

Nightmare as Reality: An Existential Analysis of The Trial

Shernaz Cam, Associate Professor, Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi

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Abstract

The 1920s witnessed a World War, the Spanish Flu, and economic disruptions when civilization seemed to be on Trial before an inscrutable destiny. Franz Kafka's world and existential crises came back to life in the 2020s. When 'One day the 'why' arises'... we search for answers because awakening into consciousness becomes awakening into a nightmare of reality. Young people, in particular, are re-reading Kafka and Kierkegaard to hope that the past can provide some answers to us in the present. Our civilization, too, is on Trial today with Climate change, war, and Covid. Will belief and faith, along with the will to act, provide an answer? This paper draws upon various editions of Kafka's *The Trial*, including deleted passages in which Art provided hope but failed to answer. Will a new generation take a leap into faith and create a better world, or will we collapse into despair like Kafka?

Keywords: Consciousness, Nightmare, Guilt, Inaction, Faith

Joseph K., the protagonist of Kafka's novel *The Trial* [1], existed in a state of dream-like unconsciousness until the morning of his thirtieth birthday. He awakens on this special day and, in an unguarded, almost absent-minded state, between sleep and complete awakening, finds himself pitch-forked into a nightmare world. Till that morning, Joseph K. has led a well-regulated life as a respected and responsible member of the banking community. Nothing has been allowed to disturb the unruffled placidity of his existence. However, beneath the stable surface, unrecognized by Joseph K. himself, are elements for which he is "so unprepared" (p.27). These elements rise to the surface of his consciousness and, on his birthday, take him "by surprise." (p. 27). The established order fades and replaces the reality of a world without limits or boundaries. In this Kafkaesque universe, probabilities are replaced by possibilities,[2] and Joseph K. can no longer regulate or explain a chaotic world where law courts exist in attics, bank store rooms become torture chambers, and Darkness is possible in broad daylight.

Joseph K. is lost in this new world. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus describes a similar feeling. "In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger." [3] For Camus, as for Kafka, the age of thirty is significant for it is then that:

It happens that the stage set collapses. Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm... this path is quickly followed most of the time. But one day, the 'why' arises. [4]

However, unlike K. in *The Castle*, Joseph K. is not at first a conscious existential hero deliberately seeking answers. Through his arrest, he is forced into awareness, and it is only later that he deliberately chooses his path and mission. Isolated from the comfortable dream world of his past and aroused into consciousness, Joseph K. needs faith to explain the apparent illogic of the world he has awakened to. Unfortunately, he fails to find faith. This paper attempts to show how in *The Trial*, Kafka depicts an awakening into full consciousness, which, without any trust or faith, becomes an awakening into a nightmare of reality.

The German title of the novel, *Der Prozess*, has a double meaning, for it signifies both Trial and process. The Trial can also be seen as the process of discovering K's Guilt. [5] Guilt preoccupies Kafka in much of his writings. The short story "In The Penal Colony" states, "Guilt is never to be doubted." [6] This idea comes close to the Judaic – Christian concept of Original Sin. However, more personal reasons seem to influence Kafka's sense of Guilt. Georg Bendemann, in another short story, "The Judgment," is guilty of a lack of faith in himself, because of which he commits suicide. Sociological and psychological reasons can be found to explain Kafka's lack of faith and obsession with Guilt. Firstly, Jews in European ghettos of the time were guilty not of committing any crime but just of the very fact of their existence. Secondly, and more personally, Kafka's relationship with his father contributed to a psychological sense of Guilt and fear. In this connection, a passage from the "Letter to His Father" seems closely linked with the beginning of *The Trial*. In the "Letter," Kafka narrates the episode of his whimpering for water at night and being carried outside by his father as a punishment:

Even years afterward, I suffered from the tormenting fancy that the huge man, my father, the ultimate authority, would come almost for no reason at all and take me out of bed...that therefore I was such a mere nothing for him. [7]

Perhaps this unsuccessful relationship with his father colors Kafka's relationship with divine authority. In *The Trial*, Joseph K. struggles toward the Law but lacks confidence in a Divine Father, making him fall short of the enlightenment he seeks. Thus, through his Trial, Joseph K. learns that he is guilty of the sin of unbelief.

Just as in a nightmare, the real and the surreal mingle; in *The Trial*, there are two planes of reality superimposed, one on the other. The world of everyday routine reality and the world of the Court can be seen as two levels of consciousness, both of which exist simultaneously. It is the landlady who realizes that although Joseph K. is under arrest, this procedure also; It gives me the feeling of something very learned...It gives me the feeling of something very abstract that I do not understand. (p. 27)

In German, the term the landlady uses for the arrest is "verhaftung," which means both "arrest" and "in the grip of a thing." Joseph K. is arrested and in the grip of something not ordinarily present. [8] Joseph K. is not accused of any single criminal act, but he is in the grip of something by which his whole life stands under judgment. By eating an apple, the fruit of the tree of knowledge, instead of his breakfast, Joseph K. chooses to explore this abstract sentence. K's subconscious has at first drawn the Law towards him, for as the Warder states: Our officials,.....never go hunting for crime in the populace, but, as the Law decrees, are drawn towards the guilty and must then send out us warders. (p.12)

However, after the initial unconscious attraction, Joseph K., at the time of his arrest, makes a conscious decision to try and reach the Law and arrest and understand his Trial. He rejects suicide as a means out of his dilemma, and thus by choosing to discover his fate K. becomes the conscious existential hero, trying to interpret his life for himself. John Macquarrie says, "Every decision is a decision against as well as decision for," [9] and Joseph K., by deciding to probe further into his Trial, decides against retreating into his earlier unconscious world and will now pursue his new consciousness. By preferring the Court's uncertain summons to the Deputy Manager's invitation to a yachting party, K. deliberately places his existential search above his pleasure or material advantage. The Court itself stresses the existential freedom of choice. The Inspector reiterates that the arrest only serves as "informing" (p.21) Joseph K. about his condition. The Law frees him from continuing his previous life; he may neglect his Trial or concentrate on it - it is his personal choice. The Law has merely brought K. to awareness; from this point, it is K. himself who must be the initiator of further action.

K. decides that his entire Trial can be dealt with in a sensible rational fashion. He will treat the Trial like a business transaction:

This legal action was nothing more than a business deal such as he had often concluded to the advantage of the Bank, a deal within which, as always happened, lurked various dangers which were simply to be obviated. (p. 141)

K. tries to mold the Trial to the rational world he knows, but the world of the Law operates on very different terms, which contradict human reasoning and mock any attempts to impose a meaningful system. The system of the Law is beyond human logic; to understand it, Joseph K. must move beyond his circumscribed vision. K., however, cannot accept on trust a plan behind the apparent chaos and is determined to rationalize his mysterious irrational state of being.

In the early stages of his Trial, K. succeeds in compartmentalizing his routine world and the world of the Law. When his workaday consciousness is in command, unwelcome metaphysical intruders from the depths of his self are quickly dismissed. [10] Joseph K. allows the Law to exercise its authority when his mind is free from his bank work; at night, early in the morning or on Sundays. However, the nature of his bond with the Law is instinctive. Even when K. declares he is looking for Lanz, the Court- attendant's wife immediately recognizes the real purpose of his search. As time passes, K. becomes increasingly concerned about the

identity of the judges; he must know what rules to follow to impress them in his favor. However, there is no further communication from the Court, and the silence of the higher officials drives K. into frenzied activity. This entangles him even further with the mystery. As Seltzer comments, it is as if Joseph K. is condemned finally by his inability to accept an unknown factor as a permanent part of his life. [11] Although he vows to remain detached and objective about his situation, it is psychologically impossible for K. to accept the unknown with equanimity. As his preoccupation with the Court increases, his ability to work at the Bank declines. K, as The Trial progresses, finds the offices of the Court in every part of the city. The warders who had appeared only in the privacy of his bedroom invade the Bank's storerooms, and just as in the nightmare world of the Court, corridors and staircases telescope into each other, similarly his external life telescopes into the world of the Trial until it becomes his sole concern.

While Joseph K. plunges deeper into the nightmare of reality, the others around him are untouched by these disturbing events. At Frau Grubach's Boarding-house the other lodgers can find "no trace of disturbance." (p.32) Unlike K., they are not concerned with finding answers to vexing questions. The Law Court officials, too, are unconcerned with the meeting of the Law. The "crowd" of officials in the Courtroom seems to stress Kierkegaard's belief that "a crowd in its very concept is the untruth." [12] They pretend to study Law books while reading pornographic literature and busy themselves seducing the Court- attendant's wife with silk stockings. Although closer to the Law than Joseph K., unlike him, they have no desire to stand face-to-face with it. Like the villagers and officials in Kafka's The Castle, the "Other" settles for "the blessing of the commonplace" [13], unconcerned with the existential quest for truth. The crowds of accused men who wait outside the Law Courts are also very different from K. They are cowed down by their circumstances and herd together like animals. Having lost whatever individuality they possessed, they are incapable of answering even the most straightforward questions K. directs at them. Although ostensibly their lives are on Trial, they can only be seen as a mass molded together by "the pressure towards uniformity." [14] Only Joseph K. stands outside the general mass of humanity, determined to pursue his quest and find an ultimate answer.

During his search for Higher Officials, Joseph K. constantly feels the need for some external aid. The first person he turns to is a woman Fraulein Burstner. [15] The exact significance of Fraulein Burstner in the nightmare world is never made clear. However, her attitude stresses that K. must learn to take responsibility for his actions. Fraulein Burstner is willing to face all the consequences of her actions and will not allow K. to make excuses for her behavior. As she says;

I can bear the responsibility for anything that happens in my room, no matter who questions it. (p. 37)

Her mature attitude is also seen in her relationship with the Law. The Law has attracted her, and unlike Joseph, K. decides that the best way to remedy her ignorance is by joining the clerical staff in a lawyer's office. In this fashion, she can successfully incorporate the world of

the Law into her daily existence. By thus reconciling the two levels of consciousness, she will be able to succeed in gaining a balanced perspective about the Law. This is unlike Joseph K's behavior, for he has swung from an attitude of not knowing that the Law existed to a total obsession with its meaning. Unfortunately, K. fails to realize the value of what Fraulein Burstner has to teach him and views her only as a means of sensual escape from the unbearable nightmare of reality.

The interview in her room ends with K. behaving "like some thirsty animal lapping greedily at a spring of long-sought fresh water." (p. 37) Repulsed by his sexual advances, Fraulein Burstner avoids K. in the future. Just before his execution, K. catches a glimpse of someone who seems to be Fraulein Burstner and, after seeing her, gives up all thoughts of resistance and follows his captors to his death. It is as if K. remembers the hope of reconciliation between the two worlds she had offered at the beginning of the Trial and realizes his Guilt in wantonly rejecting the path she tried to show him.

Leni and the Court-attendant's wife are the two other women to whom K. turns for aid, but both women actually offer only sensual gratification. The Court-attendant's wife seems to share her favors impartially with many members of the Court, and Leni finds particular pleasure in distracting accused men from their concerns. Both these women belong to the world of the Court, and Leni urges K. to bow to the inevitable and give up a search for answers. K's relationship with Elsa, his "sweetheart," is portrayed only sensually. Although he carries her photograph on his person, he visits her only once a week when she "received her visitors in bed" (p.24). However, K's sensual encounters cannot distract him from his primary purpose for long. Even as he finds temporary solace with Leni, he realizes his need for other help in successfully fighting his case.

Joseph K. now seeks academic assistance. His Uncle Karl, hearing about the case, comes to town to try and discover the true nature of the charge and is shocked to find that K's "clear brain" (p.108) seems to be failing him. He convinces K. that proper intellectual advice is essential for fighting the case and chooses Huld, the Advocate, as K's legal advisor. However, the Darkness of Huld's house and his illness and bedridden condition reveal the intellect's impotence in such a trial. Huld re-emphasizes the existential emphasis on personal responsibility and tells K. that the Court will not recognize a Counsel for the defendant, for it bars lawyers from all official proceedings. In the Trial, K. must face the Court alone. However, paradoxically, Huld also insists that K. must follow his advice. He displays the power he holds over the accused through his treatment of Block, his other client:

The client finally forgot the whole world and lived only in the hope of toiling along this false path until the end of his case should come into sight. The client ceased to be a client and became the Advocate's dog. (p. 214)

K. realizes that Huld's advice is worthless because every point has endless qualifications. Hence, it becomes impossible to start on a course of action. [16] The only concrete suggestion Huld offers is that K. should do nothing but wait. In The Trial, Huld seems to be the image of temporal authorities attempting jurisdiction over life and trying to substitute

themselves for the unattainable Law beyond. [17] K's questions go beyond the temporal and intellectual; hence, Huld cannot help him solve his case. No spiritual enlightenment has penetrated the Darkness of the Advocate's rooms, and K. rejects Huld and looks for other answers.

The senses and the intellect having failed to provide solutions, K. now turns to the artist's creative world, hoping to understand through him the working of the Court. Torelli, who embodies the creative imagination, sees deep into the nature of the Court because of his creative powers. The artistic approach to the problem involves K's emotions and intellect. [18] Huld had merely described the official channels of application; Titorelli gives K. a larger view of the Court. Although Titorelli belongs to the Court, he has a certain artistic detachment that enables him to study the Court very clearly. According to him, there are three possibilities in any case, "definite acquittal, ostensible acquittal, and indefinite postponement." (p.169)

Definite acquittal existed only in legends, and K. immediately rejects this, for he does not have faith in such stories. Ostensible acquittal allows the defendant to continue living under the threat of new arrest, while postponement allows one to defer payment of punishment in this world. These are the methods of the Courts of this world, but even Titorelli has not glimpsed the unknown Highest Court and cannot explain its mysteries. Though the creative power of the artist can help K. to see his situation more clearly, it cannot offer any proper solution, nor can it guide him to faith. Its limitations are stressed by the fact that Titorelli can only paint idealized portraits of the judges and heathscapes, all of which turn out to be identical. After realizing Titorelli's limitations, K. has exhausted all possibilities except the religious. The priest in the Cathedral seems to be the only source of enlightenment K. has left unexplored.

At the Cathedral, Joseph K. finds Darkness rapidly closing in upon him as he moves away towards the door; the priest, who has been silent till then, suddenly calls out his name. It is at this moment that K. makes one more existential decision:

For the moment, he was still free; he could continue on his way....It would simply indicate that he had not understood the call or understood it and did not care. However, if he were to turn round, he would be caught, for that would amount to an admission that he had understood it very well, that he was the person addressed, and that he was ready to obey. (pp. 230-31)

When K. turns back to the priest, it is with the realization that this is the only solution left for him to consider. The priest advises him to look within himself for help instead of casting about for outside aid. This is the advice offered at the beginning of the Trial by the warders and the Inspector, but the warders are callous and the Inspector uncaring; the priest is profoundly concerned and wants K. to see the truth. His anger at K's blindness can feel the priest's involvement:

'Can't you see anything at all?' It was an angry cry but simultaneously sounded like the involuntary shriek of one who sees another fall and is startled out of himself. (p. 233)

The priest finally resorts to a parable to make Joseph K. understand the truth. In the dark church, there is a gleam of light for a few minutes, but even as the priest speaks, the verger begins to put out the candles on the high altar. This glimmering and then fading of light is symbolic of K's state of consciousness. For a short while, it seems as if there is a hope of salvation, but the light fades for K. cannot overcome his disbelief, and Darkness descends. [19]

In The Trial Titorelli and the others, K. approaches firmly believe that the Highest Court is "quite inaccessible to you, to me, and to all of us" (p. 175). Torelli is not concerned with "The prospects.....up there" (p. 175), but from the beginning of his case, K. seeks in the Law, some indestructible element that will dismiss his nightmare and explain the chaotic illogic of the world. K's spiritual search is identical to the man's search in the parable. However, K. and the man, like their creator Kafka seem to suffer from "the fear of all faith," [20] which prevents a final movement to belief.

Like K., the man in the parable longs for understanding and an entrance to the Law. However, he is cowed down by the doorkeeper, who refuses entrance to the open door, which leads to the Law. The doorkeeper, however, cannot prevent the man from entering if he tries to do so, and it is the man's fear of unknown danger keeps him outside. Although the man's desire for the Law is excellent, his fear is more significant. When the doorkeeper warns him of the risk involved in entering, the man decides not to take that risk but to wait for permission to enter. [21]

He waits in vain for the permission never come. Years pass, and the man's vision narrows to the fleas in the doorkeeper's coat. The world around him finally starts to darken, but just before his death, the man from the country glimpses the salvation that lay beyond the barrier for "a radiance (that) streams immortally from the door of the Law." (p. 236) At this stage, he finally questions why he waited at the door. The doorkeeper now reveals that the door was meant only for the man from the country. He had the right to enter as soon as he realized that the door was meant for his salvation. The doorkeeper could only bar the way if the man believed he needed another's permission to enter. The man finally learns the truth that each man must take upon himself the responsibility of entering the door. If he had trusted the Law, it would have given him faith strong enough to let him conquer his fear of entering an unknown realm of consciousness. However, the man from the country understood the truth too late for action. The parable shows that the timing for understanding the truth is critical. Entrance into the Law is possible only at a definite unique moment, which can never be recaptured. [22] The man from the country faced an existential decision about entering. The necessity of making a choice was given to the man, and his fear of the inner doorkeepers determined his future existence. By choosing not to take that leap into the unknown beyond the door, the man prevented himself from reaching true meaning. Enlightenment lay in his grasp but fear enslaved the man to a meaningless existence outside the door.

Joseph K's death echoes the parable. On the eve of his thirty-first birthday, the warders come to lead K. to his execution. Even as the knife comes before him, a final ray of hope appears:

With a flicker as of a light going up, the casements of a window there suddenly flew open,.....a human figure...leaned abruptly forward and stretched both arms still furtherWas help at hand? (p.250)

K. is at the very nadir of his existence. All human possibilities have been exhausted and it is at this moment of complete despair that knowledge of the Divine suddenly seems possible. [23] For Kierkegaard man must believe by virtue of the absurd,[24] and K. has reached that point where hope would seem absurd. However, Kierkegaard says, "with god, all things are possible." [25] If K. can still believe, he can accept that man's knowledge and experience is incomplete and fragmentary,[26] a Divine mind alone can order his nightmare; only then can there be some meaning possible at the end. Man's life is a nightmare because there are mysterious forces beyond, which he can neither control nor save himself from. [27] If K. could make that leap into faith and accept a more excellent plan beyond his limited view, the nightmare would end in meaning.

Kafka had not studied Kierkegaard when he wrote *The Trial*, but both writers faced similar doubts and problems in their lives. As Kafka wrote of Kierkegaard:

He is on the same side of the world. He bears me out like a friend. [28]

However, unlike Kierkegaard, Kafka could not make the final leap into faith. Later Kafka wrote to Oskar Baun that Kierkegaard's territory "is almost inaccessible to me." [29] Kafka could not reconcile himself with either an earthly or a Heavenly Father, and Joseph K's faith, like the man's faith in the parable, wavers till it is too late. K. does ultimately seek divine assistance:

He raised his hands and spread out all his fingers (p. 251)

However, the delay has been fatal, for the knife has already entered. Thus Joseph K. dies without understanding either his life or his *Trial*. It is this lack of understanding which makes the end shameful for him. Without enlightenment, in despair and incomprehension, Joseph K. dies "like a dog." (p. 251)

After the process of his *Trial*, Joseph K is condemned to a shameful end because he dies guilty of the sin of unbelief. If he had believed, a pattern would have perhaps emerged, and the nightmare faded into insignificance before the radiance of divine enlightenment.

Endnotes

Franz Kafka, (1925), *The Trial*, epilogue by Max Brod. Rpt. 1983, Harmondsworth: Penguin. All references to the novel and page numbers follow the quoted passage in the text.

Alvin J. Seltzer, (1974), *Chaos in the Novel: The Novel in Chaos*, New York: Schocken Books, 141

Albert Camus, (1942), *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien, (1981), Harmondsworth: Penguin,13.

Camus, 19.

Walter H. Sokel, "The Programme of K's Court: Oedipal and Existential Meanings of The Trial" in Franz Kuna ed., (1976), *On Kafka: Semi-Centenary Perspectives*, London: Paul Elek, 4.

Franz Kafka, "In the Penal Colony," in Nahum N. Glatzer ed., (1983), *The Penguin Complete Short Stories of Franz Kafka*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 145.

Franz Kafka, "Letter to His Father" in Franz Kafka, (1976), London: Secker and Warburg & Octopus, 559.

Franz Kuna, (1974), *Kafka: Literature As Corrective Punishment*, London: Paul Elek, 112.

John Macquarrie, (1973), *Existentialism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 142.

[10] Martin Greenberg, (1971), *The Terror of Art: Kafka and Modern Literature*, London: Andre Deutsch, 119.

[11] Seltzer, 144.

[12] Kierkegaard, quoted in Macquarrie, 89.

[13] Thomas Mann, "Homage," in Franz Kafka, (1926), *The Castle*. Rpt. (1969), New York: Modern Library, xiv.

[14] Macquarrie, 92

[15] Throughout his life, Kafka was haunted by the thought of his broken engagement with Felice Bauer. Felice appears as Freida in *The Castle*, Frieda Brandendfeld in "The Judgment," and Fraulein Burstner in *The Trial*. Erich Heller, *Kafka*, (1974), Glasgow: Fontana/ Collins, 98-99, says that Felice represented for Kafka the good life to be attained by "marrying, founding a family, accepting all the children that come." Although their relationship was broken off, "F.B." represented something significant in Kafka's life, just as Fraulein Burstner is very important to Joseph K. However, the exact significance of "F.B." is never made clear in Kafka's story.

[16] Seltzer, 145.

[17] Wilhelm Emrich, (1968), *Franz Kafka: A Critical Study of His Writings*, trans. Sheema Zaben Buchne, New York: Fredrick Ungar Pub. Co, 347.

[18] In a Deleted passage, the significance of Titorelli is made more explicit. Torelli guides K. to the light, arouses his emotions, and gives him the power of vision. There is a rebirth where K. casts off his old garments and moves to a new consciousness:

"Titorelli.....clasped K. and drew him along....Instantly they were in the Courthouse and were speeding over the stairway.....buoyantly like a light craft over the water. Moreover, as K. noticed his feet, concluding that this beautiful mode of motion could not be related to his hitherto mediocre life, that very instant, above his bowed head, the transformation took place. The light that until now had come from behind them shifted and suddenly streamed dazzling from in front of them."

Franz Kafka, *The Trial* trans. Willa & Edwin Muir, rev. E.M. Butler, (1956), New York: Modern Library, 308-309. Here Titorelli becomes the symbol of the artist leading man to intuitive and aesthetically spellbinding enlightenment.

[19] Deleted passage; Willa & Edwin Muir ed., *The Trial*, 324-25. Here K. himself puts out the lamp and plunges himself into Darkness. "He tried to turn the lamp down and it went out Darkness, nothing but Darkness had flown towards him from all sides..... "It is so dark everywhere," said K., putting his hand over his eyes as if they were aching from the strain of finding his way about."

[20] Kafka, Letter to Milena, quoted in Greenberg, 19.

[21] Greenberg, 141.

[22] Sokel in Kuna ed.,15.

[23] Louis Mackey, "Soren Kierkegaard: The Poetry of Inwardness," in George Alfred Schrader Jr., ed., (1967), *Existential Philosophers: Kierkegaard to Merleau-Ponty*, New York: McGraw Hill, 76.

[24] Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie, (1941). Rpt. (1974), Princeton, N. Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 46.

[25] Kierkegaard, 173.

[26] Macquarrie, 1.

[27] Seltzer, 150.

[28] Diary entry; 21st August 1913. At this stage, Kafka had not read Kierkegaard's chief works. There were read by him only at the end of 1917-beginning 1918. The reference to Kierkegaard is made here to the Book of The Judge. Emrich, 516 tells us that Kafka was concerned with Kierkegaard's position on the question of marriage at this time. However, from Kafka's statement, we can see the close links between the thought processes of the two men on a wide variety of issues and can trace a similarity in their quest for answers.

Franz Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, ed. Max Brod, (1975), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 230.

[29] Letter to Oskar Baum, Oct/ Nov 1917. Franz Kafka, *Franz Kafka: Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, trans. Richard & Clara Winston, (1978), London: John Calder, 162.