

# Freud and the Tragic Virtues

WALTER KAUFMANN

**F**REUD, EVEN MORE THAN LINCOLN, might well be called the Great Emancipator. Like no man before him, he lent substance to the notion that all men are brothers. Criminals and madmen are not devils in disguise, but men and women who have problems similar to our own; and there, but for one experience or another, go you and I.

Without any wish to do so, Freud also confirmed many millions in the comfortable notion that the great are really no different from the small; indeed, that there are no great men. To be sure, there are great scientists and people who achieve great things. Ideas, theories and engineering feats are readily called great; discoveries and exploits—successes, in one word—are great; but human beings are supposed to be essentially alike, and it is considered unsophisticated and undemocratic to suppose that a man, instead of merely *doing* something great, *is* great, regardless of success or failure.

A hundred and fifty years ago, Hegel, the philosopher, and Goethe, the poet, remarked that no man is a hero to his valet—not because there are no heroes, but because valets are valets. Now that few valets are left and the intimate failings of men of distinction have become the business of the psychoanalysts, one may well ask whether this quip fits *them*, or whether there really are no heroes.

Freud himself believed in great men. But before considering his attitude, it may be well to lend more substance to the notion

❶ WALTER KAUFMANN, an associate professor of philosophy at Princeton University, is the author of *Critique of Religion and Philosophy, From Shakespeare to Existentialism* and *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, and editor of *The Portable Nietzsche* and *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*.

This article is from Mr. Kaufmann's forthcoming book, *The Faith of a Heretic*, to be published next year by Doubleday.

of the human being who is great apart from any success—in fact, great in failure. There is a form of literature that is specifically dedicated to such greatness: tragedy. Tragic heroes fail by definition, but the tragedy depends on the conviction that the hero in his failure is still—indeed, more than ever—nobler than the rest of us. In Shakespeare's two greatest tragedies, *Hamlet* and *Lear*, the hero neither has done nor does anything that raises him above most men; and yet there is somehow the presumption, quite unwarranted by their accomplishments, that *Lear* and *Hamlet* are superior, particularly when they are about to die.

English literature since Shakespeare has been a variety of escapes from tragedy. For three hundred years after Shakespeare, not a single great tragedy was written in English. The major poets shut their eyes to the terrors of existence and took refuge in contrivance: the metaphysical poets contrived "conceits," and Milton, Blake and Yeats, mythologies. One did not make a fuss about one's pains—not until the romantics came along and contrived a special language for such themes, worlds removed from the spontaneous power of Shakespearean outbursts of emotion.

Shakespeare had no heirs in England. His wit, which suggests the writer's emergence from the abyss rather than an escape from the brink, was taken up by Goethe and Heine, by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and by Gide. In British literature, wit became cleverness and part of the refusal to dwell on the tragic. One knows those things exist, but one doesn't make a point of them.

In the United States one did not have to be quite so genteel during the first hundred years, but there was no stage. Melville's Captain Ahab is a tragic hero even so, and the influence of Shakespeare is writ large all over *Moby Dick*. Again, the author's feeling for his hero is not warranted by any great accomplishment but lavished on a character who is outstanding in his uncompromising courage, his defiant obstinacy and his proud contempt for popularity.

It is not the fault of the psychologists that many college teachers are no longer sure that Ahab is the hero of the book—he lacks love, and some teachers are not comfortable in his presence—and some critics even argue that the fact that Ishmael survives may

show that he, having learned love, is the real hero. By the same token, Hamlet may yet be dismissed, and Horatio may be called the real hero.

It is partly the American infatuation with success that stands in the way of our having tragedies. It is well known that the Puritans closed the British theaters; it is less well understood that Calvin's ethos dealt tragedy a much more lasting blow by preaching success and lack of sympathy for failure. Our whole attitude toward greatness, our view of man, and our moral outlook have become quite different since Shakespeare's time—even since Freud's.

Freud still had a sense for tragedy and admired nobility far above success. Late in life, he wrote, in a letter to Arnold Zweig, the novelist, speaking of Nietzsche: "In my youth he signified a nobility which I could not attain. A friend of mine, Dr. Paneth, had got to know him . . . and he used to write me a lot about him." As it happens, we know what Paneth wrote his fiancée about Nietzsche, and we have no reason for doubting that it was the following sort of thing that struck Freud as inimitably noble:

"There is not a trace of false pathos or the prophet's pose in him, as I had rather feared after his last work [*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*]. Instead his manner is completely inoffensive and natural. . . . He told me, but without the least affectation or conceit, that he always felt himself to have a task and that now, as far as his eyes [half-blind] would permit it, he wanted to get out of himself and work up whatever might be in him. . . . He told me that through his physical pains [which were almost constant] he had got rid of his pessimism—from defiance, in order not to let himself be tyrannized by pain. . . . There are many contradictions in Nietzsche, but he is a thoroughly honest human being, full of the most powerful strength of will and striving. . . . He is completely convinced of his mission and of his decisive importance. In this faith he is strong and superior to all misfortune, physical suffering, and poverty. Such a contempt for all instruments of success, such freedom from all that smacks of cliques and advertising, is impressive."

Early in 1884, when these letters were written and Freud, then

in his twenties, thrilled to Nietzsche's unattainable nobility, Nietzsche was in no sense whatsoever a success. Pleading his ill health, he had resigned his professorship at Basel, Switzerland, while still in his thirties, and he was publishing a book a year without creating any stir at all.

Much later, long after Nietzsche's death, Freud, according to Ernest Jones's biography, "several times said of Nietzsche that he had a more penetrating knowledge of himself than any other man who ever lived or was ever likely to live." Freud also remarked in print that Nietzsche's "premonitions and insights often agree in the most amazing manner with the laborious results of psychoanalysis." He immediately added: "I have long avoided him for this very reason. After all, I was less concerned about any priority than about the preservation of my open-mindedness." But the image of Nietzsche evoked in Dr. Paneth's letters seems to have exerted a formative influence on the young Freud, who soon developed the same qualities.

Freud, like Nietzsche, defied the indifference, hostility and smug complacency of those who ridiculed him or ignored him without reading him. Both also defied a rarely rivaled crescendo of agonies, devoting themselves to their work as long as any strength at all was left them. They prized courage above pleasure, honesty above popularity, and integrity above success. Neither of them expected or desired the least reward. There was something stoic about both of them, especially about their attitude toward pain; but on occasion both displayed the passion of the prophets, and Nietzsche's modesty and never failing kindness in his personal relations with the simple people among whom he lived in Switzerland and Italy while writing, his vitriolic wit, and Freud's usually less acid humor and his warm affection for his children and grandchildren are remote from stoicism.

Biographies of Freud are now beginning to abound. Even if it were only on account of its massive documentation, Ernest Jones's three-volume *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* would dominate the field. Moreover, Jones, until his recent death the dean of British psychoanalysts, was very close to Freud for over thirty years before he saved Freud's life in 1938 by getting him

out of Austria soon after the Nazis entered Vienna. Based on intimate knowledge of Freud's personality, his works, his letters, unpublished material and the whole literature about him, Jones's work is unquestionably our best source for Freud's life and character.

Jones's psychoanalytic interpretations of Freud's character are, ironically, the feeblest part of his work. When he tries to explain Freud's genius at the end of Volume 2, he becomes ridiculous:

"There was his half-brother Philipp . . . whom he suspected of being his mother's mate and whom he tearfully begged not to make his mother again pregnant. Could one trust such a man, who evidently knew all the secrets, to tell the truth about them? It would be a curious trick of fate if this insignificant little man—he is said to have ended up as a peddler—has through his mere existence proved to have fortuitously struck the spark that lit the future Freud's determination to trust himself alone, to resist the impulse to believe in others more than in himself, and in that way to make imperishable the name of Freud."

Thus ends Volume 2. But when Jones forgets about such attempts at explanation and records the story of Freud's sixteen years of cancer, how he suffered thirty-three facial operations, was in almost constant pain, but worked, remaining dedicated and humane until the end, and when Jones quotes Freud's own remarks and letters, then we feel that we are face to face with greatness. No success could possibly command as much respect as the old seeker's fortitude and honesty, his mixture of humility and pride, his contempt for "the hubbub on all sides of a popularity that I find repellent," and the unique way in which he blended heroism and nobility with warmth and humor. If all his theories were wrong, one feels, he would still be one of the great men of all time, one of the few who made themselves into enduring images of humanity.

Oddly perhaps, Freud's greatness emerges most clearly when the attitude of his biographer is, as it were, pre-Freudian. Unquestionably, one way of communicating greatness is to let a man's life, actions and words speak for themselves, resisting any impulse to explain.

A fine example of an effort of this sort is Norman Malcolm's *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*. Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was one of the most influential philosophers of modern times and the man chiefly responsible for what has recently been called a "revolution in philosophy." Indeed, he had something to do with two revolutions in philosophy, seeing that he influenced the so-called Vienna Circle of the original Logical Positivists after World War I, and then, later, the development of analytic philosophy or, as it is often called, "ordinary language philosophy" which, after World War II, spread from Cambridge and Oxford to the United States. His pupil and first successor to his chair at Cambridge, Georg Henrik von Wright, says in his "Biographical Sketch," which prefaces Malcolm's memoir: "It is probably true that he lived on the border of mental illness. A fear of being driven across it followed him throughout his life." But neither he nor Malcolm tries his hand at amateur psychology. Both consider Wittgenstein a hero and let the facts and some of his remarks in conversation and some of his letters speak for themselves.

There is no effort to omit what might put Wittgenstein into a dubious light. Malcolm tells of the man whom he remembers—a man who was not comfortable company, a man much too intense for comfort, a man sometimes clearly in the wrong—a man who struck the writer as more memorable, noble, haunting than the other men and women he has met. Without any attempt at explanation, he allows us to encounter a great man.

This, it may be objected, is a pre-Freudian approach, now dated and no longer honest. We today, it may be said, cannot in candor stop short with a mere description. Freud himself, to be sure, might not have agreed with this objection. In the very letter in which he told Arnold Zweig how Nietzsche had once signified for him "a nobility which I could not attain" (Jones, III, 459f.), Freud expresses serious doubts about Zweig's plan to write a book on Nietzsche and, in general, about the possibility of reconstructing and unraveling his psychical processes and motives. But perhaps we must at this point go beyond Freud, taking full advantage of his work and that of his successors.

That is the aim of Erich Fromm, one of America's most popu-

lar psychoanalysts and social psychologists, both in his earlier, more scholarly books and in his recent tracts *The Art of Loving* and *Sigmund Freud's Mission*. Fromm certainly is a master of titles, but these two book titles are a bit misleading, and the central aim of the second book is really to "explain" Freud by laying bare, as Fromm says on the first page, "the driving forces in him which made him act, think and feel in the particular way he did." In ten chapters of about ten pages each, Fromm, with confident assurance, reveals all—or all that fits his theses.

Like many another critic of Freud, Fromm argues that the master was a little simple-minded, that he tried mistakenly to explain everything in terms of sex, and that he overlooked the vast importance of cultural differences. We gather that in our time and culture, sex and other such unedifying matters are not so important as the master thought, and that what we today need is some good, old-fashioned preaching—for example, on *The Art of Loving*.

Nietzsche, to whom the early Fromm owed a great deal, said in his *Genealogy of Morals*—and Freud would surely have agreed whole-heartedly:

"Why stroke the hypersensitive ears of our modern weaklings? Why yield even a single step . . . to the Tartuffery of words? For us psychologists that would involve a Tartuffery of *action*. . . . For a psychologist today shows his good taste (others may say his integrity) in this, if in anything, that he resists the shamefully *moralized* manner of speaking which makes all modern judgments about men and things slimy."

This quotation throws much more light on Freud's attitude toward Jung and Adler and some other men who broke with him, and toward Breuer, with whom he broke, than does Fromm's claim that Freud's "pride made him repress the awareness of dependency and negate it completely by breaking off the friendship when the friend failed in the complete fulfillment of the motherly role." In this context, Fromm, who had been harsh on Jung to the point of unfairness in a previous book (*Psychoanalysis and Religion*), soft-pedals his own objections to Jung. And regarding Breuer, Fromm quotes from Jones what he likes but stops quoting before

Jones adds, on the very same page, that Breuer "had certain characteristics which were particularly antipathetic to Freud's nature. One was a weakness in his personality that made it hard for him ever to take a definite stand on any question. The other was a pettifogging kind of censoriousness which would induce him to mar any appreciation or praise by searching out a small point open to criticism—an attitude very alien to Freud's open-hearted and generous spirit" (Jones, I, 255).

"Freud's Passion for Truth and His Courage" are acknowledged in Fromm's first chapter—and explained: "He was a very insecure person, easily feeling threatened, persecuted, betrayed, and hence . . . with a great desire for certainty." Indeed, "He had to conquer the world intellectually if he wanted to be relieved of doubt and the feeling of failure." It was really a weakness "related to his position as the undisputed favorite son of his mother." Yes, he was really a mother's boy and never outgrew "the deep-seated receptive wish to be nursed." And "to account for his passion for truth, we must point to a negative element in his character, his lack of emotional warmth, closeness, love, and beyond that, enjoyment of life."

Freud certainly lacked many things, but *this* "negative element" is Fromm's invention, based on utter disregard for ample evidence. Nor is there any place in Fromm's portrait for Freud's heart-warming sense of humor, evident both in his writings and in scores of letters and remarks quoted by Jones. Fromm quotes only one mildly humorous remark—and fails to recognize its humor. He informs us that Freud once frankly admitted his "lack of understanding of women . . . when he said in a conversation: 'The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is what does a woman want?' [*Was will das Weib?*]" Fromm does not mention that Freud said this to a woman who was also one of his most devoted friends and followers.

With *one* of Freud's closest disciples, Ferenczi, who toward the end of his life developed a non-Freudian approach, Fromm sides passionately against Freud, but simply ignores all the evidence that does not fit his claims; for example, Freud's deeply humane, de-

tailed and humorous letter to Ferenczi about their differences (Jones, III, 163-5). Lots of other letters, too, show clearly that Freud was not so stubborn and authoritarian as Fromm pictures him; but some degree of obstinacy is, no doubt, a necessary element of greatness. Fromm sees the steel but not the velvet, the sternness but none of the humor, and offers us a caricature, gerrymandered from the three big volumes of the Jones biography and a couple of other books.

Fromm tells us that Freud “appreciated his courage as the most outstanding quality in his personality,” and there is an implication that he had a rather high opinion of himself. We are not told how Freud cried when, soon after his first operation for cancer, one of his grandsons died; and—to cite Jones—“since his death he had not been able to enjoy life; he added: ‘It is the secret of my indifference—people call it courage—toward the danger to my own life.’ ” Nor does Fromm quote any of the following—all from Jones’s third volume:

“I am sure in a few decades my name will be wiped away and our results will last.” “Fame comes to us only after we are dead, and frankly what comes afterwards does not concern me. I have no aspirations to posthumous glory. My modesty is no virtue.” “Asked whether it meant nothing to him that his name should live, he replied: ‘Nothing whatsoever, even if it should live, which is by no means certain. . . . I am far more interested in this blossom than in anything that may happen to me after I am dead. . . . I am not a pessimist. I permit no philosophic reflection to spoil my enjoyment of the simple things of life.’ ” The man who comes to life in words like these bears scarcely any similarity to the subject of Fromm’s book.

Surely, Freud did underestimate the importance of cultural differences, although not so much as Fromm and other critics overestimate it. But Freud certainly did not try to explain all things in terms of sex, and in a crucial sense he was less simple-minded than most of his critics. In his first major work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud proposed a new interpretation of *Hamlet* in a celebrated footnote, which was later expanded into a whole book by Ernest Jones. By now the psychoanalytic inter-

pretation of *Hamlet* is unfortunately better known than the conclusion of Freud's footnote:

"Just as, incidentally, all neurotic symptoms—just as even dreams are capable of overinterpretation, and indeed demand nothing less than this before they can be fully understood, thus every genuine poetic creation, too, has presumably issued from more than one motive . . . and permits more than one interpretation. What I have attempted here is merely an interpretation of the deepest layer of impulses in the soul of the creative poet."

By "deepest" Freud, no doubt, meant that which was least accessible, most hidden and most unexpected. And he had a way of generally emphasizing that which was in this sense deepest, most ignored and most offensive. But he did not claim, his critics notwithstanding, that the deepest layer is the only one and sufficient for an explanation. On the contrary.

Fromm, on the other hand, concentrates usually on what is not deep in this sense, but tells us again and again that he has given us *the* explanation. After relating one of Freud's dreams, which has been variously interpreted by Freud and by several critics, Fromm, ignoring the literature, says with his customary confidence: "The meaning of the dream is quite clear. . . ." In an earlier book, *The Forgotten Language*, he furnishes us in the same vein with *the* explanations of three Sophoclean tragedies, Kafka's *Trial* and *Red Ridinghood*.<sup>\*</sup> Under his psychoanalytic wand, all tragedy and mystery evaporate: if Creon (in Sophocles' *Antigone*) and K. (in Kafka's *Trial*) had only read a little Fromm, everything could have had a happy ending. Since Fromm published *Man for Himself*, tragedy has become unnecessary, if not inexcusable.

In 1696, John Toland published a book entitled *Christianity not Mysterious*. Fromm's lifework, but not Freud's, might well be superscribed: Everything Unmysterious. But is it not simple-minded in the extreme to suppose that Sophocles' and Shakespeare's tragedies and Kafka's novels, quite deliberately fraught with ambiguity, or a dream that has elicited a literature, or the character and work of men like Freud, Nietzsche or Wittgenstein

<sup>\*</sup> For a detailed discussion, also of Fromm's views on religion, see my *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (Harper & Brothers), pp. 236-247; for some criticisms of Freud's views, *ibid.*, pp. 96ff. and 297ff.

could be reduced to one simple and unmysterious explanation?

A little honesty inclines a man to give an explanation, but depth in honesty brings his mind to realize the limitations of any one explanation and confronts him with a renewed sense of mystery. To convey human greatness one must either refrain from explanation or show how no single explanation is sufficient. Psychology is not incompatible with the belief that there are great men; only a simple-minded psychology is.

Fromm ends his little book by calling Freud a great man, but throughout the book we are made to feel that he was really far less great than we had supposed. Without being as calculated as Mark Antony's great speech in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Fromm's tributes to Freud's courage and his stature invite comparison with Antony's refrain that "Brutus is an honorable man." The leveling tendency that permeates the book and leaves its mark upon the reader shows the extent of those cultural influences upon Fromm that have led millions to disbelieve in great men altogether. But the insistence on cultural influences is not something that we owe to Fromm and other heterodox psychoanalysts but merely a fancy name for something Freud well knew, no less than Nietzsche and generations before him: conformism.

At all times men are subject to insidious pressures to accept the prejudices of their age and to rationalize them, whether theologically or scientifically. Nietzsche and Freud found that the best, if not the only, way to resist this danger is not to humor the hypersensitive ears of one's contemporaries by choosing comfortable words but, on the contrary, to emphasize precisely that which is not fashionable, not heard gladly—that which gives offense.

Fromm says of Freud: "Like Marx, he found a certain satisfaction in saying things *pour épater le bourgeois* (to shock the bourgeois)." Surely, that is to miss the point. Perhaps no writer ever wrote of sex more unsensationally than did Sigmund Freud, whose pure and simple prose is never cheap and always informed by a deep humanity. But he did insist on calling sex, "sex"; he did not like words like "erotic"; and it is easy to imagine what he would have thought of a psychoanalyst who entitled one of his books *The Art of Loving*.

Kierkegaard was a Christian who insisted that Christianity must give offense; but his twentieth-century heirs, at least in the United States, speak comfortable words. They speak more of courage than he did but, if we listen closely, ask no more than that we take the risk of having faith although we might be wrong—the risk, specifically, to be Protestants. But does it take such a great deal of courage to be a Protestant in the United States today? The whole tenor of American theology today is not to give offense but to show that one can well be religious and quite up-to-date too. One can combine Christianity with Freud and Nietzsche, with Marx (in the thirties when he was fashionable) and with existentialism (after World War II, now that Marx is out of fashion). Whatever you have, Christianity has too. The theologians offer everything, and heaven too.

When the salt has lost its savor and Christianity its sting, when a culture has successfully assimilated even a religion which, as Kierkegaard insisted, is quite plainly incompatible with it, is it strange that Freud's new teaching, too, should have been made wholesome and inoffensive? Fromm's small tract on Freud is a mere symptom of the tendencies of our time—almost a parable about cultural influence. Fromm is but one of scores who started out as radicals and later came to savor popularity and, not deliberately to be sure, came more and more to write what their large audience likes to hear.

The men who come before us as the heirs of Kierkegaard and Freud join in the common cry that courage is a good thing while conformity is bad. But Kierkegaard's successors, unlike Kierkegaard, confirm the no less popular demand that we should join some church, and Fromm, unlike Freud, looks with suspicion, if not moralistic condescension, upon obstinacy, hardness and the willingness to pit one's own integrity against the judgment of the world. Today's prophets are like headmasters who denounce conformity in their commencement speeches but, during the year, refer boys who are quite indifferent to popularity to the psychiatrist. No sooner has Freud's moral courage been mentioned than it is treated like a disease. But not the least value of Freud is that he shows us that in our time, too, true nobility is possible.

#### FREUD AND THE TRAGIC VIRTUES

To return to tragedy once more, Fromm's book is a symptom of those attitudes that go far toward accounting for the lack of tragedies on our stages. We like to tell ourselves that those whose suffering is great are like ourselves: we sympathize with them but do not look up to them as, in spite of ourselves, we do look up to Shakespeare's tragic heroes or to Sophocles'. The hero of *The Death of a Salesman*, for example, is no hero but the un-hero par excellence: he is pathetic, not tragic. And the only victim of the Nazis who has touched the hearts of millions is a little girl, Anne Frank. An occasional motion picture glorifies the tragic virtue of nobility, of courage that holds out after success appears to be out of the question: *Bad Day at Black Rock*, for example, and *Twelve Angry Men* and *High Noon*. But on the screen the hero's obstinate integrity is in the end crowned with success: how else could you sell these virtues to the public?

It is often said that the confident faith of communism must be met by us with a no less firm faith that the future belongs to us. What we truly need is not such foolishness but more intelligence, integrity and moral courage. Also some of the stubbornness that refuses to surrender when no reasonable chance of victory remains. Sometimes it prevails over stupendous odds, as Freud did after standing quite alone for many years, or England in the Second World War. Sometimes it does not, as the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto did not, and as Freud in his fight with cancer did not. In the end, against death, none of us prevail; but there is a difference between death and death.

It is easy to see why a democratic society would be skeptical about great men and suspicious of the tragic virtues. Democracy depends on compromise. But democracy can ill afford to dispense with moral courage. Under certain circumstances, it may require moral courage to advocate compromise. What matters is that the decision is not influenced by the desire for acclaim. And there are few better representatives in our time of the rare combination of humility, ambition, love, courage and honesty than Sigmund Freud.