

Letters to Hedwig W.

translated by Richard and Clara Winston

1907

one

To Hedwig W. [Prague, early September 1907]

In spite of everything, my dear, your letter has come late. You thoroughly thought over what you wrote. I had no way of forcing it to come earlier, not by sitting up in bed at night, not by sleeping in my clothes on the sofa and coming home more often than was proper during the day. Until this evening when I stopped all that and felt a desire to write to you, but first I was fussing with some papers in a pigeonhole and found your letter there. It had come earlier, but someone while dusting had taken the precaution of putting the letter into the pigeonhole.

I said that writing a letter is like splashing in the water by the shore, but I did not say the splashing could be heard.

44 And now sit down and read quietly and let me, instead of my script, look into your eyes.

Imagine that A receives letter after letter from X, and in each one X tries to refute the existence of A. He builds his case with ever-mounting force, using complicated arguments, dark in color, to such a point that A feels almost walled in, and even feels particularly aggrieved, to the point of tears, by the gaps in the arguments. At first all of X's intentions are masked; he merely says he thinks A is quite unhappy, that he has this impression, but knows nothing about the details of the matter; what is more, he comforts A. However, he goes on, if that were so it would not be surprising, because A is a dissatisfied person, as Y and Z well know—says X. After all, it might be admitted that he has cause for his dissatisfaction; just look at him, look at his situation, and there seems no reason to contradict—says X. In fact, if you observe his situation closely you would be forced to say that A is not dissatisfied enough, for if he were to examine his predicament as thoroughly as X is doing, he could not go on living. At this point X is no longer offering consolations. And A sees, sees with open eyes, that X is the best person in the world, and yet he writes me letters of this tenor, so what for God's sake can he want but to kill me? How good he is even at the last moment, since he tries not to betray himself,

in order to spare me grief, but he forgets that a light once lit sheds its illumination indiscriminately.

What is the sentence from *Niels Lyhne* supposed to mean, and the sand without the castle of happiness. Of course the sentence is right, but would not one who speaks of flowing sand be right? But the person who sees the sand running is not in the castle; and where is the sand flowing to?

What am I to do now? How am I going to keep myself in one piece? I am in Triesch also, am walking across the square with you; someone falls in love with me, I receive this letter, read it, hardly understand it. Now I must bid goodbye, I hold your hand, run away, and disappear in the direction of the bridge. Oh please, it's enough.

I bought nothing in Prague for you because from October 1 on I shall probably be in Vienna.

Forgive me.

Yours, Franz K.

two

45

To Hedwig W. [Prague, September 8, 1907]

Dearest,

They have taken away my ink and are already asleep. Permit the pencil to write to you, so that everything I possess has some share in you. If only you were here in this empty room in which only two flies against the window are making noise, I could be close to you and lay my neck against yours.

But as it is I am unhappy to the point of confusion. A few minor ailments, a little fever, a little frustrated expectation put me to bed for two days, so I wrote a dainty fever-letter to you, but then on this fine Sunday I tore it up, leaning over the windowsill. For, my poor dear, you have enough agitation. You wept for many hours in the night, didn't you, while I ran around the streets by starlight to prepare everything for you (by day I had to study); in the end it doesn't matter whether people live a street away from each other or a province. How different everything around us was. There I was self-assuredly standing at the railroad station Thursday morning, and then again Thursday afternoon (the

train does not come at half past two, but at three, and was fifteen minutes late) and you were trembling in Triesch and then you wrote that letter that I received on Friday, whereupon I could think of nothing better to do than to go to bed. It isn't bad, for without sitting up I can see the Belvedere and green slopes from my pillow.

In the end all that has happened is that we have danced a quadrille between Prague and Vienna, one of those figures in which couples bow so much they do not come together, no matter how much they want to. But sooner or later the round dances must come too.

I do not feel at all well. I do not know what will happen. If I get up early and see a fine day in the offing, it's bearable, but later—

I close my eyes and kiss you.

Yours, Franz

three

To Hedwig W. [Prague, probably November 1907]
Dear girl,
Forgive me for not having answered you right off, but I still have not developed the technique for making good use of my few hours; midnight comes apace, as now. Don't think the beautiful weather has driven you out of my mind; it only drives out the pen, love. But I'll answer all your questions.

I can't say whether I am going to be transferred soon and far away; hardly before a year is out. Best of all would be to be transferred right out of the firm. That isn't altogether impossible. I don't complain about the work so much as about the sluggishness of swampy time. The office hours, you see, cannot be divided up; even in the last half hour I feel the pressure of the eight hours just as much as in the first. Often it is like a train ride lasting night and day, until in the end you're totally crushed; you no longer think about the straining of the engine, or about the hilly or flat countryside, but ascribe all that's happening to your watch alone, which you continually hold in your palm.

I am learning Italian, for I shall probably be sent to Trieste first.

During my first few days I must have presented a most pathetic sight to anyone alert to such matters. Whatever it's actually been, I felt declassed; people who have not lazed away at least part of their time up to their twenty-fifth year are greatly to be pitied, for it's my belief that it's not the money you have earned that you take with you into your grave, but your idle time.

I am at the office at eight o'clock, leave at half past six.

Cheerful people without inner complications? All people in this sort of work are like that. The springboard for their cheerfulness is the last moment in the office; unfortunately, it's just such people I don't associate with.

Erotes will soon be published under the title of *The Path of a Lover*, but without my title page, which has proved not reproduceable.

What you write about the young writer is interesting, but you exaggerate the points of similarity. I merely try casually and in a hit-and-miss way to dress well; but many people in many countries have already become adept at that; they take care of their nails, and some even use fingernail polish. If he speaks French beautifully, that is in itself one significant difference between us; and that he is able to see you is a damnable difference.

I have read the poem, and since you give me leave to judge it I can say that there is much pride in it, but unfortunately pride that walks very much alone. On the whole it seems to me a childlike and therefore endearing expression of admiration for admirable contemporaries. Voilà. But all too sensitive to the balance of a scales you are holding in your dear hands, I am sending along a poor trifle, perhaps a year old, which he can judge under the same terms (you won't mention any names, or offer any other clue, will you?). It will give me great pleasure if he thoroughly ridicules me. Then send the page back to me, as I am doing with his.

Now I have answered everything and more; it's time for me to assert my rights. What you write about yourself is as unclear as it must be to you also. Am I to blame for their tormenting you, or are you tormenting yourself and the others merely not giving you help? "A man I find very likable," "both should have made concessions." All that I can visualize of that huge and blurred city of Vienna is you alone, and I cannot help you at all now, so it seems. May I not close this letter while the clock is dismally striking one?

Yours,

Franz