

Between a Rock and the Deep Blue Sea: Kafka's *Angst*—and Ours
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1

“The great swimmer! The great swimmer!” the people shouted. I was coming from the Olympic Games in X, where I had just set a world record in swimming. I stood on the stairs at the train station in my hometown – where is it? – and looked out at the indistinct crowd in the dusk. A girl, whose cheek I stroked briefly, hung a sash around me, on which was written in a foreign language: To the Olympic champion.

This scene is the beginning of a brief dream-like fragment found in Franz Kafka's notebooks of 1920 (cited in Stach, 2013, p.370). The champion swimmer is then taken to a banquet in his honour which he experiences in a very hazy, alienated way. Nothing appears to make sense. He does not recognise any of the guests, nor does he understand their language. He feels it necessary, nevertheless, to address the guests and to make the following statement: ‘Honored guests! I have, admittedly, set a world record, but if you were to ask me how I did it, I could not give a satisfactory answer. The fact is that I cannot even swim. I have always wanted to learn, but never had the opportunity. So how did I happen to be sent by my country to the Olympic Games? This is the question I have been pondering’ (ibid, p.370-1).

As so often in Kafka we find here a scene that strikes us as absurd and uncanny almost in equal measure. How is it possible to be the fastest man in the lane whilst being incapable of swimming? How did this man even make it to the Games? There is a crisis of recognition which works in more than one direction. The celebrated hero cannot make out the faces of the crowd, or what they are saying; others appear just as a blur to him. Equally, he cannot recognise himself in the image these others thrust upon him: the champion swimmer deserving to be feted. But maybe most importantly he fails to recognise himself in his experience—

whilst he realises that he performed to an extraordinary level he cannot comprehend what *happened to him*. This action hero appears to be suffering his triumph primarily in the passive register and far from revelling in his glory he is confronted with a dawning realisation of an inner division.

The nonsense produced in this scene is, for all its lack of logical consistence, not an absence of sense but a sense-surplus, a more-than-sense. But what does it consist of? Can more meaning be derived from this? Kafka, like the champion at the end of his speech, seems to be as surprised as we are by the image he had produced. Another fragment two months later shows him still thinking about the enigma of swimming, although here no direct reference to the Olympic champion is made: 'I can swim like the others, only I have a better memory than the others, I have not forgotten my former not-being-able-to swim. But because I have not forgotten it, the being-able-to-swim does me no good, and I still cannot swim' (ibid, p.375).

This is how both being able and not being able to swim can be present at the same time – as an intrusion of the past in the present. Remembering one's helplessness threatens to return one to its early condition undermining the competent self-assured adult and tending to arouse anxiety. Swimming by now has ceased to be about sport and become a powerful metaphor for keeping oneself afloat as a human being. If being able and incapable of 'swimming' coexist as Kafka reports then both swimming and drowning (in anxiety) are ever-present possibilities.

In letters to Milena Pollak, the woman with whom he struggled (and not soon after failed) to establish a lasting love relationship in 1920, he wrote about his *Angst*,¹ a term he had frequently placed in inverted commas at the time: 'I do not know its inner laws, only its hand on my throat—and that is truly *the most terrible thing I have ever experienced or could experience*.' He felt, however, that this *Angst* was an essential part of him and gave rise to what was perhaps most valuable, and even loveable, in him: 'It really is part of me and perhaps the best part.' (ibid, p.375). Still he struggled to describe, let alone explain to Milena the nature of this feeling. It was in a letter to his friend, the writer Max Brod, that he hit upon an image that perhaps succeeded best in conveying the actual

experience of it:

Like a person who cannot resist the temptation to swim out into the sea, and is blissful to be carried away—'now you are a man, you are a great swimmer'—and suddenly, with little reason, he raises himself up and sees only the sky and the sea, and on the waves is only his own little head and he is seized by a horrible fear and nothing else matters, he must get back to the shore, even if his lungs burst. That is how it is (ibid, p.376).

Now we know. Mastery, if that is still the word, is founded on 'horrible fear' and appears to be developed in direct proportion to its intensity. The one who is most terrified wins the world record because he scrambles more desperately than others to get the hell back on land. We will need to return to question what this fear is 'of' or 'about', but we can see already that the status of the self-image, or the ego, is centrally involved in this struggle. 'Now you are a man' – this is the swimmer talking to himself, viewing himself as if from the perspective of another, and applauding himself for (finally?) living up to the image (whose image?) of what it is to be a man. And not any man at that, not just a man amongst other men, but one who stands out on account of his physical prowess. 'You are a great swimmer.' And suddenly, the whole edifice gives way. At the moment the ego is enjoying its own potency *something* (some Thing?) returns from another place – and an abyss opens up as deep as the deep blue sea.

What is at stake here? What is this *Angst* about? The swimmer, in a moment of self-confidence, finds himself out at sea, and, having momentarily revelled in his achievement, even playing with the idea of getting carried away, suffers what we might characterise as a severe case of vertigo. Suddenly seeing himself as a tiny head bobbing along on the vast ocean brings on a sense of panic as if he were about to fall—physically drown in the sea or go mad, i.e. give way to the pull of this huge object of his enjoyment and psychotically disappear into it. The latter fear seems to have taken over, since it triggers a desperate scramble to get out of the

water ‘even if his lungs burst.’ But what is this ‘object’? The sea itself? And what precisely is endangered? The life of the swimmer or the coherence of the imaginary structure of his ego? If in the first scene the Olympic champion suffers a crisis of self-recognition here we are faced with the catastrophic potential of the fragmentation of the ego at the point where it might become submerged—and enjoy its submergence—in something infinitely bigger than itself.

It is striking that in this image which comes to capture something essential about his anxiety for Kafka there is no other person present; to put this same thought differently is to say we are struck by the presence of this absence. To know something of the context of Kafka’s life brings this only into sharper relief. For much of his adult life Kafka was intensely preoccupied with the problem of extracting himself from the overbearing, intolerable proximity of his family and the question of his relationship with women. Whilst he often felt a desperate wish, as well as plenty of social pressure, to bind himself to a woman he did his utmost to keep at bay the women he loved. Famously, he was engaged three times in his life, twice to Felice Bauer and once to Julie Wohryzek, without ever marrying. His most intense relationships he maintained through correspondences, spending hours each day writing letters to his lovers in Berlin or Vienna, women he would see perhaps once or twice a year. In the summer of 1920, the time of these fragments, he wrestled with the question what to do in relation to Milena, who was about to return from Vienna to his hometown Prague. Whilst their relationship posed a number of social difficulties (Milena was married at the time and estranged from her father, a very eminent figure in Prague) in some ways she was perhaps best suited to him and Kafka quite possibly came closer to marriage than at any point in his life. But he could not go through with it and broke off the relationship soon after.

If Kafka’s struggle with the question of the woman in his life has indeed found its way into the *Angst* of the swimmer we have to ask how this might work within the image he creates. Are we to imagine the woman on the shore and the swimmer getting away from her, perhaps even enjoying the idea—‘now you are a man, you are a great swimmer’—that

he managed to swim free of her and can do without her, strong and independent as he is? Or is it, on the contrary, the sea itself that represents the woman, perhaps in her maternal aspect, and the temptation—only to be actually entertained by the brave, i.e. the real men—is to let oneself get carried away by sexual pleasure, until suddenly to be faced by the terrifying prospect of being engulfed and annihilated? The first reading interprets the anxiety as essentially agoraphobic, that is, along the lines of separation anxiety—the absence of the comforting other gives rise to panic; the scramble is to find succour in her arms. The second reading suggests the opposite: it is the overwhelming presence of the (maternally conceived?) other, precisely the lack of gap or distance that threatens the now tiny man with his demise. The scramble here is to get the hell out of this all-embracing flood and back onto the *terra firma* of solid distinctions.

But perhaps we should not be too impressed by this opposition of interpretations, they do after all have in common that the cause of the anxiety appears to be linked to the place of the other – too distant or too proximate respectively—and thus anxiety appears to be engendered by an external danger. Seen this way, it is the other who, either in their absence or their presence, has the ultimate power over the life and wellbeing of the subject—and our great swimmer, the little man is reduced to suffering this power passively. Perhaps. But a different reading is possible, namely, that in reaction to the perception of the other as either too distant/absent or too proximate/present something on the level of the body gets aroused in the psyche with a force that threatens to flood the ego – and it is in relation to this drive that the ego finds itself in the terrifying position of utter passivity.

2

If we turn to Freud and his thoughts regarding the question of anxiety at this point, it is not in order to ‘psychoanalyse’ Kafka but to see whether the evocative power of Kafka’s images might have to do with him capturing something essential about anxiety *per se* and whether they can

therefore contribute to our understanding of it. For Freud anxiety was an enigma from the beginning of his thinking about the nature of neurosis and a problem he returned to over the span of his working life. In his *Introductory Lectures* he writes: 'The problem of anxiety is a nodal point at which the most various and important questions converge, a riddle whose solution would be bound to throw a flood of light on our whole mental existence' (1916-7, p.393). Whilst his views regarding anxiety changed considerably over time he always thought that it centrally concerned a confrontation with the drives, or, from 1923, the id.

In his first formulation of the problem Freud takes anxiety to be the result of undischarged—or as he once put it 'unemployed'—libido; i.e. anxiety is the registration of something that appears to manifest purely on the level of the body with psychic elaboration playing no part. 'Anxiety arises out of libido' (1905, p.224). In his 1926 revision of his theory of anxiety he summarizes his previous idea thus: 'What finds discharge in the generating of anxiety is precisely the surplus of unutilized libido' (1926, p.141). Whilst this is a somewhat reductive account of his first theory, leaving out the fact that he already conceived of anxiety as a transformation of the drive, this is nevertheless the version he now opposes. Whilst we cannot trace here the history of the concept of the ego in the development of Freud's theory his changing ideas regarding anxiety are clearly an effect of the increasing importance he ascribes to the function of the ego. In 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', where for the most part he still speaks about the psychic apparatus rather than the ego, Freud conceptualises trauma as the breach of the stimulus barrier that constitutes and protects this psychic formation from what lies outside it. Outside here means two things: what is external to the organism, and what comes from within the organism but is external to the ego, i.e. the drives, against which it lacks adequate protection.

The fact that the cortical layer which receives stimuli is without any protective shield against excitations from within must have as its result that these latter transmissions of stimulus have a preponderance in economic importance and often occasion econom-

ic disturbances comparable with traumatic neuroses. The most abundant sources of this internal excitation are what are described as the organism's 'instincts'—the representatives of all the forces originating in the interior of the body and transmitted to the mental apparatus—at once the most important and the most obscure element of psychological research. (1920, p.34)

In 1923 the ego becomes the name for this psychic structure, and the tensions that arise at the borders with its outside(s) becomes the focus of Freud's thinking about anxiety. 'The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface' (1923, p.26). It faces outside reality as well as the id which gets constituted as 'its second external world, which it strives to bring into subjection to itself' (ibid, p.55).

There are two paths by which the contents of the id can penetrate into the ego. The one is direct, the other leads by way of the ego ideal [making the super-ego the third element with which the ego sees itself confronted]. Consequently, we see this same ego as a poor creature owing service to three masters and consequently menaced by three dangers: from the external world, from the libido of the id, and from the severity of the super-ego. Three kinds of anxiety correspond to these three dangers, since anxiety is the expression of a retreat from danger. As a frontier-creature, the ego tries to mediate between the world and the id, to make the id pliable to the world and, by means of its muscular activity, to make the world fall in with the wishes of the id. (ibid, p.56)

However, having identified the ego as 'the actual seat of anxiety' Freud struggles to be more precise about its triggers. 'What it is that the ego fears from the external and from the libidinal danger cannot be specified; we know that the fear is of being overwhelmed or annihilated, but it cannot be grasped analytically' (ibid, p.56).

In 'Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety' (1926) Freud revises his earlier formulation of anxiety as resulting from surplus libido. Anxiety is an affect, not an emotion, that can only be registered by the ego, he now states, and its registration has a protective function. Anxiety arises when the ego is alerted to a danger situation – in fact alerts itself to an impending danger; i.e. it is now conceived as 'signal anxiety'. But what constitutes danger, and how does the ego know it is facing a danger, unless it has some prior experience or 'knowledge' of it?

The key trigger is now identified as the experience of helplessness. Freud (following, to some extent, Otto Rank's idea) views the trauma of birth as the first and prototypical danger situation, a real threat to the infant's life at the moment of separation from the mother's body. At this point, that is, before the formation of a psyche properly speaking, the experience can only be envisaged as an 'economic' event occurring on the level of the body—an upsurge of energy threatening to overwhelm the organism. Subsequent crises of physical helplessness are alleviated by the intervention of the mother, experiences which, if repeated sufficiently, usher in a shift in the perception of the nature of danger from an economic to a psychological one—i.e. separation anxiety.

When the infant has found out by experience that an external, perceptible object can put an end to the dangerous situation which is reminiscent of birth, the content of the danger it fears is displaced from the economic situation on to the condition which determined that situation, viz., the loss of object. It is the absence of the mother that is now the danger; and as soon as that danger arises the infant gives the signal of anxiety, before the dreaded economic situation has set in. (ibid, p.137-8)

With the advent of the ego there is now a decisive difference to the very first danger situation. Sensing a situation that threatens to plunge it into trauma—that is, sudden, shocking, overwhelming helplessness—the ego alerts itself to such a danger through the affect of anxiety. In doing so the trauma of object loss gets converted into the psychological danger

situation of losing the object, a danger which itself undergoes a series of transformations from the loss of the mother, via the loss of the love of the mother and the loss of 'a highly valued object', i.e. castration, to, finally, the loss of the love of the ego-ideal.

Thus, signal anxiety is anticipatory anxiety looking out for the danger that it might (again) get overwhelmed; as such it is a reaction as a consequence of a confrontation with an earlier traumatic situation. Anxiety is preferable to trauma since it is on a more manageable scale. Freud sees in this something like an immunological function: 'the ego subjects itself to anxiety as a sort of inoculation, submitting to a slight attack of the illness in order to escape its full strength' (ibid, p.162). By mobilising the traumatic past in the present it prepares itself in order to avoid trauma in the (immediate) future. Anxiety is thus conceived as an important part of a protective/defensive organisation on the part of the ego. However, anxiety itself is experienced as *Unlust* (unpleasure) and can be defended against – either through inhibition which cuts short any action that might risk the confrontation with danger, or symptom formation which binds the energy aroused through anxiety whilst repressing the perception of the danger situation, linked as it is to the manifestation of the drives. 'Symptom-formation, then, does in fact put an end to the danger-situation' through a course of action that amounts to 'an attempt at flight from an instinctual danger' [*Triebgefahr*] (ibid, p.145). Whilst it can appear that Freud had now identified separation as the main danger to the child it is the 'inner' threat arising from the drives which takes priority since he believes that object loss or the threat of castration is a response by the other to the unacceptable libidinal wishes.

Having ultimately rejected Rank's suggestion that birth trauma itself was at the root of all anxiety as well as the idea that anxiety was, in the last (existentialist) analysis, a fear of death Freud did not feel he could finally answer the question of an ultimate cause of anxiety. As we saw above he finds himself at the limits of what can be said in this respect. However, the link he establishes with trauma places this impossibility of symbolic representation at the heart of the problem: trauma is, after all, that which overwhelms the ego's capacity for mental elaboration and—

one might say precisely for that reason—it always shocks the ego. Signal anxiety is the attempt to prepare the psyche for that which cannot be prepared for; it is an attempt to anticipate what cannot be anticipated, since whatever ‘it’ is failed to become adequately represented. ‘It’ is not an object, a something that we (can) fear, but it is not a nothing either.

At the end of ‘Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety’ Freud summarises three factors that render the human being vulnerable to neurosis: first, the infant’s prematurity at birth and the high degree of helplessness and hence dependence on (m)others which persists over a life time in a need for love; second, the hiatus in sexual development during the latency period which leaves the developing ego vulnerable to the infantile libidinal demands of the id; and third, the imperfection of the psychic apparatus due to its division between ego and id. This latter division is constituted as a response to external pressure: the psyche turns against an aspect of itself but remains insufficiently protected from its demands. ‘The poor ego’ owes its existence to this precarious position and maintains itself only by means – and at the price – of anxiety. What is at stake is not the life of the organism as such; rather, an excess of internal excitation threatens the unity of the ego.

But if Freud re-casts anxiety in the light of the threat of object loss—or separation anxiety—Lacan points out that the subject can only emerge in a space opened up by separation, in the gap or lack left by the mother after her departure. It is when this ‘lack comes to be lacking (*quand le manque vient a manquer*)’ (Lacan 1962-63, p. 35), i.e. when the object of primal merger (something of a contradiction in terms) appears to return, that anxiety arises. It is not absence but *full presence*, that is, the lack of a registration of separateness, that threatens the subject in its existence.

It is not possible here to trace the complex development of Lacan’s varied thoughts on the subject of anxiety. A very brief and necessarily unsatisfactory summary points to a number of ways in which Lacan takes up, but then recasts, Freud’s key suggestions, with one main difference relating to the status of the ego. ‘We must absolutely define the Ego’s imaginary function as the unity of the subject who is alienated from himself.

The ego is something in which the subject cannot recognise himself at first except by alienating himself' (1974-75, p.24).

Having initially related anxiety to the threat of fragmentation as it is confronted by the subject in the mirror stage Lacan emphasises, as already indicated, the lack of separation from the mother and the fear of being engulfed by her as the key problematic giving rise to anxiety. Taking up Freud's conceptualisation of trauma Lacan subsequently links anxiety to the register of the Real, i.e. that dimension of experience which remains outside symbolisation and hence beyond the possibility of psychic mediation. The Real is 'the essential object which isn't an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence' (1988, p.164).

The relationship of the subject to anxiety is ambiguous, to say the least. Whilst Lacan suggests that anxiety is defended against by the various psychic defence mechanisms available to the subject he also stresses, in the seminar of 1960-1, the link between anxiety and desire, whereby anxiety is a means to sustain desire in the absence of the object. Desire, being more tolerable than anxiety, can be used as a remedy for it.

In his 1962-3 seminar entitled 'Anxiety' Lacan states that anxiety is not without an object, except it concerns an object which cannot be symbolised. The object in question is the *objet petit a*, which Lacan defines as the object cause of desire. But far from being the lost object the absence of which causes (separation) anxiety, for Lacan anxiety arises when something appears in its place and therefore threatens to undo the lack that sustains the subject. In the same seminar Lacan suggests that anxiety is triggered by the confrontation with the desire of the other, that is, when the subject realises it is an object of desire for the other without knowing what the other's desire is. *Che vuoi?* What is it you want from/with me?

In a later formulation, as Lacan's interest shifts to the dimension of the Real, including the Real of the body, he takes up Freud's first theory of anxiety as transformed but psychically unmediated libido, recasting it in his own language as jouissance. Anxiety in this view is a reaction to a surge in jouissance that cannot be assimilated and that threatens to

overwhelm the imaginary cohesion of the body. As such it does not arise from a conflict on the basis of unconscious thoughts but is the effect of a discontinuity between the Real of the organism and the Imaginary register in which the body finds its integrity. It is something that comes from beyond the ego, something that gets registered, but cannot be identified by the ego. In his seminar on Anxiety Lacan states: 'the ego is the site of the signal. But it is not for the ego that the signal is given ... It is so that the subject—it cannot be called otherwise—may be alerted to something' (1962-62, p.35). It is for the subject to find a response to what exceeds the ego, that is, to something that sits on the side of the real.

Whilst there are clear differences between Freud's and Lacan's conception of psychic organisation and functioning we might suggest that there is a structural similarity in their thinking that pertains to the question of anxiety. At the risk of gross reduction of either writer's complex ideas we might try the following thought: a psychic system—the ego for Freud, for Lacan the subject—is confronted by 'something'—the drive/id for Freud, for Lacan the Real/jouissance—which, whilst being constitutionally (for the constitution of the system *qua* system) linked to it, comes at it as if from the outside, making demands which can be neither 'refuted' nor assimilated or satisfied. The psychic system comes about as a product of differentiation from this 'outside' to which it is ineluctably wedded even as it exceeds its capacities to come to terms with it. This excess is registered as anxiety—one might say as the 'noise' of the system's self-maintenance.

If this sounds as if the question of anxiety is answered in the direction of the drive it is important to remember that the drive is not pure biology or quantity. Freud thought of the drive as lying 'on the frontier between the mental and the physical' and suggested to regard it 'as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work' (1905, p.168). What we take the drive to drive us to do is for the mind to work out—and hence inflected by the other/Other. *Che vuoi?* What do you want from/with me?—this is a question which is evoked not just in the face of the other's desire but by all that comes at me, claiming me, from 'the other side'. Inside/outside introduces a spacial metaphor with deceptive

power and, as far as the psyche is concerned, a particularly precarious status. 'I', however, has a strong vested interest in stabilising this boundary.

'The ego is not master in its own house'—a famous pronouncement, often (mis)attributed to Freud. 'The ego feels uneasy; it comes up against limits to its power in its own house, the mind', he wrote in 1917 (p.141). Precariously constituted between the drives and the Other – or, similar thing, between the drives and language—it can maintain itself only anxiously. Anxiety being a disturbing experience, the subject seeks to defend itself against the very mechanism by which it protects itself from trauma. To the extent that it succeeds in this secondary defence it does so at the cost of illness. This is the predicament that the ego, that 'poor creature', faces as it seeks mastery over its own house, often by attempting to become its master builder.

3

'I have completed the construction of my burrow and it seems to be successful' (1971, p.354). This is how Kafka's penultimate story begins. It was written in Berlin in the last year of his life under conditions of dire poverty and relentlessly advancing tuberculosis. This was a time also when he had managed, finally, to move away from Prague and the overbearing proximity of his family and, for six months, shared his life with a woman, Dora Dymant. Left unfinished at the time of his death in 1924 Max Brod published the story under the title 'The Burrow' ('Der Bau'). Like many of Kafka's stories it is written from an animal perspective, in a manner that makes the reader forget this is not a human being speaking. The unidentified animal, which we might take to be a mole, finds itself caught up in an endless series of cogitations and ruminations about the construction of his burrow and the degree of safety it provides. Although there are moments of distinct satisfaction as well as peace these are always short-lived, and a sense of imminent danger, though never specified, prevails throughout.

[...] you do not know me if you think I am afraid, or that I built

my burrow simply out of fear [...] yet [...] even now, at the zenith of my life, I can scarcely pass an hour in complete tranquility; at that one point in the dark moss I am vulnerable, and in my dreams I often see a greedy muzzle sniffing around it persistently [...] I must have a way of leaving at a moment's notice, for, despite all my vigilance, may I not be attacked from some quite unexpected quarter? I live in peace in the inmost chamber of my house, and meanwhile the enemy may be burrowing his way slowly and stealthily straight toward me (ibid, p.354-5).

Any attempt made to tame anxiety by means of identifying an object of fear against which a defence might be organised comes to nothing (no thing); potential danger threatens from all directions.

And it is not only by external enemies that I am threatened. There are also enemies in the bowels of the earth. I have never seen them, but legend tells of them and I firmly believe in them. They are creatures of the inner earth; not even legend can describe them. Their very victims can scarcely have seen them; they come, you hear the scratching of their claws just under you in the ground, which is their element, and already you are lost. Here it is of no avail to console yourself with the thought that you are in your own house; far rather are you in theirs (ibid, p.355).

Reassurance and, to the extent that it succeeds, the ensuing sense of peace paradoxically give rise only to more anxiety – the drop in vigilance increases vulnerability after all.

But the most beautiful thing about my burrow is the stillness. Of course, that is deceptive. At any moment it may be shattered and then all will be over. For the time being, however, the silence is still with me... I sleep the sweet sleep of tranquility, of satisfied desire, of achieved ambition; for I possess a house (ibid, p.356).

The burrow is an object of work, of acute observation (self-consciousness) and, at times, of narcissistic satisfaction. There is no outside to the burrow, or rather, even its outside only exists from an 'inner', solipsistic perspective. At one point the animal leaves its abode only to end up at a short distance from it in a prolonged reverie wishing 'to pass my life watching the entrance, and gloat perpetually upon the reflection – and in that find my happiness – how steadfast a protection my burrow would be if I were inside it' (ibid, p.363).

Back inside the burrow, waking from deep sleep the narrator becomes aware of an 'almost inaudible whistling noise' which now becomes the focus of irritation and anxiety and sets off an obsessive, ultimately futile hunt for its source. But the dawning realisation that he is confronted with something that exceeds his capacity to mentally represent and mediate, something of which no experience even is possible, does not bring to a halt his relentless imaginings. The paradoxical struggle to anticipate what cannot be anticipated can neither be stopped nor brought to a conclusion.

I could not have foreseen such an opponent. ... what is happening now is only something which I should really have feared all the time, something against which I should have been constantly prepared: the fact that someone would come. By what chance can everything have flowed on so quietly and happily for such a long time? Who can have diverted my enemies from their path, and forced them to make a wide detour around my property? Why have I been spared for so long, only to be delivered to such terrors now? Compared with this, what are all the petty dangers in brooding over which I have spent my life! Had I hoped, as owner of the burrow, to be in a stronger position than any enemy who might chance to appear? But simply by virtue of being owner of this great vulnerable edifice I am obviously defenseless against any serious attack (ibid, p.381-2).

It was Walter Benjamin who first linked the story of the burrow to Kafka's illness, placing it in the context of a more general reflection on the alienation from the body his writing thematises. 'For just as K. lives in the village on Castle Hill, modern man lives in his body; the body slips away from him, is hostile toward him. It may happen that a man wakes up one day and finds himself transformed into vermin. Exile [*die Fremde*]*—his exile—has gained control over him'* (1992, p.122). It is primarily the figures of the animal in Kafka that uncannily recall this lost connection, creating disturbance and anxiety, but in doing so, also (one's only) hope. '[...] of all of Kafka's creatures, the animals have the greatest opportunity for reflection. What corruption is in the law, anxiety is in their thinking. It messes a situation up, yet it is the only hopeful thing about it. However, because the most forgotten alien land is one's own body, one can understand why Kafka called the cough that erupted from within him 'the animal'. It was the most advanced outpost of the great herd' (ibid, p.128).

Türk (2007) makes the step from Kafka's illness to his impending death: 'Kafka is writing about danger and the proliferation of possible threats in the face of his own death [...] The ultimate irony is that his text tries to foresee something that it knows surpasses possible recognition' (p.155).

In a different vein, Kafka's story has been interpreted as a reflection on the process of writing and, possibly, on the significance his written work had for him. Like the building of the burrow writing is, after all, 'the work of the forehead', as Coetzee (1981, p.564) put it. Writing for Kafka had always meant a process of intense self-reflection, a retreat from the often intolerably proximity and the demands of others, and a way out to a possible other life, one promising independence and freedom. But if he experienced his life as a prison, something which he professed he could accept, he also knew, as he noted in his 1920 diary, 'the prisoner really was free [...] the bars were meters apart; he wasn't even imprisoned' (1997, p.659, my translation). The restriction is located elsewhere, as he indicates in a subsequent entry: 'The bone of his own forehead obstructed his way (hitting against his own forehead he bloodies his forehead)'

(ibid, p.660). In a letter to Milena of the same year he referred to himself as a mole.

4

In the three short fragments about the great swimmer discussed at the start there is a clear precipitation regarding something that is going wrong. The first scene evokes the puzzle of (mis)recognition and gives rise to a sense of alienation, but not necessarily to anxiety. It is only when through subsequent associations the link gets established to an early situation of helplessness that the last scene comes into view which confronts the subject with potential trauma: the tiny being, which momentarily allowed itself to be swept away by pleasure and the lure of the open space, ends up terrified for its life and/or sanity. From a crisis of recognition or identity we have moved on to an underlying catastrophic scenario, the fragmentation of the subject as such. If this is the terror that excessive openness gives rise to, might then the closure, the self-encapsulation of the burrow be an extreme attempt to safeguard against any such possibility? If the vast expanse of the open sea threatens to annihilate the subject the mole's exclusive preoccupation with securing its own space constitutes a retreat from the world to the point where world ceases to exist. No other actual beings are encountered in the burrow.

In a footnote to his text on narcissism Freud (1914. n p.44) briefly refers to two *Mechanismen des Weltunterganges* (literally, mechanisms of world going under or sinking), i.e. two kinds of scenarios which are apocalyptic for the ego. On the one hand, there is total investment in the object – the subject throws himself into it, drowns in it, and thus ceases to exist in his separateness. On the other hand, investments in the object are (regressively, defensively) withdrawn back into the ego which becomes omnipotently inflated at the cost of the death of world. It is self-evident, though not spelled out by Freud, that in both cases *both* the world *and* the ego die; either extreme leads into a form of madness. Whilst Freud does not discuss these scenarios in relation to anxiety it is clear that they constitute traumatic danger situations for the ego. Ego and object world

come into being in tandem, and can only exist in relation to one another. The subject has to find ways to manage the 'traffic' with the world that avoid the twin dangers of excessive openness or insulation. Between over-proximity or excessive distance, over-exposure or over-protection the subject has to find an accommodation, a viable place for living. For most of us the calamitous extremes of *Weltuntergang* are of course not realised, made real, in madness, but are registered and kept at bay in the experience of neurotic anxiety, typically taking on either a more claustrophobic or agoraphobic inflection. As Žižek put it, we appear to be confronted with the options of either 'the closure of the vicious cycle compulsively circulating around the same point of (libidinal) reference [...or...] losing even minimal consistency of one's own being' (2005, p.175).

Anxiety, it appears, is the ego's negative correlate—in acquiring an ego we get anxiety into the bargain. The ego which comes into being only as it sets itself apart from its outside—according to Freud its inner and outer outsides—maintains itself, by necessity, at the price of the anxiety that this separation/connection could break down. There is always the danger that what is 'other' to it might become too much—or too little. This is the constitutional weakness of the ego as identified by Freud. A breach of the 'protective shield', or its surrender, leads to the annihilation of individual life either physically or psychologically; its excessive warding off of the outside leads to starvation and maddening loneliness. These are the ultimate dangers Freud points to as the ego's *Weltuntergang*. The ego tries to find an accommodation—a place it can inhabit—whilst being pulled in opposing directions between the promises of immunity on the one hand and drift, or love, on the other. To avoid the anxiety this tension tends to engender is to become ill, or to go mad.

Kafka's texts do not provide answers to the problem of anxiety—no-one reads him for reassurance, for good reasons. If anything, he opens up the experience of anxiety, and keeps it from closing down defensively. If he feels trapped inside it as in a prison he will not seek to escape it, though he knows the doors are open; indeed, his conviction that any such attempt is to no avail safeguards this impossibility. He did, after all, suspect that his anxiety belonged to what was most valuable about him. It is as if he felt that had he succeeded in overcoming it he would have

failed in other, more important ways. He certainly would not have been 'Kafka'.

Notes

1) The German *Angst*, which in English tends to get translated as either anxiety or fear, covers the range of both of these terms undermining somewhat the distinction typically made whereby fear is taken to have an object but anxiety is supposed to be without one—a view opposed, as we will see, by Lacan.

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