

The riskiest moment: Kafka and Freud

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In the beginning there is an awakening. Many of Kafka's novels and stories begin with the moment of waking up. One awakes, but what does one awake to? One is dragged out of slumber and dreams, suddenly required to confront reality—but what reality?

The Trial famously begins with an awakening. Josef K. wakes up in his room, but the maid hasn't appeared with his breakfast. Instead, a stranger answers his call, and there is another one, popping up at his bedside, in the midst of his homely intimacy. The two intruders will then proceed to eat his breakfast, they will seize his undergarments and present him with the indictment. He has been charged, and from this moment on, his life will turn into a nightmare. Josef K. has gone to bed innocent, but he has awoken to be charged, with no chance of exculpation. In the first scene, on the edge of waking up at home, the home is suddenly 'de-homed'; the Freudian concept of *Unheimlich*, of the uncanny, the unhomely, is quite literally staged. Awakening is a threshold between sleep and wakefulness, like coming back from a foreign country, but there is a risk lurking at the threshold, for does one ever simply come back home from such a distant oneiric place? Can one return home after awakening? There is a crack in between, and the uncanny moment is precisely the moment

of not being quite able to find the homely again, just for a moment. In a passage which he eventually crossed out from the manuscript (one can find it in the Appendix in most editions), Kafka put it brilliantly:

The strange thing is that when one wakes up in the morning, one generally finds things in the same places they were the previous evening. And yet in sleep and in dreams one finds oneself, at least apparently, in a state fundamentally different from wakefulness, and upon opening one's eyes an infinite presence of mind is required, or rather quickness of wit, in order to catch everything, so to speak, in the same place one left it the evening before.¹

There is a thin line: on the one hand there is the dislocation of dreams, one has traveled far away in one's dreams and visited the distant fantasy worlds, on the other hand there is the familiar, but the familiar elusively escapes once one comes back from this journey; there is the impossibility of placing it, one needs vigilance to catch it, to prevent it from sliding away, for its strangeness strangely coincides with everything being seemingly in the same place. It is like the homely world has been dislocated by the dream and has to be relocated when one wakes up; it has to

1 *Der Process*, ed. Malcolm Pasley, *Kritische Ausgabe*, Frankfurt/M: Fischer, 1990, p. 168. I must point out the brilliant book by Roberto Calasso, *K.*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005, which gives an extended analysis of this.

be moved in order to return to the same place. If awakening is a threshold, then it is a threshold where for a moment the relation between the subject and the world wavers. “Waking up is the riskiest moment [*der riskanteste Augenblick*]. If you manage to get through it without being dragged out of place, you can relax for the rest of the day.” (Ibid.) So how can one survive the awakening and circumvent this highest risk?

What is the story of Josef K.? He is a man who has faltered on this brink, and he will never be able to relax again—not on this day or on any of the following, not till his last day on the last page. He will be stuck in-between, no longer asleep but not yet quite awake, and the whole novel will unfold in this in-between state, on this edge. His protracted wakefulness with which he will struggle throughout the novel, to the point of utmost exhaustion, appears to coincide with a protracted dream—but this is not a good way to put it: it coincides not with the dream, but rather with something that emerged at the edge of awakening and which is no longer a dream, but it is not yet the familiar and constituted reality in which one can find one’s bearings. There is a tiny lag in between, emerging for a moment on the edge. Kafka’s guideline could be stated in these terms: “Don’t give up on the edge”, on the edge of what is neither the dream nor reality, but the impossible in-between where a dream-like real infringes upon the familiar reality. It all seems like a slip, a tiny lack of vigilance. K. says to his landlady, Mrs. Grubach:

I was caught unawares [*überrumpelt*], that’s all. If immediately upon awakening, without letting myself be thrown off by the fact that Anna hadn’t appeared, I’d risen immediately and, ignoring anyone in my path, had come to you and eaten breakfast in the kitchen for a change, if I’d had you bring my clothes from my room, in short if I had behaved reasonably, nothing else would have happened. Everything that wanted to come into being [*alles was werden wollte*] would have been stifled. (33)

He was caught off guard in a reckless moment. He should have reasonably ignored the crack into which the two guards have slipped with their indictment. This is the crucial formulation: something wanted to come into being, *werden wollte*, and it could have been stifled if he had reacted in good time, if he had seized the possession of his senses

on time, but he didn’t. There was something like a momentary deficiency which enabled the impossible edge to invade everything else. “We are so poorly prepared,” says Josef K., echoing Hamlet. “At the bank, for example, I am prepared, nothing like this could ever happen to me there.” (33) When he is awake and when he is occupying his post, when he exerts power from his social position, he is well equipped and could fend off any such intrusion.

The tiny lack of vigilance on Josef K.’s part provides the tiny opening for Kafka’s relentless vigilance; he will not give way, he will persevere on this edge to the terrible end. Awakening is the riskiest moment, says Kafka, and if one lets one’s vigilance slip even stranger things can happen: one can wake up as an insect, for example. Gregor Samsa, in *Metamorphosis*, lacked the quickness of wit to catch everything in the same place when he woke up; he didn’t find his own body, he mislaid it for a moment. Awakening is metamorphosis, there is a *Verwandlung* lurking in every awakening.

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. . . . What happened to me? he thought. It was no dream. His room, a regular human bedroom, only rather too small, lay quiet between the four familiar walls. (89)

This awakening precedes and prefigures Josef K.’s. The story was written in late 1912, immediately before *The Trial*, and there we find, like the preview of the crossed-out passage in *The Trial*, the escaping familiarity that one cannot take hold of, the “it was no dream,” and the curious word *Menschenzimmer*, “the human room,” *ein richtiges*, the “regular”, the true, the proper human abode is made inhuman on the stroke of the awakening, at the hour of the riskiest moment.

On the first page of *The Castle* the land surveyor K. arrives at the village at the foot of the castle in the late evening. He calls at the inn to spend the night and since there is no room they put him up in the taproom.

Several of the local rustics were still sitting over their beer, but he didn’t feel like talking to anyone. He fetched the straw mattress down from the attic himself, and lay down near the stove. It was warm, the locals were silent, his weary eyes gave them a cursory inspection, and then he fell asleep. But soon afterwards

he was woken again. A young man in town clothes, with a face like an actor's—narrowed eyes, strongly marked eyebrows—was standing beside him. (Oxford World Classics, p. 5)

The young man would then claim that one needed permission from the castle authorities if one wanted to spend the night there. There is immediately commotion and argument. Everything starts with an awakening, after just two paragraphs, and K. wakes up caught in this middle region between wakefulness and sleep.

Another example. In one of Kafka's most striking and bewildering stories, "The Burrow" (*Der Bau*), we have an animal, a "badger" in the middle of a convoluted burrow.² The animal has built his burrow as his underground castle, protected against all possible enemies. He has carefully considered all eventualities and thoroughly pondered possible strategies of all imaginable enemies. So, he sits there in the middle of his formidable fortification, anxiously waiting in a state of permanent vigilance. I have been hitherto citing only the first pages, but in "The Burrow" the awakening appears in the precise middle of the story. For, one day, there is a moment when everything is shattered, and it all starts with waking up.

I must have slept for a long time. I was only wakened when I had reached the last light sleep which dissolves of itself, and it must have been very light, for it was an almost inaudible whistling noise [*ein an sich kaum hörbares Zischen*] that wakened me. ... This noise was a comparatively innocent one; I didn't hear it at all at first, although it must certainly have been there; I must first feel quite at home before I could hear it; it is, so to speak, audible only to the ear of the householder. And it is not even constant, as such noises usually are; there are long pauses, obviously caused by stoppages of the current of air. ... I don't seem to be getting

any nearer to the place where the noise is, it goes on always on the same thin note, with regular pauses, now a sort of whistling, but again like a kind of piping.³

It is from this thin line between sleep and awakening that the tiny noise is heard. It is a slight outer disturbance that wakes him up, though it might be just a continuation of sleep or just a noise in the head, insistent and obtrusive as it is. It is born on that thin line which seems to have produced it, it comes from in-between the two worlds, wakefulness and sleep, and it resides in the passage between the outer and the inner, the carefully protected internal and the intruding external, on the threshold. It materializes the crack between the two as a barely audible sound. And the supposed emitter of this noise, this elusive purely acoustic creature, this nothing at all, not even a voice but a tiny whistling, this unfathomable entity will invade the poor badger's life; it will dismantle his burrow and turn his life into a nightmare. The intruder will surreptitiously infiltrate all his elaborate fortifications and undo all his meticulous planning. This sound is unplaceable, it's just like a tiny crack in being, but it is enough to become overwhelming and unstoppable. The forceful beauty and elegance of this story is that it elaborates the absolutely minimum that emerges on the threshold.

On the edge of waking

I would like to open a parenthesis here and consider for a moment the eerie and mysterious nature of sound in relation to waking up. Michel Chion opens his magisterial book on sound⁴—the best book on sound I know of—exactly on this edge, using a topos of classical literature. *Iphigénie*, a classical tragedy by Racine from 1674, opens with these words: "*Oui, c'est Agamemnon, c'est ton roi qui t'éveille; / Viens, reconnais la voix qui frappe ton oreille.*" "Yes, this is Agamemnon, your king who is waking you up; / Recognize the voice which is pounding into your ear."

2 One can add two curious anecdotic indications. Kafka was not Lacan's author; to my knowledge Lacan never mentions him in any of the published works. Yet in one of his unpublished seminars (*Identification*, 21 March 1962) he takes up precisely this story at some length and develops it into a strange Kafkaesque parable of his own, claiming that 'the man is the animal of the burrow' and that this is the clue to the strange topology that links the subject and the Other. Kafka was not Heidegger's author either, to say the least. Yet, I learned from a conversation with Giorgio Agamben that he once in his young days confronted Heidegger himself with this silence on Kafka, and Heidegger, according to this hearsay evidence, engaged in a passionate discussion of just one story, precisely "The Burrow". There was no tape recorder, one desperately wishes there had been. One might well wonder about this strange hidden burrow of modern theoretical endeavours.

3 *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 343-4.

4 Michel Chion, *Le Son* (Paris: Nathan, 1998); *Sound: An Acoulogical Treatise*, trans. James A. Steintrager (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

As the curtain goes up it is dawn and Agamemnon is waking his servant, Arcas. Chion comments: "The sound of this voice seems to be coming from Arcas's dream while at the same time it is pulling him out of it." (p. 5) The curtain rises in the middle of waking up, the audience is awoken along with the sleeper; the king's voice is like a sequel to the voice in the dreams, the beginning is missed and only recuperated from the other side of the edge. "So it is in the nature of the sound to be frequently associated with something lost, missed and at the same time captured, still being there." (Ibid.)

This opening—of the book on sound, of Racine's play, of Kafka's novels—has a tenacious and internal link with the question of the nature of sound. Why does one wake up? Quite trivially and commonly, one is awoken by a sound, by a noise, by a voice, something that has become too loud and disturbing. The sound intrusion may have been first integrated into the dream, but when it becomes too noisy, one has to wake up; it can no longer be contained. So, there is a connection, in most common experience, between this space separating sleep and wakefulness and the very nature of sound. The sound has been going on for some length of time during sleep. Then, it provokes its break and continues after the awakening, the first thing one is aware of when coming to one's senses and the first thing one has to figure out is this sound. The sound displays its nature in a particularly telling way, precisely on this line of demarcation, and this paradoxically blurred line is epitomized, in a most telling way, by the nature of the sound. It belongs to two worlds, it embodies the break between the two, and in that break something comes up for a moment, between the sound integrated into the dream and the sound of reality that one wakes up to; there is a sound unheard, one cannot quite grasp it from either side.

The thin line presented by the sound invokes a moment of phantasmagoria. One cannot be quite certain whether it may be a delusion. Kafka's badger, desperately looking for the receding source of the sound, is placed in this dilemma:

Sometimes I think that nobody but myself would hear it; it is true, I hear it now more and more distinctly, for my ear has grown keener through practice; though in reality it is exactly the same noise wherever I may hear it, as I have convinced myself by comparing my impressions. (345)

There is an eerie quality lurking in every sound, but coming to the fore at the moment of awakening—can it be that only I can hear it? Does it have an "objective" status at all? Is it in my head or does it come from outside? Its spatial location poses the problem of whether there is a spatial location at all. There is a moment of phantasmagoria when the sound wavers, if ever so minimally, between its reality and unreality. One has to make sound tests to ascertain that this is indeed a sound to be located outside and not a sound imagined or dreamed up. As the badger was just awakening from light slumber, this may be a strange continuation of a dream that refuses to be dissipated. The sound is a test – of being awake, alert and conscious, of being in possession of one's senses – but is one ever? The ability to locate the sound is like the test of sanity, for if one can't locate it, one stands on the brink of delusion, hearing voices, incapacity to make sense of the world at large. One stands on the verge of an abyss, with the tiny sound that won't go away and resists being assigned a place and a cause. It is like an interminable prolongation of the vacillation inherent in every sound, and in every awakening. This is a vacillation of the divide into consciousness and the world, the most dramatic of all divides. What/where/how does one hear? The sound pierces inside, immediately and unstoppably, and directly poses the question of an outside and its status, entailing a structural moment of indecision, at the very edge of the physical and the psychic as the paramount inside/outside divide. The assumption of the reality of an outside discriminates between sanity and insanity. It places the hearer, the dreamer, the waker in an undecidable zone of a possible delusion. In "The Burrow", not quite the last, but the penultimate story Kafka wrote (in winter 1923-4, ten years after *The Trial*), he brought the logic of the awakening to the absolute minimal, the tiniest possible sound to which this strange temporality and causality of awakening is now reduced. The sound of a crack, of an opening.

Before leaving Kafka, let me just briefly point out that there is also a counterpoint in his work to what we have been discussing. Both Josef K. and the land surveyor K. struggle very hard, throughout both novels, to keep awake. They are traversed by the opposing forces of insomnia, terrible wakefulness against one's will, and sleepiness, the temptation to nod off, for they are both constantly tired to death. I will recall only one crucial moment when K., towards

the end of *The Castle*, bursts into the bedroom of Bürgel, one of the castle's secretaries, in the middle of the night. Bürgel goes into a long rambling talk during which K. first sits, then lies on his bed, and during the talk it appears that this could have been the one rare opportunity, the unique chance that his request be granted, for that is the moment when "the member of the public can now control everything if he wants to, and need do nothing but somehow or other make his request, there is a document for granting it already prepared, we say, ready to be handed to him" (235-6). K., missing his moment, has meanwhile fallen asleep.

On the threshold of sleep

Enough of Kafka. Let us look at this edge from another angle. At the time when Kafka was writing *The Trial* in 1913 (to be published in 1925) Marcel Proust, in another part of Europe and completely unaware of Kafka, was preparing the publication of the first volume of the grand edifice of what would become *In Search of Lost Time*. The first volume *Du côté de chez Swann*, *Swann's Way*, appeared in 1913, and it famously opens on the same threshold, in the intermediate state between wakefulness and sleep. One could say that the modernist novel springs from this threshold, from the crack between two worlds. Unlike Kafka, however, Proust crosses the threshold in the opposite direction: from the state of being awake into gradually falling asleep. The narrator sinks into a slumber. He describes himself losing consciousness, irresistibly submitting to sleep, yet the threshold is elusive; sometimes sleep arrives before one can think of it, sometimes it recedes indefinitely and one is feverishly awake against one's will for hours. It is not something that one can control and command. It has a temporality and a causality of its own, but what he tries to hold on to is precisely a region at the boundary, neither the one nor the other. It is on this edge, at the moment after one has abandoned the familiar yet before one has entered the dream-world and its derailed logic, that memories start flooding in, a vast tapestry of memories that one hasn't invited nor tried to recall. They are intruders at the interstice, what Proust will call *la mémoire involontaire*, involuntary memory, beyond the reach of conscious intentions, and precisely for that reason the harbinger

of another kind of truth.

There is an intricate web of signs and associations unavailable to consciousness in its normal state, yet not the stuff of dreams. Everything else will follow from that threshold; what emerges there will be the realm of Proust's entire undertaking. It will take seven bulky volumes to unravel what begins on the first page. The whole immense edifice is made of this stuff – not of such stuff that dreams are made of, nor of the stuff of wakefulness, but the edge between.

A neat symmetrical opposition can be made: *The Trial* opens in the morning; Josef K. awakes, but not quite. *Swann's Way*, by contrast, begins at nighttime, with the narrator sinking into sleep, but not quite. Josef K. is painfully overwhelmed by a strange dream-like reality; Proust's narrator is overwhelmed by the stuff of his uncontrollable memories which spur him on and where the familiar comes to appear new and unexpected. Yet one could tentatively disentangle a common denominator they share: the threshold. One can take a cue from Walter Benjamin in his brilliant essay on Proust: "And there is no telling what encounters would be in store for us if we were less inclined to give in to sleep. Proust didn't give in to sleep."⁵ On the very edge of slumber resides an imperative: don't give way to sleep. The injunction to yield to the lulling edge, thus losing the conscious control over the world of meaning, is actually its opposite, the injunction to wake up from the slumber usually presented by consciousness and habit. One has to give in to slumber in order to arrive at another world lurking beyond habit. And what we find there is not a nostalgic dive into the past, its quasi-oneiric reconstruction, a recuperation of the lost time in *Le Temps retrouvé*. It is not that the title hero, time, has been lost and found again. What is at stake is rather the apprenticeship of the new, to use Deleuze's term. Proust's focal point is not the past but the future, not nostalgia, not loss and its impossible recuperation, but the becoming of the new. Deleuze, another great reader of both Proust and Kafka, will insist on this at length.⁶ As for Proust's memories of the past, we owe Samuel Beckett, another great reader of Proust, the best line ever written on this: "Proust had a bad memory."⁷

Jacques Lacan, in his seminar on *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, dwells for

5 "On the Image of Proust", *Selected Writings* 2/1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1999), 238-9. Benjamin, a great reader of both Proust and Kafka, has actually himself co-translated two volumes of Proust's saga into German.

6 Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes* (Paris: PUF, 1970).

7 Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (New York: Grove Press 1978), 17.

a moment on this edge between sleep and wakefulness. He takes up one of Freud's dreams from *Traumdeutung*, the most Kafkaesque of all the dreams Freud ever interpreted—a dream which reads straight as a Kafka story.⁸ A father keeps watch at night over the body of his dead son, who is laid out in the adjoining room, surrounded by burning candles. He falls asleep during this terrible wake, leaving an old man in charge.

After a few hours' sleep, the father had a dream that *his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: 'Father, don't you see that I am burning? [Vater, siehst du nicht dass ich verbrenne?]*' He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child's dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them.⁹

How to understand this dream? The real intrusion—the light and the smell of the burning from the next room—were integrated into the father's dream, which at its heart, contains the appeal of the dead child standing at his father's bedside, causing him to wake up. This is like vintage Kafka. Freud briefly discusses this dream at the beginning of the seventh and final chapter of his book on dreams, at the point where he is moving on from the interpretation of dreams to engage in a murky realm that one could call 'beyond interpretation'. There is nothing much to interpret in this dream, says Freud, it all seems to be laid out, yet what is most significant is the uncanny encounter produced in the dream. From out of the intersecting empirical and dream realities, something emerges that is irreducible to either empirical reality or to the psychology of dreams and their interpretation.

Freud maintains, throughout his book on dreams, that one crucial function of the dream is to be the guardian of sleep. Any external disturbance which might wake us up is integrated into the dream in order to keep us asleep, to enable the continuation of sleeping. The dream protects the sleeper from the

intrusion of reality. One eventually wakes up when the external disturbance becomes too intrusive. In the dream of the burning child, something else is at stake: the father is not woken up by the external disturbance but by something that occurred in the dream itself, something that was trying to protect him from the intrusion. One can say that the dream itself produces a real that is more overpowering than any external disturbance, such as the fire in the next room. It is the impossible appeal of the dead child that awakens the dreamer.

There is a paradox: the dream, in its endeavor to shield the dreamer, creates a real from which the dreamer then tries to escape; he tries to take refuge in the usual reality in order to be protected from what the dream has produced as a device of protection. The security measure turns out to be more dangerous than the danger against which it guards. There is something in the dream's own logic of wish-fulfilment that tends to run amok; it runs into a nightmare far more traumatic than reality, so one is forced to wake up in order to escape it. Lacan's point, in simplest terms, is this: we wake up in order to be able to continue to sleep, in order to escape the excess produced by the dream in its endeavor to protect our sleep. So we could say that first we dream in order to be able to continue to sleep, protected from the intrusion of reality. We then wake up in order to be able to continue to sleep, protected from the intrusion of the dream itself.¹⁰ Both the dream and the waking up ultimately protect the sleep. Yet, between the two lies the threshold of awakening, an edge between the real produced by the dream and the reality into which one wakes. This threshold is the missed encounter between the two, an interface where, for a moment, the one infringes upon the other.

Thus the encounter, forever missed, has occurred between dream and awakening, between the person who is still asleep and whose dream we will not know and the person who has dreamt merely in order not to wake up. [...] If Freud, amazed, sees in this the confirmation of his theory of desire, it is certainly a sign that the dream is not a fantasy fulfilling a wish.¹¹

8 *The Interpretation of Dreams, Standard Edition* (London: Hogarth Press), 5:509; *Studienausgabe II* (Frankfurt: Fischer 1982), 488.

9 One can recall that the most extreme modernist novel by James Joyce will be called *Finnegans Wake*, evoking both the wake over the dead and the strange temporality of awakening, a novel again written in the realm of the edge.

10 Cf. Jacques-Alain Miller, "Réveil", *Ornicar?* vol. 20-21/1980, pp. 49-53.

11 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press, 1977), 59.

The encounter occurs as though in the gap between two fantasies: the one which sustains the dream and the one that sustains the waking life. Lacan uses the peculiarity of French language, the expletive *ne*: What am I *avant que je ne me reveille*? What am I before I wake up? – or before I don't wake up? The ambiguity of this gets lost in translation, at least in English (this strange negation curiously exists in Slovene). Is one awake or is one asleep?

Freud is fully aware that there is something there that eludes his theory of dreams, or rather something that presents its limit and reaches across its boundary. He has at this point of his book exhausted his resources of interpretation.

The problems of dream-interpretation have hitherto occupied the centre of the picture. And now we come upon a dream which raises no problem of interpretation and the meaning of which is obvious ... It is only after we have disposed of everything that has to do with the work of interpretation that we can begin to realize the incompleteness of our psychology of dreams. (510-11)

There is an uncanny moment when the dream redoubles the reality, while still being and no longer being just a dream. It produces a real which is no longer a matter of interpretation – precisely at the point where the dream is not merely a fantasy fulfilling a wish, as Lacan put it. The awakening is the limit of the interpretation of dreams not in the sense that from then on we have the normal waking life where the distortion of dreams no longer applies, but in the sense that at the border of the two worlds something is produced that doesn't belong to either.

Josef K. wakes up in this temporal modality; he does and does not wake up. This is also what happens to Gregor Samsa, and to the badger in "The Burrow". The reality into which they awake is like the continuation of a dream, but—and this is crucial—this is not the reality into which one awakes to escape the real of the dream—quite the contrary. It is a real from which both the dream and the awakening were supposed to protect us. The missed encounter evokes something impossible, it only emerges for a fleeting moment in which everything vacillates. There is something

like an ontological opening at this edge where the usual assumptions are shaken for just a moment. There is an encounter with something that cannot be accounted for in terms of either reality or psychology, neither empirical nor psychic life.

'Ontological opening' may sound like an overstatement for something that appears to be fickle and tiny. Yet there is an experience there that may have always existed, somewhere on the margins, but which is perhaps new in the sense that it has for the first time come to occupy centre stage. My proposal is broadly that this experience is tightly linked to a privileged moment of modernity, conditioning both the advent of modern literature and of psychoanalysis. There was a historical turn, starting at the turn of the century, that one might describe as 'the moment of awakening'. But what is at stake is not an awakening to reality, but an awakening to something that gets lost in the reality once constituted and made ontologically consistent. There is a real that emerges on the very verge, and holding on to it started serving as the red thread for both theory and artistic practices. It embodies the break between two worlds, and in that break something comes up that doesn't belong to either and, since it only flickers for a moment, it takes a supreme alertness and mastery to hold on to it, to prolong it, to make a literature out of it, to turn it into an object of theoretical pursuit.

Let me list here, somewhat schematically, what happened in 1913. In 1913 Kafka was writing *The Trial* and Proust published *Swann's Way*. Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*, written much later, starts off on a beautiful August day in Vienna in 1913. 1913 was the year of Marcel Duchamp's first ready-made, *La roue de bicyclette*. It was the year in which Kazimir Malevich painted the first version of the *Black square on white background* (first exhibited in 1915 in St. Petersburg),¹² and the year in which Kandinsky and Klee were painting the first abstract paintings. In March 1913 Arnold Schönberg organized a concert of his music and the music of his pupils in Vienna; the concert was violently interrupted, a scandal ensued and questions were asked in the Austrian Parliament. Stravinsky gave the first performance of *Le sacre du printemps* in Paris in May 1913, which was also interrupted, followed by a scandal and riots in the streets. In 1913 Apollinaire published *Alcools*, one of

12 For the emergence of the object in visual arts, in Duchamp and Malevich, cf. the magisterial book by Gérard Wajcman, *L'objet du siècle* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1999).

the most important collections of modernist poetry. It was in 1913 that Gertrud Stein wrote the line “A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose”. In 1913 Freud was preoccupied with his metapsychological writings, some of his most perspicacious texts. It was a year of awakening if ever there was one.¹³ What happened in the space of this one year? Of course the means and the methods in each of these cases varied but my inkling is that a common denominator exists among them: articulating something of what I have called the edge is a condition of this curious awakening.

If there is a wake-up call pertaining to modernity, then this is a very peculiar kind of wake-up call. Wake-up calls, to put it briefly, are fundamentally linked to the mechanisms of ideology. There is always a wake-up call involved in a basic ideological move, and what Althusser pinpointed by the notion of interpellation is precisely this: awakening to a recognition, an emergence of sense, the retroactive imposition of sense on what didn't make sense, the coordinates, from blindness to insight. One was blind but now can see. This is, in fact, precisely the moment of obfuscation. This is where Kafka stops this process on the threshold, just before the advent of sense. Something is revealed that is not covered by meaning, and these are the words that Gershom Sholem used, a propos Kafka, in his correspondence with Adorno in the thirties: *Offenbarung ohne Bedeutung*, revelation without a meaning. This is a wake-up call that thwarts waking up, a wake-up call against wake-up calls, dismantling their logic. It is like interpellation in reverse—a moment when precisely one cannot recognize oneself, a reality that one cannot claim as one's own, a moment where sense and recognition falter, an experience that is impossible to sustain, yet which, once it has come to the foreground, casts a different light on everything, and the very notion of interpellation, as a handy common denominator (of waking up), could be conceived only on the basis of its impossibility. This is an experience that one always misses—hence Lacan's insistence on the missed encounter as constitutive of the real—yet it is also something that doesn't simply vanish. What is missed perseveres as an opening, it introduces a rift that displaces all subsequent wake-up calls.

In a variety of ways, this strange modality of waking up has shaped the subsequent philosophical and artistic pursuits of the early twentieth century, in persistent attempts to show fidelity to what emerges between two dreams, between two fantasies, something very difficult to hold on to. We still need the formidable guidance of Kafka and Freud.

13 Scholars have looked into this at some length. Cf. Jean-Michel Rabaté, *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007); Liliane Brion-Guerry (ed.), *L'Année 1913: Les Formes esthétiques de l'oeuvre d'art à la veille de la première guerre mondiale*, 3 vols (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971); Fredric Morton, *Thunder at Twilight: Vienna 1913/1914* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2001); Alan Valentine, *1913: America between Two Worlds* (London: Macmillan, 1962); Virginia Cowles, *1913: An End and a Beginning* (New York: Harper & Row 1968)