

A Contemporary Reading of Kafka's Fear of the Father in *Brief an den Vater*

Michaela Ruppert-Smith
College of Charleston

Kafka's autobiographically influenced works have been analyzed from literary, socio-cultural, historical, and psychoanalytic perspectives, among others. Like Edvard Munch's pictorial *Scream*, Kafka's fictional image of the metamorphosed Gregor Samsa is widely considered to be an icon of Modernist Angst. I would like with this close textual reading of Kafka's account of the childhood origins of his personal Angst, as detailed in his autobiographical *Brief an den Vater* (*Letter to the Father*), to present a contemporary analysis of the irresolvable fear of the father that marked Kafka's life and works.¹ My reading of Kafka's fear, his self-perceived ontological reduction, and his distorted and diminished sense of being will interpret these as chronic manifestations of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that Kafka suffered as a result of his father's abuse. Initially defined in reference to male veterans of war, cases of PTSD are now diagnosed within the population at large, including women and children². Victims of terrorist attacks, natural disasters, serious accidents, as well as rape, domestic violence, child abuse, and other serious physical and emotional abuse may go on to develop chronic self-diminishing and debilitating symptoms of PTSD. In his *Letter to the Father*, Kafka struggles to come to terms with the paternal abuse he suffered from early childhood on. He describes the terror imposed on the son by his patriarchal father who exerts a pervasive, insidious power over his victim. It is a relentless and chronic terror that distorts, diminishes, and consumes the son. In *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka's fictional account of his chronic manifestations of PTSD, it is Kafka/Gregor who becomes the vermin

¹ All translations from the German *Brief an den Vater* are my own.

² The original definition of PTSD first appeared in the DSM-III in 1980; it is now defined more broadly in the DSM-V.

that in the end succumbs to his diminished state of being. In his *Letter to the Father*, it is Kafka, who remains trapped in a life-sentence of post-traumatic terror and loss of self.

The *Letter* was prompted by the failure of Kafka's third and last attempt to marry, a plan blocked by his father for what was, to Kafka, no good reason. Both the marriage plan and the *Letter* were driven by Kafka's hope of establishing his independence from his father, but neither the marriage, the delivery of the *Letter*, nor Kafka's independence from his father ever happened. The *Letter* soon makes it clear that Kafka will be unable to escape from his emotional existence as traumatized child. It conveys Franz Kafka's irresolvable entrapment in a life diminished by his overpowering post-traumatic fear of the father.

From the evidence in Kafka's journals (Shahar und Ben-Horin 87), we know that he was familiar with the works of Freud, and despite some reservations about Freudian psychoanalysis to which his journals also testify, we can assume that he wrote the *Letter* to some degree within the cultural context of Freud. In any case, what Kafka's works, including the *Letter*, certainly seem to bear out is Freud's theory of trauma, whereby, as Cathy Caruth notes, ". . . the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will" (2). Today, a contemporary reading of Kafka's *Letter* within the context of our current knowledge of the kind of personal Angst or fear that is symptomatic of PTSD can offer additional insight. It is not my intent, however, to undertake a clinical analysis of Kafka. My interest in PTSD begins with a basic understanding of post-traumatic stress as triggered by an event that threatens or is perceived to threaten one's existence, whether physical or psychological or, most likely, both. My focus is on the existential, ontological experience and perspective of the victim who lives out his or her life within the oppressive and limiting shadow of the other, the other being the trauma, its agents, and everything in any way connected with these. This ontological state of non-being manifests itself emotionally through fear, terror, guilt, helplessness, and existential loss. Anything or anyone—a noise, a smell, a situation, an image, words, a person—that is in any way reminiscent of the original trauma can trigger a flare-up of PTSD and the re-experience of the traumatic event, its extreme destructive emotions, and heightened anxiety. Victims thus live constantly on guard, their lives taken over or encompassed by the other, their agency

diminished. The other keeps you from being who you are in yourself. From this focus we may better understand how a victim of severe trauma, in this case Kafka, as self-portrayed in his *Letter*, can be led to consider himself as nothing, as less than a dog, as some kind of vermin who feels personally, developmentally, and existentially annihilated.

In the opening sentence of his *Letter* (Brief 5), Kafka cannot even assert that he is the author of the question driving the *Letter*. It was the father, he claims, who recently asked Kafka why he had such a fear of him. This opening already brings to the forefront the guilt-ridden, subservient stance that Kafka takes on throughout the *Letter* and throughout his life. Kafka continues by saying that, "as usual" when asked this question by the father, he was unable to answer it. He says, that even in writing to him, he is disabled (*behindern*) in front of the father by the magnitude of his fear that far exceeds his capacities of memory and reason (5). From its opening, therefore, the prospect of this *Letter* achieving understanding, reconciliation, and liberation seems less than promising.

From within his post-traumatic existence, marked by overpowering fear and guilt, Kafka nevertheless attempts to see the father as the latter sees himself, a hardworking man who sacrificed himself for his cold, unthankful, and estranged son, whom he perceives as having crept away (Kafka uses the word *verkrochen*) (5), an action more characteristic of a frightened animal (and thus less than human), into his room, to books, crazy friends and wild ideas, away from the family and the family business (5-6). The self-righteous father thus attributed all guilt to the son. Kafka responds obsequiously by agreeing that his father is innocent, but goes on to assert that he himself is not guilty of the estrangement either and offers this interpretation of dual innocence as a possibility for reaching a kind of understanding or at least a "lessening of his father's constant accusations" (6), not a resolution, therefore, but more of a ceasefire. In fact, the possibility of the desired resolution is dashed within the same sentence when Kafka maintains that it is already too late. It becomes apparent that every seeming step towards reconciliation and resolution bears within itself the worm and either mutates into a reproach and/or otherwise negates itself. It is one of many examples of the entrapment of the author of the *Letter* within an endless, confused and confusing labyrinth of conflict, terror, and trauma with no escape.

Kafka continues with an atoning acknowledgment of his tendency towards exaggeration (7), the literary hyperbole characteristic of his works including the *Letter*, and from there he once again demeans himself in comparison to his father. "Even if I had grown up completely without your influence . . . I would probably have been a weak, fearful, hesitating, and anxious person," he writes (7). To Kafka, his father is everything the son is not. He is strong and healthy, has a good appetite, a strong voice, a command of words. He is self-satisfied, in control, persevering, and has a strong presence of mind (7). They are so "dangerously" (8) different, Kafka claims, that one could have prophesied that the grown man would simply stamp out the developing child so that nothing would be left (8). This is a hopeless and damning accusation which, out of fearful subservience, Kafka quickly overturns with the admission that this did not actually happen. However, in another typical twist, he adds that something even worse probably happened, that is, the life-long traumatization of the son. Kafka quickly reasserts that he is not blaming his father and, in the same breath, he even dares to appeal to the father to stop blaming the son (8), but we again realize that neither the one nor the other will ever change his perception of and relationship to the other or his sense and expression of self. While Kafka has taken a daring leap with this written confrontation with the father's abusive spoken word, he has had to tread on eggshells with every attempted rebuttal, and we sense that the childhood and adolescent trauma that continues to overtake Kafka at age 36, when he wrote the *Letter*, will never release its destructive grip on him.

Still attempting not to blame his father unfairly, Kafka reasons that his father had wanted to raise a strong and brave son, and the only way he had known how to do so was by means of his abusive bullying through "*Kraft, Lärm, und Jähzorn*" (9), that is, physical force, yelling, and rage. But with this, an alarming memory from Kafka's early years intrudes as an example of his father's bullying: the time when as a small child he was "whimpering" for water in the middle of the night. Out of his habitual self-deprecation, Kafka adds that he was most likely not even whimpering out of thirst, but to anger the father or to entertain himself. The German word Kafka uses for "whimper" is *winseln* (9), a word generally used to refer to a dog's whimpering; by its application to the son by the son, Kafka again reiterates his perceived abject reduction to something less than human, certainly the leitmotif in the

Letter and *The Metamorphosis*. We recall that in *The Metamorphosis*, the son Gregor is reduced through the father's abuse, not even to a dog, but to an *Ungeziefer*, some kind of lowest of low vermin, so low that it does not even get a specific designation. In Kafka's traumatic childhood memory about his whimpering, the father wished to teach the very young son a lesson about disturbing his night's sleep and did so by putting the child, dressed only in a night shirt, out on the *Pawlatsche* (9) or balcony for a period of time, something akin to a master banishing his whining dog to the balcony in the middle of the night, only that in this case it was his small son whimpering for water. "I was obedient after that," Kafka remembers, "but I sustained inner damage" (9-10). The child would have had no idea how long he was to stay out on the balcony in the dark and the terror would have been shattering and made him fear for his life. For years afterwards, Kafka says, he had nightmares of the giant father getting him out of bed in the middle of the night for next to no reason and putting him on the balcony (10). From then on, Kafka says, he concluded with his innermost being that ". . . I therefore was a complete nothing to him" (10). Both the repetitive nightmares and the conclusion are consistent with PTSD.

Is it an exaggeration to say that Kafka remained in this state of Angst, what we now would call post-traumatic stress, a state that caused his transformation into an existence perceived as inherently lacking? Or is this what actually happened to Kafka? Can we simply dismiss his account as literary hyperbole or must we acknowledge that the trope is the literary transmission of what it means to be defined by the intense fear, helplessness, and horror of trauma and the resulting Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder? Caruth maintains that trauma, "the wound of the mind" (4) ". . . is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on . . ." (4). Trauma, she writes, "seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4).

Like Gregor Samsa, disabled by the serious wound inflicted by his father, Kafka wishes in the *Letter* that, instead of the wounding, some kindness had come his way. "I could have used a little encouragement in those days, a kind remark . . ." (11), he reminisces in a downward

spiral. "But I was already weighed down by your mere corporality" (11). He recalls how skinny, weak, and scrawny he was in comparison to his father's strong, tall and imposing physique when they undressed in the cabin to go swimming (11). He describes himself as a mere skeleton in the hand of his father: "... when we stepped out of the cabin in front of the people, me holding your hand, just a little bag of bones ... afraid of the water and incapable of swimming like you" (11). But even before they stepped out, the diminutive Kafka was gripped by shame, guilt, and fear: "I felt pathetic already in the cabin and not just in front of you," he writes, "but in front of the whole world, for you were for me the measure of all things" (11). "You were for me the measure of all things."—What an imposing statement both as a Freudian patriarchal paradigm and as a universal archetype. But what a terrifying statement it is in the context of trauma and post-traumatic stress where the perpetrator can become the measure of all things to the victim, where the perpetrator rules every corner of the victim's world, the victim's psyche, and the victim's life, trapping the victim in a life-threatening horror of nightmares, flashbacks, intrusive memories, thoughts, images and sensations day after day from which there seems to be no escape. From the description of his father's physical superiority (which Kafka admits he also admired), Kafka continues to cite his father's mental superiority and compares him to a god or king ruling over the world, Freud's patriarch, the archetypal god, ruler or king incarnate. "In your armchair," Kafka writes, "... you ruled the world. Your opinion was correct, every other one was crazy, overstrung, *meschugge*, not normal. At the same time your self-confidence was so huge . . ." (11-12). In Kafka's experience the father has now fully assumed the character of oppressive tyrant and judge whose chief victim is his son. Every thought even before uttered, writes Kafka, every opinion, feeling, deed of the child was judged as wrong (12). Even Kafka's friends were habitually put down by the father as "vermin," dogs, or fleas (13). And the father's complete lack of empathy for the suffering and shame his words and judgments had on the son, Kafka writes, "will forever remain incomprehensible" (13). "You carried on with your attacks without restraint . . . one was completely defenseless against you" (14). Kafka writes. To be defenseless and helpless to that degree is part of the easily recognizable PTSD symptomatology.

Kafka often comments on his father's thunderous voice or *Donnerstimme* (16), with its constant undertones of patriarchal, divine

rage and total condemnation (17). In a conciliatory attempt, Kafka admits that today he trembles less at it than as a child, as the child's feeling of guilt has been replaced by the recognition of both his and his father's helplessness (17). Yet Kafka now adds a further memory of the past. "The impossibility of calm discourse" (17), he writes, had an additional consequence: "I lost the ability to speak" (17). Rather than a scientific observation, this bombshell opens up the full extent of the childhood trauma experienced by the son through the verbal, psychological and physical abuse or threat thereof delivered by the tyrannical father, master and judge whose word rules, the word of the father that, in this case, silences the son.

Clearly, the inability to speak, whereby a psychological wound is somatized, is symptomatic of severe psychological trauma, terror, intimidation, and disempowerment. When the word of the father renders the son speechless, this is a rendering by the more than human father of the son as less than human. Kafka claims he was too obedient and "I fell completely silent, hid from you (*verkroch mich vor Dir*)" (18), again a German phrase indicating that he crawled away from his father and hid like an animal. Certainly one cannot avoid drawing comparisons here to Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*. As Gregor morphs into a repulsive vermin, he loses one human characteristic after another, including the loss of speech. In short, the vermin, banished from the family, crawls into his room, the father's booming voice in the background, the mortal physical wound inflicted by the father festering, and lingers there alienated, aphasic, and alone for months until he dies.

In "The Judgment" (1912), a short story written prior to both *The Metamorphosis* and *Letter to the Father*, Kafka depicts another silencing of a son by the father, in a power struggle to the death that has a fatal outcome for the son. In this story the son, Georg, facing marriage and a crucial life decision, seeks out his elderly father and finds him in a neglected, seemingly moribund state. Shocked and guilty at finding his father in this condition, Georg vows to take better care of him. He picks his father up and, cradling him like a baby, carries him into his own bed and lays him in it. Georg soon finds out, however, that his father is still the same bully that he always was and remains in total control. In a terrifying instant, as Georg lays the seemingly dying father down, the latter morphs into an invincible apparition of horror (*Schreckbild*) ("Das Urteil" 15). He throws off the covers, stands up on the bed, and accuses his son of wanting him "covered up" or dead. As Georg cowers

in the farthest corner of the room, his father continues to berate his son and reveals that he has had a secret correspondence with Georg's friend, who "would be a son after my own heart" ("The Judgment" 68). Georg stares in horror at the resurrected tyrant now towering over him on the bed and wishes for a split second that he would fall and shatter to pieces. But the father does not fall. Instead, he rages, "I'm still a lot stronger than you!" (70), and utters his final condemnation of the son: "You were truly an innocent child, but you were even more truly a diabolical man. And therefore know: I hereby condemn you to death by drowning!" (71).

"Georg felt hounded from the room," Kafka writes, "his ears still rang with the crash of his father behind him, falling on the bed" (71). For Georg in "The Judgment," as for Gregor in *The Metamorphosis* and for Kafka himself, the patriarch's *Donnerstimme* that silences the son never ceases to resound. Georg runs down the stairs, flees out the gate, and races towards the water. He grasps on to the railing above it until his hands get weaker and he cries out, "Dear parents, I have always loved you" (72). Then he lets himself fall.

Is not the state of chronic PTSD akin to death by drowning, a drowning of the self under the omnipresence of the overpowering other? Is this not another version of the same terror, the same intrusive thoughts and fears and nightmares of the loss of the self, whether the metamorphosis of the son into a dust-covered, wounded to death vermin, or the autobiographical account of the young Kafka whimpering on the *Pawlatsche* for the rest of his life, or the son sentenced to death by drowning by his all-powerful father? Do not all of these tropes each convey the disempowerment and loss of self that mark the experience of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder? For the fictionalized victims of trauma in "The Judgment" and in *The Metamorphosis*, death is the only escape from suffering and victimization. In fiction, death is a powerful metaphor for the loss of self, the disempowerment of the victims of trauma. In real life, death by suicide is a worst case scenario risk of PTSD.

In his real life, Franz Kafka died relatively young, not by his own hand, however, but of tuberculosis. While he was seriously victimized by irreversible trauma during his lifetime, Kafka was able to survive and write the tale in numerous fictionalized/autobiographical versions that not only gave powerful voice to his own Angst, but through it, symbolized the Angst of the modern era. While Freud gave us a

systematic psychoanalytic account of the origins of trauma and its aftermath, Kafka's works further illustrated the dynamics of both trauma and its resulting post-traumatic stress. With his *Letter to the Father* Kafka left us a masterful account of what it means to live one's life in the shadow of the other and its agents. The *Letter* may never have reached his father, but it relates with psychological acumen and literary tour de force the childhood and lifelong post-traumatic consequences of the overpowering, all pervasive, threatening and self-diminishing fear and unmerited guilt inflicted by the father on the son. His metaphorical description of the father as the measure of all things, as spanning the map of the son's known and unknown world gives us at the same time a tangible account of what the annihilation of the will: "I lost confidence in my own ability to act." (*Brief* 19), due to psychological trauma means. Through Kafka's recounting of the destruction of self and of his healthy and independent life as a result of repetitive childhood trauma, we can better understand characteristics of post-traumatic stress. We have gotten an insider's perspective into the pervasive and persistent anxiety that is induced by a threat to one's very existence and that effects a metamorphosis that is an incarceration, suffocation, drowning, and annihilation of the self within the overpowering other. Kafka's image of "opening the map of the world in front of me and seeing you spread out over its entirety" (*Brief* 55) makes it clear to us how under the influence of PTSD no place is safe from the trauma; there are no boundaries that divide the self from the other; there seems to be no place to either hide or flee. The other encompasses and entraps the self. There was no place on this map, therefore, for Kafka's marriage and independence from the father, the dashed hope that led Kafka to write his *Letter to the Father*. Kafka states that he has been left mentally incapable of marriage and the reason is "the pervasive oppression of the fear, the weakness, and the self-deprecation" (*Brief* 54).

True to his traumatized nature as a victim of childhood abuse and life-long post-traumatic stress, we note that Kafka ends his *Letter* on a more or less conciliatory tone, a whimper rather than a scream. It is an ending that leaves one more sad than happy and it offers neither the reader, nor the father, nor Kafka a clear resolution. However, what Franz Kafka, one of the greatest Modernist authors, was not able to live, what he was unable to speak, he was able to write. Writing, it can be argued, was Kafka's way out of the maze. If the traumatic

experience cannot be fully assimilated at its inception or in its subsequent remembrance/repetition (Caruth 5) it can and must, as Caruth tells us, "be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (5). Unlike the outcomes in *The Metamorphosis*, where the vermin literally wastes away alone and ends up in the maid's dustbin and "The Judgment," where at the moment that Georg lets himself fall into the water, "... a simply endless stream of traffic was passing across the bridge," (72), the *Letter* offers a different conclusion. Through it we have noticed Kafka diving deep but resurfacing to tell the tale and we are mindful that seeing through a glass darkly, as some philosophers said long ago, is sometimes the best we can do. To this Kafka testified, and we bear witness.

WORKS CITED

- Caruth, Cathy. Ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. Print.
- Hermes, Roger. Nachwort. *Brief an den Vater*. By Franz Kafka. 1935. 5th ed. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2003. Print.
- Kafka, Franz. *Brief an den Vater*. 5th ed. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2003. Print.
- _____. „Das Urteil.“ *Das Urteil und andere Erzählungen*. Frankfurt am Main. Fischer Bücherei, 1965. Print.
- _____. "The Judgment." *The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories*. Transl. Joachim Neugroschel. Scribner Paperback Fiction. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000. Print.
- Shahar, Galili und Michal Ben-Horin. „Franz Kafka und Max Brod.“ *Kafka-Handbuch*. Eds. Bettina von Jagow und Oliver Jahraus. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008. Print.

Perceived Learning Value of Grammar Feedback and Error Revision in Second Language Writing

Antonio Pérez-Núñez

College of Charleston

1. Abstract

Research on grammar correction has typically centered on learning outcomes (i.e. accuracy changes); however, the engagement and learning that may result from written corrective feedback (WCF) depends on both individual and affective factors (Ellis 339). This study compared the perceived learning value of error revision with and without WCF among second language (L2) learners of Spanish. The participants enrolled in a Spanish composition course completed a total of 11 five-minute daily writing assignments over four weeks. One group (N=18) revised their errors with comprehensive WCF (i.e. a type of feedback that targets many or all error types in the students' writing); while the second group (N=18) revised their errors without WCF. All participants completed a 36-item questionnaire at the end of the four-week treatment, which included questions aimed to gather information about the perceived effects of the treatment on their grammatical knowledge and learning. The results showed a higher level of error noticing during the revision sessions in the WCF group as compared to the group that received content feedback but not WCF. Both groups reported that the treatment helped them to obtain a better command of the grammar concepts they already knew, increase their confidence when writing in their L2 and decrease the frequency of their errors.

2. Introduction

The question of whether grammar correction in the form of written corrective feedback (WCF) can help learners acquire their second language (L2) has attracted a great amount of attention from both