Before we enter into a discussion of the Freudian texts proper we do well to think in our own contemporary terms on the fundamental human problem of desire and satisfaction in a way that will shed some light on our current situation. We should never come empty handed to interpret a text. To participate in the interpretation of a text means to become involved in a gift exchange. The calling of the scholar, like that of the artist, is a calling of generosity of the spirit — only truly generous readers can elicit gifts from the texts.

We begin our work on the Freudian texts with the question: “What is desire and what is its relationship to satisfaction or to fulfillment?” Our word desire is directly cognate with the Latin desiderium, which meant in this old context in particular the grief for the absence or loss of a person or thing. We would generally translate desiderium by “desire” or longing. The verb form desiderare equally corresponds to our verb to desire, to long for. At one time this sense of longing was strongly associated with the stars. Sidus means “star” or “star constellation” in Latin and we may read the verb as desidiris, “from the stars,” and thus desire would at one time have had the meaning of “expecting from the stars.” Whatever it is that we feel as our desire nevertheless requires to take on the contours of this historic cultural institution that poses our longing as a relationship to the unreach-able stars. We cannot escape that cultural institution, we can only inhabit it or fail to inhabit it. The verb “to consider” is closely allied to “desire.” Here also we must evoke a Latin antecedent, con-siderare, which translates “to look closely at something,” “to observe carefully,” “to contemplate,” “to meditate.” But originally it meant “to observe the stars.”

To enter the realm of desire cannot help but lead us into a relationship to what is all at once brilliant, attractive, and out of reach. Inevitably we enter a world of starry eyes, heavenly bodies, star-crossed lovers, of messages written and erased in the heavens. Above all, desire introduces
us to an impossible situation — impossible of absolute fulfillment. We cannot dictate what is in the stars — we cannot touch and appropriate these far-off brilliant objects — all our relations to them must respect an infinite distance. This aspect of desire forces us to reflect on satisfaction. If we think satisfaction according to a physical metaphor and in analogy to a container being filled, we can come to think of appetite or desire as a particular capacity for eating, drinking, fornicating, loving. This capacity would be gradually taxed and eventually overcome in the pursuit of our appetites or desires. Desire would refer us to a physical emptiness and to a network of actions designed to fill that emptiness. Or, we could think of desire as referring us to a pressing physical fullness that requires an analogous complete physical emptying. The object of our life understood in terms of such a desire would be to achieve as much as possible a state of physical emptiness or fullness that would correspond to a being satisfied. The psychological sense of satisfaction would ultimately be nothing more than thepsychical noticing of a physical state of emptiness or fullness. Yet, a first reflection on our experience of desire and satisfaction warns us of what remains wholly false in such a description. "Being satisfied" does not mean that we are confronted with a mysterious fullness or emptiness. On the contrary, the moment of satisfaction announces itself as a shift away from a particular preoccupation. Suddenly we want to do something else than lie in bed, and our thoughts turn to the possibilities of the day. Being satisfied means getting up from the table to go to work, to read a book, to go for a drive in the country. Or it may mean that after happy love making we suddenly treasure the prospect of a restful sleep. Or it could mean that after hearing someone offer his apologies we suddenly are ready to let bygones be bygones and we are no longer held enthralled by our injuries and feel free to turn to other things. In all these instances the feeling of satisfaction does not issue from the contemplation of a fullness or emptiness or from the noticing of a physical barrier beyond which we cannot proceed. On the contrary, in all these instances satisfaction announces itself in a shift in our attention, in a gradual opening of a new horizon. To be satisfied means here to be free to explore a different aspect of the world. In essence it means to become aware of and to assent to a difference. We discover that there is more to life than sleeping or eating or collecting injuries or reading books or pursuing the meaning of a dream. Satisfaction understood this way constitutes liminal activity. It carries us across a fateful boundary from one thing to the next, from one activity or perspective to another. Within satisfaction we shift gears, we pivot on our axis and turn in a different direction. Successful weaning must thus be understood in analogy to our getting