

# A psychoanalytic view on the constitution of the subject in the work of Franz Kafka

## Summary

This essay provides a psychoanalytic perspective at the novel Letter to My Father by Franz Kafka. With a strong self-biographical content, Kafka makes a courageous exposition of himself in the relationship he had with his father and the interference in his psychological development. Some aspects of this novel clearly address issues that refer to the Freudian theory of narcissism, the process of identification with parental figure, Oedipal aspects, the constitution of the Ego and its ideals as well as the importance of the SuperEgo in the constitution of the subject. Freud believed that through literary texts we can approach the concerns of the human soul. In his vast work, Freud's references to authors such as Goethe, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and Sophocles are numerous. Literary texts give vent to human emotions and suffering. This is very clear in the text Letter to My Father which is the object of this essay by focusing on the relationship between Franz Kafka's words and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis.

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*"Dearest Father: Once you asked me for what reason I used to say that I was afraid of you. As usual, I was unable to think of what should I answer to you, partly for the fear that you bring to me... the fear itself and its consequences do hamper me when I am in front of you... my appreciation of myself depended much more on you than any other factor..." (Letter to My Father, Franz Kafka)*

*"I would cry for having said too many things about the things that are usually said, and not enough of those that are not. In the end, there is a way out for everything, except for the difficulty of being, which never settles." (Jean Cocteau)*

## A flightless jackdaw

The so-called Thirty Years War refers to a series of wars in Europe in the seventeenth century fueled by religious, territorial and dynastic rivalries which brought economic and demographic difficulties to that region and their people. In Bohemia, as in other parts of Europe, there was a real desertification of rural areas in this period, causing Jews to migrate from neighboring countries due to their recognized experience in the development of businesses in general. Jewish immigrants spoke a "German Jewish" language, which could be described as German with several expressions in Yiddish and, once a new statute for the Jews was created in the late nineteenth century, they moved to urban centers where they sought assimilation through socio-cultural ambience at big cities. The story of Franz Kafka's family is the story of most Jewish families who settled there at that time. Josef Kafka, who was the first to adopt this surname, which means "jackdaw" in Czech, married in 1802 and one of his sons, Jacob Kafka, became the father of Hermann Kafka. Hermann settled down with few financial resources, and shortly after marrying Julie Löwy in 1882 he opened a fabric store that thrived thanks to his hard dedication to work. Shortly after, Hermann successfully expanded his business. Hermann established himself thanks to his commitment, sacrifice and perseverance. Franz was the first child born of this marriage, in Prague, in 1883. Two more boys who died young and three daughters who died later during the Nazi holocaust were also born of this marriage. Hermann is described as an energetic man with strong temperament and Julie as a sweet

and serene woman, always willing to mitigate her husband's strong temperament. In addition to Yiddish, Hermann's children spoke German, which was his family's native tongue in South Bohemia. Besides German and Yiddish, Franz also spoke Czech in an attempt to broaden his local communication. Based on the fact that they were Jews and having the habit of speaking German, Franz and his family were seen as the minority of minorities, making it difficult for Franz to connect with other inhabitants of Prague. In this context, Franz was exposed to the nationalistic feelings of Prague residents which, when combined with anti-Semitic prejudices, eventually led to street demonstrations against the Jews. Curiously, although he belonged to a family of Jews, Franz did not attend to the synagogue because he did not see himself to be sufficiently involved in the Jewish religion.<sup>1,2</sup>

Franz Kafka died in 1924. Six years later, Freud published *Civilization and its Discontents*, a text in which he points out the relevance of cultural conditions in the production of happiness and curiously also makes reference to the figure of the peasants in the Thirty Years War as an example of the gradual numbness of expectations and a process of narcotization affecting the susceptibility to sensations of pleasure as well as displeasure. He also comments that it is very important to consider the way in which social relations between human beings are regulated in the process of civilization, whether as neighbors, as a source of support, as a sexual object and as a member of a family and then, he concludes that the cultural element would be the first attempt to regulate these relations.<sup>3</sup>

The constitution of the subject occurs in the land of otherness, and this is a process in which the language plays an important role, both in the objectivity of communication and in the symbolism of what is said as well as in the silence that sometimes is adopted as the only possibility for communication. Language is one of the possibilities that the unconscious has to manifest itself. Therefore, interpersonal relationship is not limited to the field of objectivity. The influence of other's gaze on us is a relevant constituent of our subjectivity and it is controlled by the unconscious, which receives external information and determines the form in which it is possible to respond. Therefore, language itself should not be taken as the only and absolute reference

for social communication. All symbols associated with language are quite important in this process.

We know language is strongly influenced by historical circumstances in which it is inserted. History, both that related to society and that concerning family environment, is important in the constitution of the subject since it exists even before its birth and does influence its constitution from the very beginning. Franz comes from a family exposed to migratory movements resulting from mainly economic needs and, although born in Prague, Franz expressed himself in three languages, probably not only because of cultural versatility but also because of the connection he had with his origins coupled with the need to adapt to the environment, which lead us to speculate about a possible relationship of the dilution of the spoken language with the dilution of Franz's own subjectivity. Obscure is the word Franz used when referring to himself in relation to his father in the *Letter to my Father*, which is the object of this essay:

“Let's compare the two of us: I am a shy and obscure person totally interrupting myself quite often. You, on the other hand, is a true Kafka in strength, health, appetite, loudness of voice, eloquence, self-satisfaction, worldly dominance, endurance, presence of spirit, experience, knowledge of human nature, a certain way of doing things on a grand scale, and, of course, also with all the defects and weaknesses that go with these advantages and into which your temperament and sometimes your hot temper do drive you”.<sup>4</sup>

Franz's speech is created in the context of social and cultural circumstances in which both he and Hermann were inserted and responded to in opposite ways on the basis of their unequal singularities, making it difficult to find a true connection between them. Hermann was a migrant who responded to adversity with perseverance, seeking to overcome obstacles, aiming at a material well-being for himself and his family what made him to become a migrant of himself, without giving much value to non-pragmatic issues of daily life and without paying attention to those who were used to surround him. In contrast, Franz presents himself as a fragile subject at the mercy of a tyrant father. He also considered not having many points in common with the Jews aside from having little affinity with himself as he used to say.<sup>2</sup>

As previously mentioned, language is one of the ways for the unconscious to manifest itself, then, its relation to the external world is not exclusively based on the field of objectivity. The speech of the speaker produces a much broader and hidden discourse than the text that is spoken. The subject of the discourse unconsciously refers to historical, social, cultural, ideological and emotional components, all of which exposed to the interference of external references that act by impregnating the discourse that is spoken which, in the end, expresses the uniqueness of human experience.

In *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*<sup>5</sup> Freud comments on the mental phenomena determined by the sociocultural context and highlights some components of this process, for example, the sociocultural construction of these phenomena that occurs through the language, both in its occurrence as in the apprehension process by the individual. In the same way, he makes some reflections on the passage from the unconscious to the conscious and questions how consciousness may have access to the content that is in the unconscious being this is a process in which, again, language plays a relevant role. In *Civilization and its Discontents*,<sup>3</sup> we see Freud saying that culture is a process that is developed in humanity at the service of Eros seeking

to bring together individuals, families, and then ethnicities, people and nations into the great unity of humanity, concluding that these human groups should be linked libidinally with each other. Franz was born in Prague in a time of social discomfort that would lead to the first of two world wars thirty years after his birth. Franz experienced this environment of progressive social tension and discontent. Franz was a Jewish man who was fluent in three languages and did not go to the synagogue as expected, becoming a minority among minorities and being exposed to anti-Semitic prejudices, as already mentioned. In addition he had particular and specific difficulties in the relationship with his father.

It is accepted that sociocultural context in which the subject is inserted has a unique importance in his/her development, mainly because of the way in which it captures and translates the elements of this context and the resulting mental phenomena through language. The scenario where Franz established himself did not seem to be sufficiently provided with symbols that could be positively structuring his subjectivity and existence. Similarly, in his family universe, Franz was unable to find the appropriate structure to establish a reasonable relationship with his father, as he writes in the *Letter to my Father*:

“I remember, for example, how we often undressed together in a changing room. I—meager, weak, small. You—strong, great, broad and I used to feel myself miserable, not just in front of you, but in front of everybody...”.<sup>4</sup>

The representation contained in Franz's words portrays his perception of himself and expresses the emotional consequences that those words bring to him. His narrative may suggest that we are in front of a jackdaw outside the nest without the necessary drive to fly, with shortage of investment in its own desire.

### He is the rock, his work is perfect and his way is right. (Deuteronomy 32:4)

“From your armchair you ruled the world. Your opinion was correct, every other one was absurd and abnormal... Your self-confidence was so great... You seemed to have the mystery that all tyrants have in whom the reason is based on their appearance and not on their thoughts... everything you called out to me seemed to be a heavenly commandment, never forgotten, and it usually remained for me as the most important way to judge the world... I could not satisfy you because I did not have your strength, your appetite and your skills and this was the greatest disgrace of all”.<sup>4</sup>

In the text *The Task of the Translator*<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin comments that the translation process implies a return to the original, since it is there where the law of its format lies. Then he raises the question whether translations may be valid for the readers who have not read the original words. Therefore, we may ask to what extent any translation would be able to aspire to be similar to the original. Benjamin goes on discussing the need to integrate various languages into a true language in order that sentences, poems and judgments may harmonize each other. However it is true that languages may harmonize each other, complete one another and reconcile each other through the way they are expressed. We can then speculate on what Franz wanted to express by writing the *Letter to my Father*.<sup>4</sup> In other words, we may think about how many languages of affection Franz was putting together, translating and integrating each other in his discourse. The text of the *Letter to my Father* is Franz's perception about himself and his father, a clear emotional translation that he provides about his father and

himself, with all the symbols pictured in his experience. As expressed in his words:

“My writing was all about you; in my words I was able to regret what I could no regret upon your breast...the way you smile is extraordinarily beautiful and exquisite...you had magnificent commercial talents... when facing any uncertainty or doubt you immediately knew how to find the solution...a spectacle worthy to be watched...”<sup>4</sup>

When speaking about his father, Franz speaks of himself, translating the force of Hermann’s image on himself. When he speaks of himself, Franz also speaks about his father when he writes: “the feeling of nullity that masters me was imposed to me in a large extent by your influence... you were used to censor me since the very beginning, blocking my way...Your verbal communication process contained abuse, threats, irony, spiteful laughter...I was used to go on living as a not deserved gift...I lost confidence in my own actions...the older I became, more material was there for you to bring up against me as an evidence of my worthlessness...”<sup>4</sup>

But, after all, who is Hermann Kafka? The description presented by Franz does not necessarily coincide with the testimony of others who lived with Hermann. For example, Max Brod, a friend of Franz from his youth, brings up a different perspective about Hermann saying that he was a Jew who came from an environment of material scarcity and opened a profitable business in Prague, promoting stability for him and his family and, in addition, that he was a very nice and generous person with his children, enabling Franz to get a good education, even by giving him a trip at the end of his studies. Another example can be seen in the recent edition of *Letter to my Father* in German,<sup>7</sup> on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of Franz’s death, which included recollections of Frantisek Basik, a Czech apprentice who worked two and a half years in Hermann’s shop in Prague. Basik describes Hermann as a man with a good sense of humor who played with Frantisek during his working hours and even taking him to spend a vacation with the Kafka family. In his account, Frantisek confirms that the work was hard, and the boss was strict, but, in some way sympathetic, calm, almost affectionate. The early years of Franz’s life were not referred at Franz’s letter to his father making it difficult to reflect on the representations and associations that may have been experienced by him in his childhood. The perspective we highlight at this essay is the way by which Franz refers to his father in this text<sup>4</sup> and also the strong and assertive way he exposes his feelings in regards to the sensation of failure attributed to his father in regards to parental role in his development.

In available biographies,<sup>1,2</sup> we read that Franz had some professional occupations, starting at his father’s store, where he stayed for a period of time to attend to repeated requests from his father to help him in business without considering that this activity drew no interest from Franz who, from an early age, was already attracted to literature. In 1901, at the age of 18, Franz began his studies in chemistry and, in 1902, he began to study literature and history of art. In that same year, Franz entered law school, obtaining his doctorate in 1906. Literary activity initiated in 1904 during his university course. After graduating from university in 1907, Franz joined the private insurance company Assicurazioni Generali. This activity kept him busy all day and he did not have much time left to write. As a consequence, he decided to move to the Workers’ Compensation Institute, which allowed him more time flexibility for dedicating himself to writing. Literature was what fascinated him. However, his father did not approve this activity.

In the *Letter to my Father* he says:

“...you used to address your aversion to my writing and to everything that, unknown to you, was connected with that... my vanity and my self-esteem did suffer under your proverbial way of hailing the arrival of my books: “Put it on my bedside table”... This was the environment in which I was given the freedom to embrace a career. But was I still capable of making any use of such freedom? Had I still any confidence in my own capacity to pursue a real career? The valuation of myself was much more dependent on you than on anything else... So I was not truly free to choose my career”.<sup>4</sup>

### Men cannot live without having the confidence of something indestructible within himself (Aphorisms, Franz Kafka)

In the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, originally published in 1905<sup>8</sup> Freud refers to autoerotism as an anarchic state of infantile sexuality in which sexual drive finds satisfaction in one’s own body without resorting to an external object. It is a pure local satisfaction, not organized and disjointed in relation to other partial satisfactions, i.e., the so-called pleasure of the organ in a fragmented body. A few years later, Freud investigates the relationship between self-eroticism and narcissism in the publication *On Narcissism: An Introduction* that was released in 1914<sup>9</sup> in which he states that at early stages of life there is not a unit that is comparable to the “Ego”. As drives are present since the beginning of life, something should be added to self-eroticism as a new psychic action for narcissism to be constituted. In this same text, Freud tells us that narcissism is necessary for the constitution of subjectivity, i.e., for the development of the “Ego”, which is considered the great reservoir of all libido available. Freud calls this stage of development as primary narcissism. The constitution of the “Ego” is affected by the revival of the narcissism of parents who ascribe to their child all perfections in the world and grant him/her the privileges which they were forced to leave behind. The “Ego” that emerges from the unified image that the child makes of his own body and from this revival of the parents’ narcissism is the “ideal Ego”, which corresponds to primary narcissism and gives the subject a feeling of omnipotence, leading him/her to love himself. Later, the libido is redirected to objects (representations-object) leading to the transformation of the narcissistic libido into object libido but emphasizing that, throughout the life of the subject, the “Ego” continues being the great reservoir of the libido from which libidinal investments are sent to objects and collected from them, such as an amoeba that extends and then collects its pseudopods. The return of libidinal investment to the “Ego” after investing on external objects is considered by Freud to be the secondary narcissism. It is worth emphasizing that he believes that these modes of libidinal investment should not be considered as successive stages, i.e., there is no complete abandonment of the “Ego” in exchange for the object, nor afterwards a complete abandonment of the object investment in favor of the “Ego”. Both forms of investment may coexist even with the predominance of one of them.

In *On Narcissism: An Introduction*,<sup>9</sup> Freud introduces the concepts “ideal Ego” and “ideal of Ego” and says that the self-love feeling that is enjoyed in childhood through the real “Ego” lies on this “ideal Ego” and that this narcissism is displaced into this “ideal Ego”, which, like the infantile Ego, finds itself in possession of all valuable perfections. Like everything that occurs under the domain of the libido, Freud says that during their psychic development, human beings demonstrate to



be unable to renounce the satisfaction that was once enjoyed at early times. They do not want to deprive themselves of the narcissistic perfection that is characteristic of childhood. This sensation, however, cannot be maintained when they grow up and this state of mind is disturbed by the admonitions of others and by the awakening of their own judgment about life. Consequently, this leads them to seek for recovering of this state through the new psychic instance named “Ideal of Ego”.

The “Ideal of Ego” is a psychic instance resulting from the reconciliation of narcissism and idealization of the “Ego” with the process of identification with the parents, their demands and/or also with their substitutes in society defining rules and laws to be followed. The “Ideal of Ego” turns to be a standard in relation to which the subjects measures themselves and commit to fulfilling the demands that are presented to them in order to be loved and recognized being this a process that generates conflict and psychic suffering. The “Ideal of the Ego” actually represents the identification built up on the figure of the father who is what we would like to be, as clearly indicated by Franz several times in *Letter to the Father*,<sup>4</sup> whenever his words reveal relevant signs of praise related to Hermann.

In *The Future of an Illusion*, published in 1927,<sup>10</sup> Freud draws attention to the ambivalence of the father-child relationship in which there are strong feelings of affection but also of severity: “We found ourselves in a similar state of helplessness as young children in relation to our parents. We had reasons to fear them, especially our father; yet we were certain of his protection against the dangers of life”.<sup>10</sup>

In Jewish families, paternal authority is unquestionable, and children are instructed to honor and fear this image of authority. In Jewish families, the father is the center of everything, the lord who has the control of everyone and whose power rests on images as ancient and irrefutable as presented in the biblical passage found in Isaiah 64-7 which says “O Lord, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand”. The father is the first “other” the child discovers after the mother. The presence of the father is what defines the rules as well as the limits for living and then allows the transition of the child from family world to society and the consequent entrance into the culture. In this way, it is guaranteed the state of security that is necessary for the child to make his/her own decisions in life, allowing him/her to explore the world and then return to the family with the assurance of be welcomed. The father is the one who brings the perspective of “otherness” which is a critical experience in the process of subject’s psychic development. It is due to this experience that the child is presented to the feeling of belonging to a group which do facilitate the process required for human development. Franz goes on in his life without being able to authorize himself in taking decisions that would make him able to support his own choices. In order to be able to grant permission to life, it is necessary for the subject to have the “praxis” of his own and, not, be a faithful copy of his master however without losing the perspective about the relevance of this master. Getting married is one of the steps that Franz wanted to accomplish but never succeeded. It was after his unsuccessful third attempt that he wrote the letter<sup>4</sup> to his father.

Franz had several love experiences.<sup>1,2</sup> Some were short and some were deeper and longer, capable of influencing the course of his life. One of his main relationships was with Felicia Bauer, who

fascinated him to such extent that he decided to propose to her. They were engaged between 1912 and 1914 and, during this period, Franz could not decide between getting married and overcoming his isolation, or preserving his independence and personal freedom even paying the price of his solitude. Despite this hesitation, Franz did not take the initiative to break the engagement with his fiancée what was then decided by Felicia herself. Two years later, in 1916, Franz finds her again and resumes the relationship. In 1917, Franz had his first episode of hemoptysis due to tuberculosis what made it difficult for him to marry her. Then, in the end of 1917 they terminated the engagement. In 1919, at the age of 36, Franz met Julie Wohryzek, to whom he became engaged, but soon after he got to know Milena Jesenska-Pollakova and established an intense relationship with her, despite the fact he was still engaged to Julie and Milena was married. By Milena’s demand, Franz broke up the engagement with Julie but he never got to be married to Milena, since she refused to leave her husband.

In the end of 1919, feeling disappointed by the cold reception granted by his father in regards to the announcement he made about his engagement to Julie, Franz wrote the *Letter to my Father* where he comments about the interaction with his father in relation to his loving experiences: “...first of all you rank the failure of the marriages at the same level you do with the rest of my failures... you underrate the importance of this matter... getting married, raising a family with children, supporting them in this insecure world and perhaps even guiding them for a while until the limit that a man can reach...our needs are quite different; what is important to me is just superficial for you ... soon after I told you about my project in regards to getting married to Julie you told me that she probably got dressed with a fancy blouse, like those Jew girls are used to do Prague, and that this may have influenced my decision in regards to getting married to her”.<sup>4</sup>

The suffering that Franz exposes in this auto-biographical *Letter to my Father*<sup>4</sup> points out the failure of his father in exercising his parental role, a relevant step that is needed in the process for constitution of someone’s subjectivity. The failure of Franz’s attempts to establish lasting love bonds could indicate some degree of frustration related to such initiatives that he was not able to sustain, experiencing the sour taste of failure in many situations. Marriage would be such a new literature to be written in his life, a guarantee of self-liberation and independence that maybe would allow him to write a letter to his father with a different content. Franz also considered that, through marriage, he could live up to the image of his father, but in order to reach this, Hermann should have been the father who grants his son the recognition of power, something that never occurred as Franz says: “You could have never humiliated me more deeply with words in addition to showing me very clearly the contempt you had towards me... My choice of a girl to be engaged meant nothing at all to you... You have always smashed (unconsciously) my power of decision... Again as a sign of your complete misunderstanding was the fact that you believed that I—timid, hesitant, suspicious—would be able to quickly decide about marriage seduced by a blouse.... Neither of the girls has disappointed me, only I disappointed both of them... It is the overwhelming pressure of anxiety, weakness and self-contempt”.<sup>4</sup>

There is no sufficient investment from Franz in his subjectivity to make it possible for him to sustain his own desire and, in this process, he compares his “Ego” to his “Ideal of Ego” represented by his father when he says:

“Marriage certainly is the more explicit guarantee for me in order to reach self-liberation and independence. I would have a family that, in my opinion, is the highest status one can achieve... I would be at the same position that you are and all previous and even new shame and tyranny episodes would just be mere history...I could picture myself in this situation of equality which would then arise between ourselves... But the way we are now, marriage is barred to me because this is exactly your most private domain”<sup>4</sup>.

The novel *Letter to my Father*<sup>4</sup> denounces the issues that plagued Franz at an early age. Paternal law, profession and marriage are central themes for him. However, to me, what seems to be in question is not the truthfulness of the narrative but, rather, the burden of affections destined by Franz to the facts. Not only the feeling of emptiness that he addresses to his father, but also the torture he sets upon himself in an unmistakable self-condemnatory attitude that evolves into a tragic outcome.

### The final silence

In 1917 Franz, then aged 34, was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis. At this point, Franz had already been admitted into some health institutions until 1924, when he was last hospitalized. This time, there was an aggravation of the tuberculosis that had affected his larynx leading to respiratory difficulties. For this reason, feeding also became a painful activity for him. On June 3rd, 1924, Franz’s conditions got worse. He asked for morphine and, a few hours later, he died. In *Letter to my Father*, written in 1919, thus after the diagnosis of tuberculosis but five years before his death, Franz wrote: “The impossibility of a serene relationship brought me a different outcome: I unlearned to speak... since very early the word was forbidden to me...and, at last, I shut up.”<sup>4</sup>

The process of subjectivation is a painful process for anyone that requires stamina. For this, feeding the soul, investing in the psychic development and interacting with the “other” in a way that guarantees the constitution of own subjectivity is quite important components in this process. At the end of his life, Franz got ill with a disease that affected his ability to breathe, to speak and to eat, an outcome he himself had predicted a few years earlier, as if it was his inexorable

fate from which he was not able to run away. Between 1917 and 1918, Franz was admitted into a sanitarium in Zürau where he wrote more than one hundred aphorisms<sup>11</sup> about good and evil, true and false, alienation and redemption, death and paradise. One of them says: “From a certain point there is no return. This point has to be reached”.

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### Conflict of interest

Author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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