

<http://www.lacanianreview.com.br/n2/pdf/artigos/JLOption.pdf>

Other texts by Jean-Louis Gault <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?cat=762>

Note : the reference to 'preying/praying mantis' : Seminar X : 27th December 1962 & 4th July 1963 :
See [Seminar X: The Anxiety \(or Dread\): 1962-1963: begins 14th November 1962: Jacques Lacan](#) or
[here http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=212](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=212)

International Lacanian Review

ARTICLE

THE OPTION OF ANXIETY

Jean-Louis Gault1

Abstract: The author highlights that Lacan came across anxiety on the road of his study on desire. The fact is that he is not interested in anxiety as such, but rather as a sign of desire. He has no interest in what Jacques-Alain Miller called “constituted anxiety”; he is interested in “constituting anxiety”, that is to say, anxiety insofar as it constitutes desire.

Keywords: Anxiety; desire; object of desire.

Resumen: El autor destaca que Lacan se encontró con el concepto de angustia en el camino de su estudio del deseo. El hecho es que no está interesado en la angustia como tal, sino más bien como un signo del deseo. No tiene interés en lo que Jacques-Alain Miller llama “angustia constitutiva”, está interesado en la “angustia constituyente”, que quiere decir, la angustia en tanto y en cuanto constituye el deseo.
Palabras clave: Angustia; deseo; objeto de deseo.

Last spring, Jacques-Alain Miller gave us the transcription of the seminar Lacan made during the academic year 1962-63, under the title “Anxiety”. He introduced the book published at the Seuil editions, along with six lectures. That is the presentation which has helped me find my bearings for this paper.

Lacan’s seminar is entitled “Anxiety”, but in fact, anxiety is not the real topic of the seminar. The actual theme of the seminar is the object of desire.

Lacan had ended his previous seminar on “Identification”, with a short fable about himself and a praying mantis. The praying mantis, that draws itself up and faces Lacan, has human height. Lacan wears a praying mantis mask. He can but feel anxious before this animal, whose real intentions towards him he doesn’t know. He doesn’t know what the praying mantis wants from him, so he feels anxiety.

That brief fiction is supposed to show the situation of a person coping with the desire of another. If I don’t know the other’s intentions towards me, I feel anxious. Before another one who seems to be interested in me, if I don’t have an answer to the question: “What do you want from me?”, I become anxious.

In another occasion, Lacan had already set the question of desire. Desire is a question that can be conveyed in the following way: “What do you want from me?”. Lacan had introduced that question through a tale of the French writer Cazotte called “A devil in love”, in which the hero met a camel that questioned his desire and asked him in Italian: “Che vuoi?, which means: “What do you want?”.

That question about desire, “What do you want?”, can be reduced to the question itself, because any question is a question about desire. It is what inspired Lacan in the

1

construction of his diagram of desire. The graph of desire has the shape of a question mark, because desire is a question. That question has no response, or at least no final answer, because any answer can be the source of a new question.

To my question about your desire: “What do you want from me?”, you can answer pointing at something and say: “I want that”. But do you really want “that” or do you want something else beyond what you answer to me? So, here is a new question, to what you could give a more precise answer, and so on after the second answer and a new question. That impossibility to give an ultimate answer to the question about desire, maintains desire as a question. That question without answer is the cause of anxiety. At that level anxiety is the sign of desire, the sign of the desire of the other. Anxiety is the affect related to the enigmatic character of desire.

Lacan says that his graph of desire also has the shape of a pear, in relation to which it is called pear of anxiety. A pear is not only a piece of fruit, it is also a gag , a perfected gag, a torture instrument which has the shape of a pear, in iron, and which robbers introduce in the mouth of their victims to prevent them from shouting . That device is called pear of anxiety, because the torture that it induces, as it is easy to imagine, is cause of anxiety. The graph of desire has the shape of a pear of anxiety, because desire is cause of anxiety.

So, Lacan came across anxiety on the road of his study of desire, but he is not interested in anxiety as such. Lacan is interested in anxiety in as much as it is a sign of desire. What interests Lacan is desire and the object of desire. He has no interest in the way anxiety is experienced by a person, and he does not make any investigation on the phenomenology of anxiety. He does not study the body expression of anxiety, or the personal experiences of anxiety. In other words, Lacan has no interest in what Jacques-Alain Miller called “constituted anxiety”. What Lacan is interested in is only “constituting anxiety”, that is to say anxiety insofar as it constitutes desire.

Lacan follows the path of anxiety because anxiety leads to desire. He made a seminar on anxiety because, in his teaching, at the end of his seminar on identification, he had reached that point of anxiety in the study of desire. So, he will follow the way of anxiety to explore desire, and particularly the object which is in relation to desire. At the level of the theory of psychoanalysis, Lacan will describe the structure of anxiety and reveal its relation to desire. Beyond desire, he will discover the links of anxiety with fantasy, which covers desire, and so, with the object of desire and the object of satisfaction, and finally, its fundamental relation to the real. So, it will appear that anxiety is not only the sign of desire, but beyond desire, it is the signal of the real.

At the practical level, which means in the direction of treatment, anxiety has the same function of compass. It is a sign or a signal which helps the psychoanalyst find his bearings. In the treatment, it is important to see in which privileged points anxiety emerges, so as to model its true geographical relief, that is to say its orography. That orography draws the connections of anxiety with desire, and with the object of desire, with the ego, with fantasy, and with satisfaction. Then it comes down to drawing up what we could call a topology of anxiety.

In the treatment, anxiety enables us to find our bearings according to its

appearances. Anxiety is an affect, but it is not the way the patient experiences it through the senses which is important. That constituted anxiety can only lead the psychoanalyst astray, and his patient too. But anxiety which is limited to its constituting value, that is to say only as a sign or a signal, can show the analyst the way through the rambling development of the patient's sayings.

The way taken by Kierkegaard to shape a concept of anxiety, away from the phenomenon of anxiety, is a first step in the direction Lacan will follow to go further on, beyond the concept. The Lacanian anxiety is not a concept, it is precisely what escapes any kind of conceptual grasp. Anxiety can't be turned into a concept, and if we consider that a concept is a signifier, anxiety cannot be conveyed into a signifier. In that sense,

2

anxiety is the affect of displeasure, that connotes what can't be transformed into a signifier.

Anxiety is not a concept but it can be located in its structure, its logic and its topology. As anxiety is not captured by a signifier, it escapes the sliding and the shift which accompany any signifier. Anxiety is directly in relation with the real, so in that way it never deceives. Anxiety points out what Lacan calls "la Chose" and "la jouissance", in English "Thing" and "satisfaction", in so far as signified and signifier, imaginary and symbolic, can only turn around them.

Anxiety which is not caught in the signifier's net, gives way to an original object, which also escapes the signifier's grasp. There is an object of anxiety, which is not an object like the others, which means that it is neither a symbolic object nor an imaginary object.

The study of desire and of the desire's object doesn't start with the seminar on anxiety. From the very beginning of his teaching, Lacan wondered about desire and its object. He first considered the dimension of desire in its relation to love, and he tackled the question of desire by the way of love. During the first ten years of his teaching, the economy of desire is dominated, conditioned and determined by love. Before the seminar entitled "Anxiety", Lacan gave a first seminar on anxiety, the one he did on "The relation of object", in which he studied the case of Hans' phobia. In that fourth seminar made in 1956-57, Lacan sets the desire of the little child in relation to his mother's love. In that context, the breast of the mother is inscribed as the object which is in question in that relation of love. The breast, which can be for the child an object of satisfaction, takes now a new value in that relation of love. The breast is interpreted, by the child, as a symbolic object, and it takes the value of a sign of love when the mother gives it to Hans.

In that same seminar, there is another object from which Lacan elaborates the theory, and which is also in relation with love. That object is the phallus, the phallus as a signifier, which is the privileged object of love. To tackle the analytic experience by the way of love has the consequence of putting the emphasis on lack, because love is in relation to a lack. The demand for love always has its source in a lack. The response to love must also give the sign of a lack. In that sense Lacan said that "to love is to give what one does not have".

The stress put on lack makes the woman the privileged person in the relation with love, because the woman is, in the Freudian perspective, a being who is affected by a lack.

That orientation makes the woman a castrated being. It makes the man the being who is not castrated, and who is linked to a threat of castration.

That perspective, which makes the man the one who does not suffer any lack, and the woman the being who lacks something, is only tenable at the imaginary level. It is the privilege given to the image of the male organ, which makes a man a being that has something, and a woman the one who lacks something.

The new perspective introduced by the seminar on anxiety will reverse all that construction. Anxiety is in relation with an object which is beyond the imaginary, and when this object, which is not normally present in the image, appears at the level of the image, there is anxiety. The tales of Hoffman are cause of anxiety, because they represent the appearance of that object at the level of the image.

That observation about the structure of the imaginary will lead Lacan to a general disimaginarization of his teaching. So, the phallus loses its privilege, it is only an image, the image of power, that is to say only an imaginary power. Now the deal is to go through the illusion of power. This has a consequence at the level of a man. His organ, which loses its imaginary power, is now stricken by a real lack of power, which follows sexual intercourse with detumescence.

Then a new concept of castration appears in Lacan. It is man who is castrated, and castration refers to a lack of power, a certain “not to be able” which follows the

3

sexual act. At the same time, woman is no longer castrated. On the contrary, she appears as the being that lacks nothing.

This new conception of castration brings into a question the Freudian castration complex. Castration is not in relation to a threat, and is not related to the Oedipal complex. Castration is referred to a biological function, and in that sense it is man who is castrated.

Clinically, we come across two fantasies which respond to that conception of castration as the castration of man.

On the male side we find feminism masochism, which is a masculine fantasy. It is, for a male, the fantasy that all women are masochist. It means that all women want to give themselves, in order to repair the lack a man is affected by.

On the feminine side we have the myth of Don Juan, which is a feminine fantasy. It is the fantasy of a man who lacks nothing, since he is able to satisfy every single woman. A being that lacks nothing is a feminine image, so Don Juan is a false man, and he cannot provoke anxiety. On the opposite, a true desire of a man is cause of anxiety for a woman.

To conclude on the relation between love and desire, let's say that if anxiety never deceives, love always deceives, tricks or misleads, because it veils anxiety.

Member of l'École de la Cause freudienne and the New Lacanian School.