

Review of Kafka's Other Trial

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The first woman Franz Kafka considered marrying was known for years by the initial F. Then, in 1960, 4-3 years after Kafka's death, F. sold the letters he wrote to her and the rest of us were pleased to learn her name: Felice Bauer. In 1964 a small book entitled Kafka's Other Trial appeared. It was written by Elias Canetti, author of the celebrated Auto-de-Fe. Mr. Canetti's book makes no claim to definit veness, not even comprehensiveness. Indeed it is a mere essay of little over 100 pages exclusively devoted to the Felice correspon dence. But in those few pages it does what good literary biography ought to do: reveal the connection between the life and the writerly perceptions of the author--What it is a writer can and does do with the shards of life -- the commonplace.

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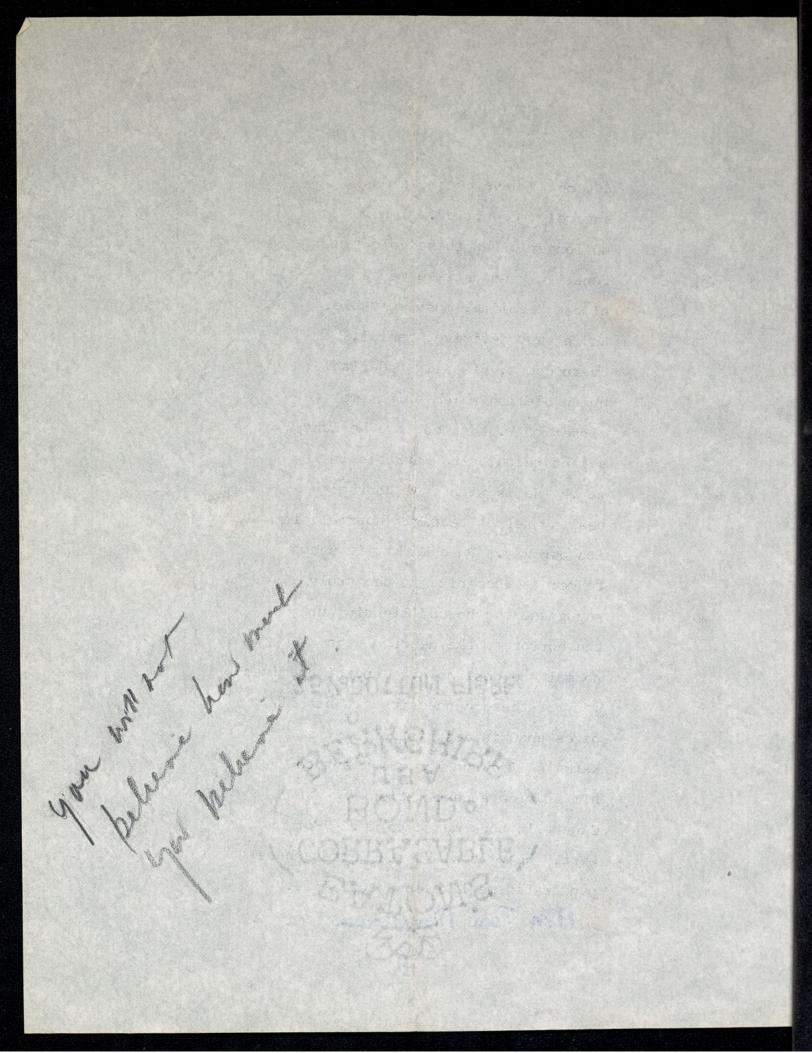
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how an ordinary courtship becomes extraordinary literature by a writer's perception of it; how a tedious engagement broken off in public in a Berlin hotel becomes the Trial. But especially the humor that splices Kafka's work like sunlight dappling a head stone. And it is this attention to humor that sets Mr. Canettis' book apart, just as it is humor that civilizes Kafka's nightmares. Example: during a particularly fragught period of his affair with Felice, Kafka learned that she had had her mouth filled "almost entirely with gold capped teeth." "To tell the truth," writes Kafka,"this gleaming gold ... so scared me at first that I had to lower my eyes at the sight of F.s teeth. After a time, whenver I could, I glanced at it on purpose to torment myself, and finaly to convince myself that all this is really true.

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But now I have become almost entirely reconciled. I now no longer wish these gold teeth gone, they now strike me as almost becoming, most suitable, and a very definite, genial, everpresent, visually undeniable, human blemish which brings me closer to F. than could a healthy set of teeth, also horrible in its way." He is right, of course; a healthy set of teeth is horrible in its own way. Pure Kafka, it seems to me: to recognize in the truly repugnant the beacon lighting up the horror at the heart of the normal and desirable. Canetti examines many of these connections in his 117 pages and his description of what Kafka's life and letters meant to him is also a description of what Canetti's book meant to me. "For my part," he writes, "these letters have penetrated me like an actual life."

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