

What Did Georg Forget?: Amnesia Caused the Fatal End in Kafka's "The Judgment"

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In Kafka's "The Judgment," one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the protagonist is his forgetfulness. In his ultimate confrontation with his father, Georg awakens memories of his father's past violent maneuvers and feels a presentiment of the dangerous attack, but he forgets just as swiftly. In spite of his previous resolve to evade his father's assault, he exposes himself without defense to his father's malice, which at last causes him to commit suicide.

If his amnesia proves fatal in the end, how does it relate to the sexual implications of the story? The recently engaged protagonist, his friend who is "resigning himself to becoming a permanent bachelor,"¹ and his father who rebukes him for his engagement and tries to seduce him sexually are all concerned in one subject: sexuality. As Freud explains the sexual element of infantile amnesia in relation to hysterical amnesia, if Georg's amnesia originates in the repression of sexual impulses in his childhood, what sexual repression did he experience in the early stage of his psychosexual construction of selfhood?² If the story indicates its protagonist's lamed effort at achieving the heterosexual manhood preparing for his upcoming marriage, is his death to be recognized as his failure in his struggle with the Oedipus complex?³

The story starts when Georg finishes writing a letter to inform his friend in Russia of his engagement that he has been hiding from him for a month. He has been reluctant to announce his engagement to his friend because he thinks his engagement will "hurt" (79) his friend and makes him "discontented" (79). His fiancée cannot see how the news of their engagement will hurt his friend while she does understand that it may make him envious. Between Georg and his friend, there is a certain intimacy that his fiancée is not able to understand and which he has to give up when he gets married. As Georg mentions "my friend has his peculiarities" (83), the friend is a person who can be hurt by the marriage of his same sex friend because of his certain peculiarities. In such a context, his peculiarities imply his homosexual desire for

Georg and the possibility of the same desire on Georg's side.

In their correspondence, Georg hitherto finds a solitary pleasure in sharing the sexual gossip with his friend. In his last three letters, Georg writes "about the engagement of an unimportant man to an equally unimportant girl" (79), in which his friend shows "some interest" (79). Georg himself is also excited about the gossip. The news of an unimportant man's engagement continuously rises in his memory and gives him a reticent pleasure that animate his quiet Sunday. He writes to his friend about the event "three times in three fairly widely separated letters" (79). Obviously they are excited at the love affair of someone of their age, and they enjoy the gossip lasciviously in men's talk. Although the narrator says that the friend's interest in the gossip is "quite contrary to his intentions" (79), Georg's surprise at his friend's curiosity is his excuse to shift the responsibility for their erotic enjoyment onto his friend as he endorses their homosexual tendency solely in his friend's peculiarities.

After he writes the letter that might bring disaster to his friendship, Georg goes to his father's room with the letter in his pocket, and talks to his father about it. However, when his father asks "Do you really have this friend in St. Petersburg?" (82) and Georg "rose in embarrassment" (82) at the question, the physical existence of the friend in Russia comes into question. Although his father soon recognizes the friend, the illusory aspect of the friend becomes certain when the narrator mentions "His friend in St. Petersburg, whom his father suddenly knew too well, touched his *imagination* as never before" (85, emphasis added). As the narrator suggests, his friend in Russia becomes Georg's imaginary creation as his other self. The poor permanent bachelor in the foreign country is his tortured Oedipus, who is both sexually and economically lamed by the paternal punishment for his incest and homosexuality. Georg casts the reflection of these tabooed desires of his own on the personae that he has created to save his own figure as an innocent son of his parents.

Georg's letter is the attempt to demolish his imaginary friend, which means to him the dissolution of the Oedipus complex that he could not dismiss in a normal way in his childhood. Exposing his secret acquaintance with his Oedipus, he confronts the father's judgment on him and on his Oedipus of whom his father used to have his "dislike" (83). During the confrontation, his father's image diminishes from a "giant" (81) into a small aged person whom he can easily lift up and who needs his care and assistance. The shrinking of his father reflects how the paternal power induces Georg's psyche to confront his father. However, the apparently weakened

father carries out indirect attacks, which cause Georg's psychic breakdown in the end. By letting "his head with its unkempt white hair sink on his [Georg's] chest" (83), allowing Georg to slip off his dressing gown (83) and carry him to bed in his arms (84), and even lifting up his shirt to show his legs (85), the father throws his body in front of his son's long-forgotten incestuous desire.

His father's seduction brings on Georg's sudden amnesia. The homosexual and incestuous seduction makes him face what he lost in his childhood without remembering its loss: his love for his mother and his love for his father. Mimicking his fiancée's alluring way, and saying that his engagement "disgraced your [Georg's] mother's memory" (85), his father reminds him that his heterosexual desire originates in his incestuous desire for his mother. At the same time, putting himself in the place of the object of Georg's desire through mimicking, his father reveals Georg's other incestuous but this time homosexual and therefore more prohibited desire for his father. Identifying himself with Georg's homosexual friend in Russia by saying, "I've been representing him here on the spot" (86), his father indicates that Georg's homosexual desire originates in his love for his father. Georg's twofold object-cathexis in his childhood results in the equally twofold Oedipus complex. Consequently, he has to overcome the Oedipus complex quite differently from what Freud states as the normal way: his identification with his beloved father becomes the substitute for his erotic cathexis of his father as it usually occurs in the melancholic's narcissistic identification with the lost love-object.⁴ Because of the identification with the lost object, Georg, like the melancholic, experiences the loss of his own ego. This loss encourages his construction of his other self to whom he attributes the tormented figure of his own twofold queer Oedipus.

Georg shows his unconscious desire for his father seen in his attentive care of his father's (he takes off his father's clothes and sees his underwear; he carries him to bed in his arms), his melancholic self-reproach for his "having been neglectful" (84) of his father, and his amnesia about the loss of his beloved father in his childhood. Finally he gives in when he finds out his father "has pockets even in his shirt" (86). The pocket is the metaphor for the secret access to his queer Oedipus. He puts the letter into its envelope and puts it in his pocket. There is no sign that he writes an address or stamps it. He does not even need to post it, because the pocket leads directly to his Oedipus. He slips off his father's clothes because he knows the hidden meaning of the pocket quite well and he is afraid that either his father or his Oedipus will take over the privilege and his hidden homosexuality will come out. Yet when

he realizes his father has pockets in his shirts, his ambition to demolish the Oedipus complex is suspended. Moreover, when he finds that his Oedipus with whom he is developing contact behind his father's back is doing a secret service of his father hidden from himself, his psychic makeup is completely crushed down.

Georg dies at the very moment of his oedipal crisis. Oedipus betrays him and takes his father's side. His father with his son's Oedipus on his side becomes "an impossible figure for all the world" (86), which, because of amnesia, Georg has forgotten for a long time, remembers at a moment, and forgets again right away. It reveals both his and his father's homosexual tendencies. The recognition of his libidinal condition is intolerable for his psyche. His father says, "He knows everything a thousand times better" (87). What he knows or who knows it is not important, because Georg does not remember what he observes. What makes his life unsustainable is the fact that someone knows what he does not want to be known about his sexuality. He waits for his father's judgment, and willingly takes it. In the loss of his both ego and alter ego, the father's judgment becomes the ultimate agent that he clings to. Before he jumps into the river, he says "Dear parents, I have always loved you, all the same (88)." It is not clear that this utterance indicates his acceptance of his bisexual nature. But it is clear that he does not have any alternative love object that will make up for his loss of his beloved mother, of his beloved father, and even of his Oedipal desire. His fiancée is out of question. "The Judgment" is a fatal story because it is the story of the oedipal crisis in melancholia in which only the judgment survives the death of its subject/object.

Notes

¹ Franz Kafka, "The Judgment," trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 77. Hereafter page numbers will be cited in the text within parentheses.

² See Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Basic Books, 2000).

³ According to Freud, the Oedipus complex arises when a child finds its father to be an obstacle in its pursuit of the love for its mother. In case of a boy, it ends usually when he yields to his father's power given to him as a castration complex and gives up his love for his mother. The Oedipal complex is dissolved, and he consolidates his masculine self through his identification with his father. See Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (New York: Norton, 1960).

⁴ The main characteristic of the melancholic's experience of loss is that he/she is not aware of the loss. It is because the melancholic identifies him/herself with the lost object to make

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up for the loss. In melancholia the object loss relates to the ego loss. (Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *SE*, vol. 14, pp. 239-260.)