

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER: A LACANIAN AND DERRIDEAN ANALYSIS OF KAFKA'S "THE JUDGMENT"

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Abstract: Kafka's art is one of negative capability immersed in negative emotions. Towards what is this art of negativity directed? In the broad sense, the Kafkaesque strangeness can be seen as part of his modern allegory meant to expose the modern conditions of unfreedom. With combined insights from Lacan (those related to the Name of the Father and the analysis of psychosis) and from Derrida (regarding the logocentric structure), the authors examine one specific story, "The Judgment," to understand how Kafka exposes conditions of unfreedom and why such an exposition in fact reflects Kafka's passionate desire for the freedom which has been restricted or denied under certain modern condition. The more shocking and also more sobering part of Kafka's prophecy in "The Judgment" is this revelation: the victim of repressive power, often in the image of a "son," is victimized partly because he has already internalized the rules of a logocentric/centric system with the "Name of Father" (a phrase from Lacan) at the center, whether this "father" is alive, as in "The Judgment," or dead, as "In the Penal Colony."

KAFKA'S WORLD is "strange" in formal details and yet "familiar" in its implications. Readers of Kafka might remember the absurd situation in which a child-like yet tyrannical father sentences his son to death and the son obeys, or a Commandant who rules from beyond the grave a penal colony symbolized by an Apparatus that punishes and kills, or the psychological rollercoaster of Gregor Samsa's transformation into a giant beetle. Kafka's art is obviously one of negative capability immersed in negative emotions. Towards what is this art of negativity directed? In the broad sense, the Kafkaesque strangeness, as illustrated in the above examples, can be seen as part of his modern allegory meant to expose the modern conditions of unfreedom. We argue that Kafka's exposition of conditions of unfreedom through an art of negativity in fact reflects the author's passionate desire for freedom which has been restricted or denied under certain modern conditions, and how, in turn, it awakens the same passion in us. Like the negatives in photography, Kafka's allegories of unfreedom need to be "developed" (interpreted) into positives so that we, allowed an insight into the conditions of unfreedom, regain the courage to continue the struggle for freedom. This essay will look at one such story, "The Judgment," from a Lacanian and Derridean perspective in order to understand how the conditions of unfreedom are established in a repressive structure, and how violent power is exercised within that structure.

Kafka's stories invariably lead the more informed reader to find a socio-psychological order that commands the enslaved (often in the image of a "son"). In Derrida's term, that order can be more accurately described as a logocentric structure in which a center forbids, controls and reigns. More shocking and also more instructive in Kafka's "strange" ways of revelation is that the victim of this repressive power, a Kafkaesque "son," is victimized because he has already internalized the rules of a logocentric structure at the center of which sits a

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symbolic Father who exerts his power relentlessly and even violently, whether this “father” is alive, as in “The Judgment,” or dead, as “In the Penal Colony.”

Insofar as Kafka’s stories are modern allegories, the father figure depicted should not be confused with a biological father (or Kafka’s own father), but as a symbolic one whose function is to stabilize the order within the logo centric structure. Symbolically, Kafka’s father should be read as what Jacques Lacan calls the Name of the Father capable of keeping the “son” in some form of slavery by manipulating his sadomasochistic ills and pains. Kafka has been interpreted in various ways but the most fitting exegesis for reading Kafka is deconstruction, in both the Derridean and Lacanian sense. Indeed, Kafka was a natural deconstructionist before there was “deconstruction” the name.

What is the Name of the Father as postulated by Lacan? Why should we appreciate and adopt this phrase? The Name of the Father, rather than just the word “father,” indicates how the oppressive rule of a patriarchal structure is linked to a symbolic center. In other words, the Name of the Father assumes an omnipresent and omniscient authority guaranteed by regulations of that socio-symbolic order. The Name of the Father, in turn, “justifies” the symbolic power of a repressive structure. Lacan maintains, further, that Name of the Father derives much of its authority from the religious implications in the inception associated with “the order that prevents the collision and explosion of the situation as a whole” (Lacan, 1993, 96). Therefore, a tradition with the Name of the Father at the center is more than just a product of simple human nature, but instead, something symbolically ordained by “divinity.” “Divinity” is understood as the sense of being “superimposed” (Lacan, 1993, 96) which allows the representative of that authority to be God-like and thus fearfully obeyed. With such religious connotations, the Name of the Father represents the ultimate truth, the transcendental signified.

Lacan, in this sense, is a deconstructionist like Derrida who argues that “the concept of centered structure [...] is constituted on a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude” (Derrida, 2003, 278) that is both irrefutable and inflexible like the word of an all-powerful God. Since the central logic of such a structure cannot, by its nature, be questioned, those within it remain slaves to its regulations and are forbidden to have the freedom of their own opinions.

In Kafka, the center, in the Name of the Father, has a shockingly unwavering resilience through which it demands obedience. In Derrida’s term, this symbolic father has *full presence* to which all signification within the structure is controlled. Freedom to express or interpret otherwise is forbidden.

The Name of the Father thus also figures the Other in Lacan. Lacan argues that because everyone of us is born and socialized into the structure of a cultural language which alienates us from our primordial desires (called the imaginary order), each one of us is, first of all, “a slave of language [...] because language and its structure exist prior to the moment at which each subject at a certain point in his mental development makes his entry into it” (Lacan, 1977, 148). In that sense, unfreedom, rather than freedom, is a given since we are always under the authority of this Other (the symbolic order). That the structure of the “whole language” exists prior to a subject’s entrance into the world thus assumes a power of *Gestalt* unless the individual learns how to challenge it with a language of his own while operating with the structure. Self-exile could be an option but it would

mean that the individual would forfeit such benefits as social communication and relations.

Since full participation in the structure is taught to everyone who enters into it, the alienation caused by it is all the more persistent and pernicious. The structure, with its set of rules and regulations, is internalized as our unconscious, thus subjugating the individual. For example, masked with phrases like “the American (or Chinese) Dream,” traditional regulations dictate to people what they should want and strive for regardless of whether or not those goals are actually in line with a person’s internal desires. The implied instruction to those living within the structure is the expectation to “follow the rules or you risk becoming ostracized.” Such an implicit instruction is rarely ever questioned. In fact, most people are under the impression that the expected goal is in fact something they truly wish to accomplish. The structure mediates our desire in such a way that it sometimes jeopardizes our natural desires. What makes Kafka’s allegories both “strange” and “familiar” is the way in which Kafka explores how the consequences of such a structure can be damaging if the dictated desire solely defines the individual that he loses his desire and ability to pursue his life naturally. Thus, the individual becomes a case of what Lacan calls “psychosis.”

In “The Judgment,” when Georg begins a conversation with his father, his inner desires are said to be in direct conflict with what his father expects of him. Instead of being able to argue for his own desires (e.g., I will continue to run the family business successfully, I be married and will invite my friend to my wedding), Georg finds himself only capable of repeating his father’s words. In the Name of the Father, Bendemann Sr. assumes a power to cancel out Georg and enslaves him by invoking those rules internalized in his unconscious since birth. Georg would be more free if he could refuse his father’s blackmail. But Kafka shows us the negative: George remains under the thumb of his father who has all the power symbolically assigned to him. The absoluteness of this un-equation is the horrifying ending in which Bendeman Sr. sentences George to death, and the son even goes on to carry out the sentencing by jumping off a bridge. George’s death is not the result of suicide. Rather, he is suicided.

Georg’s unfreedom is seen not so much in that he has a conflict with his father but in his inability to question and argue. He does not yet have a language of his own. Had he been able to articulate his own wishes, he would have gained at least some freedom. Therefore, the story of Georg and his father is most chilling because of the blatant suspension of natural freedom. Not only does the judgment of a decrepit old man upon a vibrant son strike the reader as strange, but so do the images that lead up to that point including the odd mores of Georg’s father along with his childish behavior, and the strange and violent way that Georg meets his end.

Underlining the horror is Kafka’s courtroom-like drama in which the son’s “guilt” is shockingly contrasted with the insignificance of his alleged crime. The father becomes the embodiment of a completely unjust “law”; he judges accordingly and the son has to find the judgment and sentencing “natural.” Georg is not only unable to tangle with his father regarding the minuteness of his infraction, but even cheers his father for being fair in limiting his desires.

The fundamental unfairness about this “trial” is that Georg cannot defend himself. He passes up opportunities to fight for his case even when his own life is at stake. Moments arise in their conversation where Georg could either avoid his

father's edicts or refute them entirely but instead, he either remains silent or finds himself parroting the words of his father. In Lacanian terms, Georg displays symptoms of psychosis, following a thought process or round of regulation that is "not [being] part of the subject's own thought processes [but those which] impose themselves on the subject's mind from without" (Lacan, 1993, 4). Like a parasite to a host, the ideas of an imposing outside force, which in the case of "The Judgment" would be Bendemann Sr. to Georg, reside within the psyche, controlling its host on an unconscious level for the purpose parasitic preservation. The fact that Georg appears to be unaware of the depth of his father's control over him speaks to the very basic level that defines him to be unfree.

Georg's case of psychosis is strikingly evident when he accepted his father's verdict calmly even though he is shocked by the unfairness of the father's judgment of his "crime." He even begins to enforce the logic of the system upon himself despite its inequity to his "crime." The regulation, as prescribed by the Name of the Father, gains its stock by planting itself in the realm of "fundamental immobility and [...] reassuring certitude" (Derrida, 2003:278). The father's verdict, with authority akin to the "word of God," is based on the "crimes" ranging from Georg planning to take a wife, "the nasty creature," only "to make free with her undisturbed" (Kafka, 1948, 60), to attempting to overthrow his father in the business, to trying to replace and kill his father by "cover[ing him] up" (Kafka, 1948, 59).

What gives Bendemann Sr.'s words absolute power is not only the centuries of a patriarchal rule he has on his side but also his knowledge that the son will admit "guilt" no matter what. A prominent feature of logo centric structure, as it is explained by Lacan and Derrida, is that the center of a repressive logo centric structure derives its power from a divine source. Derrida names this "divinity" as the "transcendental signified." Lacan explains that "at the heart of the religious thought that has formed us there is the idea of making us live in fear and trembling, that the coloration of guilt is so fundamental that it [...] fundamentally bear[s] on our relationship to the other" (Lacan, 1993, 288). The receiver of the authoritative word must then follow it or risk the mystical and fearful experience of guilt. How very unholy is this supposed divinity!

Since Bendemann Sr. is the god-like enforcer of laws set forth by the years of cyclical patriarchy that came before him, he is the man who is allowed to allege and judge of his own accord. Compliance with such judgment is already preconditioned and instilled in the son's unconscious from his birth when he enters into the system. Thus spoke Lacan, in his far-reaching revision of Freud's concept of the unconscious. "The Judgment" is so fittingly an illustration of Lacan's theory that one wonders if Lacan himself were not an avid reader of Kafka.

What is discovered in the unconscious is "the whole structure of language," says Lacan. Let us look at the story again from that perspective. In that moment when Georg attempts to disagree with his father, he seems to remember his assigned place concentric within the structure his father represents. When he attempts (almost the only moment when he so attempts) "to make fun of his father, but in his very mouth the words turned to deadly earnest" (Kafka, 1948, 62). Georg is divided. The eerie scenario Georg faces is then "the immediate cancellation of Georg's posture of self-defense" and the rise of "a force inside him [supporting] his father against himself" (Sokel, 1988, 226). The father knows

the language with which he can punish and he knows that his son has internalized it. The linguistic grammar, the logic, of the implicit patriarchal system is one based on certain binary oppositions that are “not . . . a peaceful coexistence *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms has the upper hand” (Derrida, 2003, 41). Violence exercised by Bendemann Sr. is seen not only in the judgment itself but also in his constant scolding of his son meant to tear away all of Georg’s accomplishments and self-pride.

Georg should be the one on the rise in life. He is young, doing well in the family business and will be married. Metaphorically, he is, or should be, the symbol of life’s fertility. In striking contrast to this is his father who begins to show all the signs of a dying force. Bendemann Sr. seems to have entered into his second childhood as he has to be carried to bed by Georg and “the old man on his breast was playing with his watch chain” (Kafka, 1948, 58). The imagery given in this passage tells the reader that, not only is Bendemann Sr. in a state of physical handicap, but he has somehow reverted back into a child, playing with the watch chain as if he were trying to reverse time to his favour, or, as an infant would, asking to be tucked into bed. By trying to take over the role of “father” to a sick and weak “son,” Georg, for a moment, can be read as making an attempt to take over the power of his father, for “the images of Georg caring for his father like a child and then [tucking him] up in bed and . . . asking whether he is adequately covered up, all reinforce the idea that Georg is trying to reduce his father to the role of child that he has patronizingly applied to his friend in Russia; and for a while old Bendemann plays along with Georg” (Sokel, 1988, 107). But Bendemann Sr. has a language advantage over Georg, as he says, ““you wanted to cover me up, I know, my young sprig, but I’m far from being covered up yet. And even if this is the last strength I have, it’s enough for you, too much for you”” (Kafka, 1948, 59).

The father’s frail appearance and inability to adequately take care of himself would justify that it is the son’s place to take over care of his father. Georg has been running the business in what Sokel calls “Darwinian nature” where “the brute strength of youth prevails over the wielders of authority who are weakened by age” (Sokel, 1988, 211). However, when regarding Bendemann Sr. as symbolizing the Name of the Father, even the natural progression “literally becomes a crime” (Sokel, 1988, 211) as it is perceived as a threat to the father by the son. The strangest part about this instance is the fact that, despite the father’s objections, the son has the physical ability to overtake his father, but does not. Georg instead handcuffs himself for his father by giving in to the criticisms and proclamations made by Bendemann Sr. Georg relinquishes the individual life he would have with his fiancée, the business he has made more profitable by his dedication to it, and even his ability to make his own decisions. This is very strongly stated when, in the heat of the confrontation, Bendemann Sr. stands on his bed and shouts, ““you think you have strength enough to come over here and that you’re only hanging back of your own accord. Don’t be too sure! I am still much the stronger of us two”” (Kafka, 1948, 61). The father is a weak, infirm, and lonely man, how then could he possibly be the stronger of the two? That’s implicit thought-provoking question from Kafka.

Bendemann Sr. accuses his son of “betrayal.” But a “betrayal” of what? Metaphorically, it is the betrayal of the bachelorhood (a symbol of infertility) in which the father lives. Allegorically, then, the story becomes a conflict between

life and death. But as the force of death desperately clinging onto the last straw, Bendemann Sr. tries to regain power by reclaiming everything in the Name of the Father. He spits, “and my son strutting through the world, finishing off deals that I had prepared for him, bursting with triumphant glee and stalking away from his father with the closed face of a respectable business man!” (Kafka, 1948, 61). Sokel suggests that we read it as “implicitly the Oedipal of father by son [which] had been present as soon as the father withdrew his full energies from the business and the son jumped, ‘decisively’ to use his own word, into the power vacuum thus created” (Sokel, 1988, 210). But instead of holding a discussion about the resentment the father might have about being displaced in the business “the father automatically [assumes] an accusatory view of the natural succession of the generations” (Sokel, 1988, 210).

The voice that declares Georg’s death sentence is the voice of death itself. Yet, Georg accepts it with a farewell to his “loving” parents: “Dear parents, I have always loved you all the same” (Kafka, 1948, 63). All that needs to be signified is signified, in the phrase: “all the same.”

One cannot be suicided unless one also slavishly accepts the terms of one’s death. So the more shocking and also more sobering part of Kafka’s prophecy is how Georg’s internalization of a tyrannical patriarchy causes him to be, what Lacan terms, an *interposed subject*. This means that Georg’s ego has been so infused with the rules of his father’s structure that his connections to his own desires have been interrupted and are instead filtered through the desire of the Other. Georg thus “is happy to say, *This is how things are*, and one does not even try to see that this is how things are” (Lacan, 1993, 97). In agreeing to be suicided, Georg’s desire to marry and go on in life is brought to an abrupt and permanent end. In that sense, Georg, an example of Kafka’s allegorical son, is sabotaged by his inability to free himself from the Other which governs his unconscious.

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