelt*" position, an absolute particularity protected by masks, fundamentally based on a mystery, the "teleological suspension", i.e., the sacrifice of Isaac; in the second, a reduction of anxiety to the unknown that can be discovered, operationalized. Chekhov's medical and naturalistic point of view opens the possibility to reduce the infinite down to a spare part: object *a*.

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