

Konnarock, Virginia
August 21, 1949

Dear Margaret,

Will you give the enclosed translation of Frau Kaufmann's letters to your father, and ask him to pardon me my procrastination? Upon re-reading them, I ask myself whether they cast such an unfavorable light on their author after all. Judgments like this are difficult to make and often rebound to oppress him who judged hastily. How can anyone, my mother, your father, or I, know the state of mind from which those letters sprang; and knowing it, who could evaluate it; and being able to evaluate it, who would dare judge? And therefore I send my translation, - it is as accurate in most places as I could make it, and the stylistic errors are Frau Kaufmann's own, - I send my translation to your father without comment or criticism, but merely with apologies for my delay.

Your letters, the one to my mother and the one to me, arrived Saturday. Mother thanks you for your lines; that there was much neatness and simplicity about them you were doubtlessly aware when you wrote. Your letter to me gave me much pleasure and some pain; the two, as you know, often accompany each other. In reading it, I was aware that much of what you wanted to say you could not. Sometimes when in conversation one unsuccessfully gropes for a word, the annoyance or disappointment felt at being unable to express oneself is soon superceded by a quiet thankfulness for the inability. Perhaps what was not said was better left unsaid; in the long run, would it not have shamed the mind and burdened the soul?

There was much feeling in your letter, I would not say too much, because to say "too much" I liked it too well. Yet you have more liking for me than is good for your health, and you must never forget that I have not the specie with which to repay. The role of debtor does not suit me either. The kind of coin I have will not suffice indefinitely; still, it is all I have. I am a bad investment, barren and implacable. The wise investor withdraws his deposits early and does not wait for the run on the bank. There is much foolishness in his wisdom, however, and there is much wisdom in ~~the~~ foolishness. Let me repeat, for what it was, I liked your letter, and would sooner do anything than hurt you on its account.

We must be honest, and for myself I cannot differentiate honesty from bluntness. Neither can my mother; it must run in the family. About minor issues I can tolerate deception; the large ones frighten me so that I blurt out the truth. Whatever I do, you must not take me seriously, hear everything I say, yet ~~not~~ be not hurt by it, no more than if I were one of your problem children in school, or one of the little actors whom you were trying to teach a lesson last year, who was incredibly dumb about learning and yet so earnest and sincere. He could never learn your lesson, probably because at heart he was afraid of it and did not want to.

August 22,

I wrote the first page of my letter between two and three a.m. last night. The late hour must bear the blame for the bluntness. If I tried to write it now, I would try to express the same notions in more civil garb. If only I succeed in equivocating myself to heaven like Shakespeare's minister in Macbeth. (III, 3) Like him, I would try to swear in both the scales against either scale, and commit treason enough for God's sake. But what use to deny the two sides of the scale; are they not meant to equalize, balance and compensate for each other? How hazardous, the attempt to detach one from the other; yet how difficult it is to maintain a balance once one has become aware of the duality. You see, the bright-eyed boy whom you meet on the street, who goes to the movies on Monday, Wednesday and Friday nights, on Saturday to the bowling alley and on Sunday morning to Sunday school, - for him the two opposites are unconsciously synthesized and compromised. He is happier and yet not so happy.

The need is for balance, but what use to deny the extremes. I could destroy the preceding portion of my letter, but would I not have to re-write it in some form or another either now or later? On the other hand, what I do from compunction today I will never need to deny later; and what you feel you must say, I would have you say it. The necessity which drives us to speak and the suffering which accompanies our actions are sufficient for their justification. What matters is the force with which the personality resists necessity and the sincerity with which it accepts the suffering. Do we not, like straws, bend in every gust of wind and call it necessity? And when we itch, we scratch our backs, and call it a cross we are bearing. We accept fate as glibly as the morning's headlines, and confuse ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ our breakfast cup of coffee with the chalice of suffering.

About all these phenomena must be much secrecy. If they have not enough of their own, we ~~try~~ try to give them some. I knew a boy from Winthrop House last year whose life was simplicity and innocence incarnate, whose every thought was so lucid and straight-forward that his mind had neither secrets nor mysteries. But Gary, that was his name, Gary also had a longing for mystery and secrecy. He vented it by having secret places in his desk and mysterious sealed and unaddressed envelopes in his files. One weekend he decided to meet his parents in New York, his intentions were not sinister. He longed to make them appear so. He told no one of his plans, got up early one morning, and took a New York train before his roommate awoke. His roommate was in the habit of getting up late.

For myself, I do not need, or I think I do not need external secrecy to veil my actions, thoughts or feelings. Unless they carry their own secrecy within them, they are unworthy of secrecy. How cheap and common our ideas become when we try to hide them! Have you ~~noticed~~ noticed that everything real is incomprehensible and everything true is mysterious and everything which is beautiful carries inseparably with it the secret of its beauty? - *or am I deceiving myself?*

I do not think that you must agree with me in this instance. What I have written is not criticism but explanation, and I hope you will not take it wrongly. All things which demand secrecy, external secrecy to protect them from the common gaze are immature, I think. As a test of the maturity of my words I often ask myself whether I could have everyone I know hear them. Nothing which I have told you, so far as I remember, I could not tell in the presence of a third or a fourth person, not because mine were public thoughts, but because they were so utterly my own that I know no third person will know what to make of them, and sometimes I wonder whether even you know what I mean.

← If not, no harm is done. Whether I speak or write, my thoughts are a source of pride to me. Whatever I pride myself on is vanity; therefore my thoughts are vanity, and what harm is done if you fail to understand my vanities? When I first read your letter, I resolved to skirt the points on which my vanity makes me differ with you. But as such resolutions go, before I finished the second paragraph I was at the heart of what concerned me. Is that an indication of strength or of weakness? I cannot judge. Your concern about Alec's and Margrit's opinion seems immature to me, an attempt to discern the nature of our friendship by noting its effect on other people, the way one studies the outline of a statue by throwing its shadow upon a wall. Yet oftentimes we label each other's actions with the name of our own weaknesses. Perhaps you are wise, and I am immature. I would not hesitate to illuminate the subject with whatever brilliance and color my intellect and my emotions place at my disposal.—I feel that my bluntness, whether it be immaturity or not, must pain you; I know I should be ashamed and frightened of my cruelty. But what can I do? I must say what seems to me true. I can do nothing but take your hand and press it as a gesture of my good will. All the while my hand and my head are disputing the truth of my action; for my hand feels that it is warm and intimate and good, but my head knows that it is false and deceptive and untrue. We must not deceive ourselves about the nature of such actions. If purity of heart is the will to do one thing, namely the good, then confusion about the nature of the good can ~~be the basis~~ only be impurity of heart.

There is much impurity in life. Indeed life may be said to be impurity. Every action has some duality of right and wrong, because knowledge of the truth is not given to us. And even if we had it, we could not act according to its precepts. Knowledge of the truth would destroy us like flowers wilted by the sun. But the impurity, though it is inevitable and necessary, remains none the less. The impurity should be for us a source of suffering, and the suffering shall justify the impurity. God sent us suffering because he loved us so, in order that we might stand before him not just but justified, not pure but purified. The Greeks knew more about ~~the~~ purification through suffering than do we. ~~XXXXXXXX~~ Do you know about Oedipus at Colonus. We have much to learn from him.

It is night now, and all day this letter to you has been on my mind, on my conscience. Perhaps I will feel better about it when I have sent it, yet I wish I did not have to write it at all. Probably I shall have to be patient and wait for your answer to be assured that you have not misunderstood me. When I write like this, the words themselves belie my thoughts.. I write of possible misunderstandings, yet if you really understood me and saw all the weakness, the blackness and the rottenness, you might not even chose to answer. Sometimes I think that everything I do turns into guilt. There is much impurity in life..

I wish I could write you about people and events rather than these sordid thoughts, but they block all mental passages and give me time for nothing else besides work. Work is the only distraction I know. True, there is sleep, but then, too, there are dreams.. In the end, all our thought, all our words, all our letters center about ourselves. If there be anything I say which hurts you, think that I said it of myself, and not of you. But what good were our friendship, if we could not be honest to each other about our thoughts, however wrong they might be..

I should close now, I think. Nothing worthwhile will come of my writing any way, at least not tonight. Outside, the creek is moaning, I pity it for its long journey, and yet I would go with it. Then at least I should be going somewhere.. But for its moaning I have no ears. My ears are all turned inward, and what I hear is such that I would not describe it. My memory goes back to the evenings on Buzzards Rock, or the sunset over the Black Mountains in North Carolina. I think of Rilke's recognition that beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, and we love it so because it serenely disdains to destroy us.

with tenderness and fear,

Good night, then. I think often of you, though I know not quite what to think.. Of the past I think with distrust and of the future with apprehension. But the present is no more than the sound of breath or the substance of a shadow. I wish that it could be more, but I try to be patient.

Good night.

John

P. S. How murey can one get? - without getting stuck?
- if one be a tanner - - -