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Account of a Fight against Paternal Authority: Franz Kafka's *Letter to his Father* (1919)

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There is only one episode in the early years of which I have a direct memory. You may remember it, too. One night I kept on whimpering for water, not, I am certain, because I was thirsty, but probably partly to be annoying, partly to amuse myself. After several vigorous threats had failed to have any effect, you took me out of bed, carried me out onto the pavlatche¹ and left me there alone for a while in my nightshirt, outside the shut door. I am not going to say that this was wrong – perhaps there was really no other way of getting peace and quiet that night – but I mention it as typical of your methods of bringing up a child and their effect on me. I dare say I was quite obedient afterward at that period, but it did me inner harm. What was for me a matter of course, that senseless asking for water, and then the extraordinary terror of being carried outside were two things that I, my nature being what it was, could never properly connect with each other. Even years afterward I suffered from the tormenting fancy that the huge man, my father, the ultimate authority, would come almost for no reason at all and take me out of bed in the night and carry me out onto the pavlatche, and that consequently I meant absolutely nothing as far as he was concerned.

That was only a small beginning, but this feeling of being nothing that often dominates me (a feeling that is in another respect, admittedly, also a noble and fruitful one) comes largely from your influence. What I would have needed was a little encouragement, a little friendliness, a little keeping open of my road, instead of which you blocked it for me, though of course with the good intention of making me take another road. But I was not fit for that.²

Franz Kafka (1883–1924) was and is an extraordinary author, but his struggle against his father was not. It was rather typical for this epoch and for the literary

trend in German expressionism around the turn of the century in 1900.³ These struggles took place in particular in literature, and young intellectuals and authors like Kafka found in their fathers all they wanted to overcome, or imagined father figures onto whom they could project their resistance against old and rigid social structures. The fatherly image drawn by this generation of young men was a symptom of a special state of society after the very long nineteenth century, which lasted until the (end of) the First World War and beyond, as in the case of Kafka, who wrote his famous letter a year after the war.

Until the end of the war, the two big countries at the heart of Europe, Germany and Austria-Hungary, were ruled by emperors. The possibility of a double throne anniversary of the German Emperor Wilhelm II (thirty years) and the Austrian Emperor and Hungarian King Franz Joseph I (seventy years) is described as the so-called 'Parallelaktion' (which never took place) in Robert Musil's (1880–1942) big novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften/The Man without Qualities*. The two emperors embodied two different kinds of men and different types of male and paternal authority, the one acting like a young and strong-willed soldier with catastrophic consequences, the other appearing as an old and seemingly benevolent father and symptom of patriarchal and paternalistic backwardness. These caricatures recalled the three dimensions of patriarchal ideology known since the time of Goethe and Schiller, and depicted in the latter's drama *Die Räuber/The Robbers* (1781/2), in which the father is God, regent and biological father. Thus the father figure had a central function in all systems that constituted a society – fathers were physicians as well as judges, and administration was a paternal concept to be found not only in society but also in governance, in schools and universities, in prisons and in barracks and, above all, in families.

The war had not only ended these two monarchies, but also brought new dynamics into social structures. Thus, female labour during the war both led to new impulses for emancipation and other cultural, political and legal transformations. Female characters in their struggle for social recognition became a subject of literature as in the famous novel *Das kunstseidene Mädchen/The Artificial Silk Girl* (1932) by Irmgard Keun (1905–82). Thus literature became in itself a symptom of these structures, an awareness that the time of these father figures and even the generation of fathers in politics and society had come to an end.

This loss of authority was especially noticeable where fathers tried to keep it. The case of Otto Gross serves as a radical example.⁴ Otto Gross was born in 1877 as the son of the famous Austrian jurist Hans Gross (1847–1915). Otto studied zoology but, at his father's request, turned to medicine. He married in

1903 and later came into close contact with radical movements and had to fight against drug addiction. Several illegitimate children made his social standing unsustainable – at least in the eyes of his father. Using his judicial authority Hans Gross had his son declared insane, and Otto spent time in several mental institutions before a reappraisal set him free again. Otto Gross died in 1920.

In the relationship between Otto and his father we find the fault line of different discourses: jurisprudence on the part of the father, psychoanalysis on the part of the son. Psychoanalysis delivered insights into the sexual conflicts which might undermine the civic society of the fathers. While Sigmund Freud described these conflicts on the one hand, he himself was such a father figure on the other. Even Kafka would notice in his diary after the writing of his first successful novel *Das Urteil/The judgement* as an experience of his readings: 'Gedanken an Freud natürlich' ('Of course, thinking about Freud').⁵

Otto Gross meanwhile had a different understanding of psychoanalysis. His sexual promiscuity was closely related to his way of thinking about sexual affairs as conflicts with the rigid and paternal structure of society. Freud described the son's fight against his father in the 'Oedipus complex'. Later, in the 1950s, Jacques Lacan invented the conception of the *non/nom du père*, which plays which the homonymy of the French *non/nom*, 'no' and 'name' of the father and is the goal in the process of constituting a subject. The subject enters the state of the symbolic order when it learns to follow the law and the signification of the father. The conflict between Otto Gross's sexual promiscuity and his father's judicial power seems to be an early display of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

At the turn of the century these social structures were so stable and unquestioned that they were at the same time exhausted and an object of psychological theories as well as literary and aesthetic challenges. A process of erosion had begun, and literature and art were fields which both reacted with and promoted this process. Otto Gross himself was turned into a literary character in several of Franz Werfel's works and in the expressionist drama, *Der Sohn/The son* (1914) by Walter Hasenclever (1855–1934). In this play a son cannot stand paternal expectations any longer; he has failed his exam, thinks about suicide, becomes a member of a youth movement, makes first sexual experiences, gets himself arrested and is finally brought to face his father. Self-confident, he does not want to hear the paternal judgement (as in Kafka's novel of the same name), but demands his freedom. The father would have his son institutionalized to protect society, but the son is prepared and determined to kill his father, when the latter suddenly dies from a heart attack.

Kafka's *Letter to his Father* is both a typical and a special case, generically poised between biographical conflict and literary document. It is a document

of the loss of paternal authority and at the same time a very personal report of his own emancipation from the dominant figure of his father and his own understanding of himself as an author outside his middle-class career. The relationship between Kafka and his father is not easy to understand. The situation was difficult, and Kafka's own description of this relationship in his *Letter to his Father* is neither objective nor fair, which means we have to modify his perspective.⁶ While the depiction of this fraught relationship was important for his own literary biography, not all of it was incorrect or wilfully misleading. Kafka's literary self-fashioning, and thus his description of his father, was part of his strategy to establish writing as his one and only acceptable principle of life. Thus, Kafka follows a double strategy. On the one hand, he reports how his father had judged him – with devastating psychological effects. On the other hand, Kafka also uses these reports to judge his father – mercilessly. His highly sophisticated letter thus follows a legal principle: *audiatur altera pars* ('hear the other side too'). His father is given the chance to express himself, but only to give his son, the author of the letter, the opportunity to respond and to reject the father's position even more powerfully. Kafka himself referred to his 'lawyer's tricks' ('advokatorischen Kniffe') and calls his letter in a comment to Milena Jesenka a 'lawyer's letter' ('Advokatenbrief').⁷ This son is no longer the object of his father's judgement. Instead, he has become a lawyer himself making his father an object of his judgement framed in a literary text.

These tricks meant that Kafka always linked the judgement of his own position with his father's judgement, and the judgement of his father with his admiration for his father. This strategy is independent from Kafka's real argument with his father. In the same way, his letter oscillates between biographical authenticity and literary fiction as Kafka's self-expression and his late fight against his father come closer together. His self-fashioning as an author, his identity and conception of literature, as well as his way of writing on the one hand, and his hatred of his father and even of himself on the other, are entangled in his letter.

This is how we may approach the beginning of the letter. The son picks up his father's question of why he, Franz Kafka, could claim to have been afraid of his father. This question remains unanswered – because of the son's fear. From this point on Kafka describes his relationship to his father as a relationship filled with fear in every aspect of family life. But he has no illusions. The letter does not and cannot lead to a better relationship, to a better understanding between father and son, or to mutual respect. Kafka knows that it is too late. The relationship cannot be modified or renewed. The family is broken. What he, the

son, wants is a clarification of his own motives and of what the son assumes to be his father's motives. He does not want a final and definitive expression of the truth of this relationship but, as Kafka points out in the last sentence of the letter, something so close to this truth, 'that it might reassure us both a little and make our living and our dying easier' (167).

In the opening lines of his letter cited above, Kafka describes an archetypal scene from his relationship to his father, in which all ingredients of the later conflict are already present. Yet, more importantly, Kafka reconstructs the scene as symptomatic for his view of this relationship. The judgement of the father begins with a judgement of Kafka himself which may excuse the father: the child was noisy, and his father wanted to sleep. However, these opening lines only serve to make the subsequent judgement of the father even harsher. Kafka's accusations reach existential dimensions when he characterizes 'the methods of bringing up a child and their effect on me' ('die Erziehungsmittel und ihre Wirkung auf mich') (119). Kafka stresses that his suffering results from this scene. As he styles his father, he styles himself. Yet, the two parts of his rhetorical figure aim in opposite directions. Kafka employs two techniques which he also uses in his literary texts, for example, the enlargement of body sizes and the use of legal terms as metaphors for social roles and relationships. The father appears as a huge man and at the same time is characterized as an almighty authority. The bigger and mightier the father appears the smaller and weaker Kafka himself becomes. Immediately after this first scene Kafka remembers a second one, which also operates with this aggrandizement. In the changing rooms of the public swimming baths Kafka was overwhelmed by his father's size: 'I was ...weighed down by your mere physical presence [Körperlichkeit]. I remember ...how we often undressed in the same bathing hut. There was I, skinny, weakly, slight; you strong, tall, broad' (120–1). The passage closes: 'this difference between us remains much the same to this very day' (121). Addressing his father as an institution and highest authority, Kafka becomes implicitly – and artfully – an accused about to receive the maximum penalty. The punishment of having to stay on the balcony all night turns into the father's attempt to destroy his own son. 'This feeling of being nothing' (120) would never leave the child. The letter then turns from physical to intellectual hegemony ('geistige Oberherrschaft'), especially concerning the father's authority to give orders in every practical and ideological aspect. Paradoxically, Kafka concedes this intellectual hegemony to his father within a text which is itself an example of intellectual hegemony. But this is also a part of his lawyer's tricks.

Throughout the letter the reader can follow this interplay between the accusation of Kafka himself and the accusation of his father. Kafka concedes his father's 'gift for bringing up children' ('Erziehungstalent') while insisting that this gift has had devastating effects on him. Yet, between the lines, Kafka delivers an accurate characterization of the man who was his father. Hermann Kafka was born in 1852 in Bohemia as the son of a Jewish butcher family of lower social rank. His only aim in life was to rise to become a member of civic society. This meant he had to earn money and assimilate to the dominant class in Prague: the German-speaking Christian upper class. He established rigid norms and standards for himself, his family, and especially for his children, including Franz and his social environment. He was the typical representative of his civically assimilated Jewish class and a typical father in the paternal society of the late nineteenth century. This was revealed when he accused his children of being 'too well off' (135). We have to see Kafka's failure in or aversion towards his father's business in this context. Kafka returns his father's reproach. He, the father, was responsible for Kafka's refusal to join his business. The son describes his father's behaviour as a tyranny. He himself would not follow the rules he expected others to follow.

Over the course of the letter several issues arise which were all crucial for Kafka's life, such as his relationship to his father, his (Kafka's) position in the family and in business, his father's educational methods, the father's tyranny over his family and employees, and the overall atmosphere of repression. Besides, Kafka mentions his own plans to choose a profession, his family's attitude towards sexual education, and finally the way the father and his family lived their Jewish faith.

Kafka's problems in getting married (for example, to his fiancée Felice Bauer), his relationships to women, and his reinforcement of his Judaism were attempts to escape his father. He shows that all these paths led nowhere, that his failure was inevitable as a result of his respect for his father. Conflict with his father was particularly strong in two areas, marred by misunderstandings and failed hopes of agreement: Judaism and sexuality.

I found just as little escape from you in Judaism. Here some measure of escape would have been thinkable in principle, moreover, it would have been thinkable that we might both have found each other in Judaism or that we even might have begun from there in harmony. (145–6)

Kafka talks about rescue and escape, which also means salvation, and so he uses religious terms. Kafka starts an apotheosis of his father: he is not only the highest

authority on all questions concerning the family but also a religious authority like a god ruling over his creation, his family. Yet, due to Kafka's negative characterization of their relationship, his struggle against his father assumes the character of a primal sin. Kafka bemoans that his Judaism has become a social mask, while also putting himself into the position of his father's judge in social and even religious questions. But Kafka himself could not claim to lead his life in accordance with the strict rules of an authentic Judaism. Only from 1911, when he met Jichzak Löwy and his eastern Jewish theatre troop, did Kafka become seriously interested in religious questions. In these people he found the real authentic Judaism, and subsequently turned his own erratic behaviour against his father. His own father was sceptical towards his Judaism. Kafka notes in his diary that his father denigrated Löwy: 'If you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas.' ('Wer sich mit Hunden zu Bett legt, steht mit Wanzen auf.')8 The same denigration can be found in his letter, when Kafka describes his fight as a 'combat of vermin'. Kafka lets the reader understand that his father may accuse him, but these sentences can always be read as Kafka's own accusations of himself. As a central metaphor, bugs or vermin are part of his second novel *Die Verwandlung/The metamorphosis*.

The differences between Kafka and his father are even more radical in questions of sexuality and marriage. As he points out in a letter to his fiancée's friend Grete Bloch of 11 June 1914, marriage is for Kafka 'the most social action' ('sozialste Tat').⁹ In his letter to his father he describes an embarrassing situation. The son speaks about his sexual education, even though the father has never taught his son about the facts of life. Instead he advised him to go to a prostitute, which strongly violated his son's sense of shame. Kafka was disgusted, if not by this advice. He visited prostitutes frequently, which was common at the time for an unmarried son of this class. Kafka indeed pursued a sexual snobbery ('Sexualsnobismus') as his biographer Klaus Wagenbach has shown.¹⁰ However, he was disgusted by the fact that even an intimate conversation like this was overshadowed by alienation and a lack of love. For Kafka, the crucial point is his father's opposition to both his engagements, the earlier one to Felice Bauer and the later one to Julie Wohryzek. Kafka reports that his father assumed sexual motivations on his part, while Kafka himself describes these potential matches as marriages of convenience: 'The fundamental thought behind both attempts at marriage was ... to set up house, to become independent. An idea that does appeal to you ...'. The son's foundation of his own family would have led him out of the position of a son: 'I would be your equal; all old and even new shame and tyranny would

be mere history' (162). Marriage would thus become an act of emancipation, and so Kafka delivers an argument which we can also find in his early novels: marriage is a rebellion against paternal power and punished with death. In his *Letter* Kafka concedes: 'It is too much; so much cannot be achieved.' His equality with his father becomes immediately dubious. Kafka could not stand this 'most acute form of self-liberation and independence' (162). Consequently, he never married, and he makes his father responsible for his own mental block. At that point in the *Letter* the son has turned the asymmetrical power relations between father and son into their opposite. Kafka explains that his father's mere existence meant that he could only be nothing. But at the same time he explains why his father could destroy the son so easily. The relationship between father and son is a relationship of mutual annihilation. The guilt (of being nothing) and the accusation (of annihilating the other) were far beyond a solution of this problem.

Kafka's *Letter* has often been read as a biographical document. This only makes sense if we do not read it as a historical document, but as a document of Kafka's writing. The son describes his father as accusing his son, as much as the son himself accuses his father. In the same way in which the son accuses his father he also needs his father as a force to fight against and a cause to write against. The description of the father's annihilation of his son is also an act of the son's self-constitution through the act of writing this letter. Thus Peter-André Alt takes Kafka's conception of being such a son as a principle which opens a perspective on Kafka's writings and biography. We do not know for certain if Kafka's father ever read this letter, nor does it matter. The most important thing is that Kafka wrote it. This letter is the document of a struggle of a son against his father. Perhaps this struggle was not so successful existentially, but it was very successful from a literary point of view. Thus, the *Letter* is not only a literary document of patriarchy but also a document of its literary negotiation.