

# Is Melpomene Dead?

A maverick Princeton philosopher attacks the pronouncements on tragedy made by his predecessors, beginning with Plato.



ANYONE who teaches a course or gives a lecture on tragedy is likely to draw a large audience, even in an age which has been told that tragedy, like God, is dead. The subject resembles a mountain. It challenges the climber by its perilous slopes, its heights that make one swoon, and its promise of mysterious vistas. Few people can resist the spectacle of a man trying to come to terms with such a challenge, even though—or perhaps because—they know he will probably fail.

Comedy is even harder to interpret, for which reason those who essay it are few. Even so, we watch them with less fascination and suspense, for we know that if they do succeed it will be by virtue of a certain unaccountable grace, not, as with those who interpret tragedy, by the exercise of such virtues as courage, patience, and intellectual power.

There is another reason why the commentator on tragedy commands our attention. We are haunted by the notion that even if “great” tragedies are to be written no more, yet our own lives are shot through with tragic qualities we would be the wiser for comprehending. There are few words to which people cling more possessively, insisting on their right to use them in a vague but personal sense, than “tragedy” and “tragic.” A debate over whether the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas was or was not a “tragedy” often breeds fear and anger, not only because such talk revives memories of that terrifying day but also because the intertwined meaningfulness of individual and national existence is felt to be at issue.

In a different way the same anxieties can be raised by denying the name of tragedy to any human catastrophe. This is felt as an attempt to belittle its significance and therefore as a mark of inhumanity, just as calling the suffering and death of animals “tragic” is regarded as sentimental.

Tragedy is widely considered, therefore, to be somehow coextensive with and constitutive of humanity, and the mystery of it is taken to be almost synonymous with the mystery of being human. We expect him who would speak to us of tragedy to talk, certainly, of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Shakespeare; of literature and the theater; of images, plots, and myths; of philosophy and maybe theology—but through and beyond all this to tell us of our own existence and why its agony is worth enduring.

It was not always so, and it may not remain so forever. Before the sixteenth century, as Walter Kaufmann points out in *Tragedy and Philosophy* (Doubleday, 388 pp., \$6.95), the term “tragedy” was not used in reference to events in “real life.” It denoted then only a certain type of story, usually one told by a playwright. The notion that tragedy is the universal lot, or even a “right,” of mankind is a legacy of the Renaissance,

## SR: BOOKS

Book Review Editor: ROCHELLE GIRSON

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TOM DRIVER, who teaches practical theology and literature at Union Theological Seminary, wrote *The Sense of History in Greek and Shakespearean Drama*.

furnished and intensified by Romanticism and the spread of something called "the tragic sense of life."

In literature and drama, meanwhile, tragedy (and attitudes consonant with it) have surely been passing away. I mean not only that Shakespeare, Corneille, and Racine are no more, but that the aspirations of dramatists to write tragedies have waned. After Chekhov, if not before, and certainly after Expressionism, "serious" drama tended toward tragicomedy and away from tragedy, even though Professor Kaufmann would have it that these are virtually the same. Since the Second World War the tendency has been to steer away from tragicomedy as well, if for no other reason than that Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* produced what many consider the ultimate distillation of this genre, at least for the foreseeable future. Although we have no name for the innovative types of plays our most vigorous contemporaries are writing (which some lump together as "theater of the absurd" and others call simply "new theater"), its spirit is strongly antitragic. It veers instead toward impudence (which I do not disdain), recklessness (which I do), and, most important, a frequent belittling of deep feeling. If this trend continues and carries public taste with it, "tragedy" will tend to lose its positive bias; it may then revert to its former status as a semitechnical term.

Walter Kaufmann, maverick philosopher of Princeton, deserves credit for attempting to clear away a number of confusions that have grown up through centuries of writing about tragedy. Beginning with Plato, he takes philosophers to task for having made pronouncements about tragedy while paying scant attention to the repertoire of tragic plays. To remedy this, Kaufmann proposes that the tragedies themselves, instead of any philosophical or ideational assumptions, should be the starting point, even for philosophers.

His position is made clear in two of ten "rules" and "conclusions" offered in Chapter III, "Toward a New Poetics," to define the author's method: "One should not discuss tragedy without discussing any tragedy." "Tragedy is primarily a form of literature developed in Athens in the fifth century B.C., and all other uses of the words 'tragedy' and 'tragic' derive from this. (The notion that events of some sort are tragic and that literary works deserve the name of 'tragedy' only by derivation is the opposite of the truth . . .)"

The part of me that is a critic of drama readily concurs with these two maxims, and the part that is a theologian sees no reason to object; so I am in hearty agreement with the initial position Professor Kaufmann adopts. Those who know his earlier writings will not expect, however,

that the theologian will stick with him down the line, and they are right. Luckily, the book's theological comments are not its main theme, so all I need do about them is say that they are as extraneous as they are prejudiced and jejune.

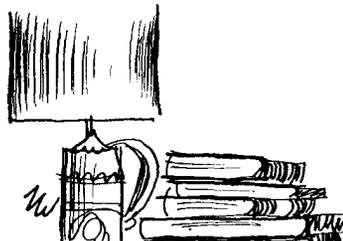
LONG ago I came to the conclusion that literary critics are better philosophers than philosophers are literary critics. Professor Kaufmann makes it amply clear that he considers most philosophers to have been lousy, even lazy, critics of tragic literature, but he also has little use for such literary and dramatic interpreters of tragedy as he bothers to mention. In fact, he treats the latter so scantily that he ignores the most probing modern commentaries available—for instance, those of Francis Fergusson, Eric Bentley, Northrop Frye, and Richard Sewall—while the critics he does take seriously, such as H. D. F. Kitto, are brought in only to be attacked, and on minor rather than major grounds.

Consequently, Professor Kaufmann is pretty much on his own as a dramatic critic. Rightly putting tragedies ahead of all theories about them, he stumbles for lack of expertise in reading and interpreting them. Perhaps this is why he adopted a rather superficial criterion for what is tragic in tragedies, as when he says: "The most distinctive and universal feature of Greek tragedy was that immense and overwhelming suffering was presented to the audience." The context makes it clear that the same is to be said of all other tragedy, allowing for variations in degree of suffering: "It . . . seems reasonable to call any play that powerfully stirs the emotions we have described a tragedy."

The emotions in question are those called by Aristotle *eleos* and *phobos*, usually translated as pity and fear, but which Professor Kaufmann, for good reasons, calls "ruth" and "terror."

The trouble with this definition is that it is virtually the lowest common denominator. It leaves out of account other qualities of the greatest tragedies, by means of which *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Oedipus Tyrannus* have gripped the human imagination more strongly than, for instance, *The Trojan Women*. And it allows, as Professor Kaufmann concedes, that what we call pathos and melodrama have as much right to be called tragedy as do the most sublime works of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

I would have no objection to a fresh



look at our usual distinction between tragedy and melodrama if the author could show me that it would pay off in discernment of what is really going on in lots of plays, especially contemporary ones. But here is where Professor Kaufmann's performance as a critic, nowhere very impressive, comes to lamentable grief. Toward the end of his book he offers us two recent examples of tragedy that fit his criterion, and they turn out to be *The Deputy* and *Soldiers*, by Rolf Hochhuth. This is as if an author had decided to ridicule his own thesis by *reductio ad absurdum*. To be sure, Kaufmann finds that both works are flawed; but he does not seem to recognize that their "flaws" (e.g., Hochhuth's caricature of Pius XII in *The Deputy*) are their only memorable virtues. It is surely also a critical blunder to attack Brecht for not writing tragedy when Brecht's avowed purpose was to write something else. Kaufmann's curious position is that, although we know Brecht eschewed tragedy, he fell into it anyway and is at fault for not having fallen further.

Apparently unable to analyze the poetry of the great tragedians, Kaufmann informs us that it was "profound" and "moving"; how, he does not say. Impatient with all analyses of dramatic structure, he gives none himself. He does offer a number of original comments about characters, but on the plays as wholes he is mute, and his remarks are mostly on themes within them. He drives the symbolism of Oedipus's blindness so hard that it turns into allegory, and he is so contemptuous of all comments on that play's design, beginning with Aristotle's, that he does not even bother to describe or make any point of the distinction between theme (as such) and plot.

The key to all this is found in Kaufmann's reading of Aristotle's *Poetics*. It shows, he informs us, a "perverse concentration on [tragedy's] merely formal aspects, such as plot and diction." So much for them. The chapter on the *Poetics*, which includes a long section on Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude . . ." has nothing whatever to say about the most important and problematic word therein, namely, "action."

I have not space to discuss Kaufmann's treatment of the philosophers on tragedy. Needless to say, they have all, by Kaufmann's light, gone astray. They have had less to say to us than the tragedians. But the tragedians, if we listen to Kaufmann, haven't said much either, though he admires them no end. Their value lies in the emotional effect they have produced. This brings me back to the question of "deep feeling."

I think it might be legitimate to take

# Book Forum

## Letters from Readers

emotions, rather than, say, such a formula as Hegel's "conflict of values," as the point of entry into discussion of tragedy. But if so, we must surely find that the name of tragedy is earned not merely by the kinds of emotion evoked (pity and fear) but also, and more importantly, by their depth and particular qualities. Furthermore, this depth and these qualities can be accounted for only by probing the ideas at work in the play, the images used, the poetic techniques employed, and the interplay of story, plot, diction, character, and what Aristotle called "spectacle." All these are various facets of the imitation of action, which Fergusson has aptly called "the aim or focus of psychic life" in the play.

To interpret a dramatic action is not easy, because it is the hidden heart of the drama, all other elements being only partial analogues of it. The task requires a blend of literary analytic skills and philosophical acumen. But surely this is what must be expected of one who claims that the philosophers have not done justice to the tragic poets, and who would turn to the latter for philosophical inspiration.

*Tragedy and Philosophy* contains very little wrestling with such philosophical concerns as logic, beauty, finitude, death, process, ethical dilemma, the validity of analogical statement, or reason *vs.* passion—any of which might be thought pertinent in a philosopher's treatment of tragedy. Kaufmann realizes this and says "it depends on what your conception of philosophy is." My conception includes the notion that it is rigorous, fascinated by major problems difficult of solution, and willing to follow up the ontological implications of the statement Kaufmann makes—only to leave it unexamined—that tragedies function "on different levels of reality." Philosophy to me has intellectual as well as emotional courage.

This is for the most part an interesting book, as determinedly wrong-headed books often are. It has, moreover, a few excellent passages. The discussion of pity and fear, changing these terms to ruth (does this archaic word suggest that the emotion it names is also archaic?) and terror, is cogent and helpful. So is the treatment of *hubris* and pride, which lays many a false and overly Christian interpretation to rest. It was wise, I think, to stress in a full chapter the importance of the *Iliad* as a precursor of tragedy. Having done so, it would have been wiser still to try to explain why tragedy matured in dramatic rather than epic forms. This was the question Nietzsche and, later, the Cambridge anthropologists sought to answer. Their solution is out of fashion now, and Kaufmann barely mentions it; but the question remains.

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### Black Esthetic

RE: PETER BEREK'S REVIEW OF *Black Fire* (SR, Nov. 30). Berek's decidedly narrow, static feeling for poetry and blackness is incomprehensible. Certainly the tenor of the review facilitates the "anti" feeling prevalent in all people. Don L. Lee's essay "Black Poetry: Which Direction" (*Negro Digest*, Sept./Oct. 68) is anticipatory of Berek-type critics: "We as blk/poets, write out of a concept of self, a black thing, knowledgeable at all times that mistakes will be made, that there will be disappointments and disagreements, but realizing that these are the actions of black men and black artists. We will determine standards of judgment and excellence and no white boys in the pages of . . . *Saturday Review* . . . will direct or affect our efforts. Black people will direct us; direction will be a reciprocal process, shared between black people & black artists."

Peter Berek emphasizes "to create his own (Afro-American) esthetic . . .", but as brother Larry Neal relates it: "there is no need to establish a black esthetic. Rather it is important to understand that one exists." Don L. Lee quotes brother Arthur Rimbaud in that black poets realize that poetry will no longer accompany action but will lead it.

As I feel it, the most forceful blk/artists are those experimenting with the vernacular, broken rhythms and folk idioms. The precise, controlled poetry desired by Berek suffers in comparison with the almost violently alive, highly charged "ghetto" cadence of blk/poems. As sister Carolyn M. Rodgers puts it: "Black people are explosions of love, hate, fear, joy, sorrow; their literature should be that way." The wit, the obstreperous typography and syntax, the improbable catalogues, the juxtaposition of terms that were thought to be unrelated, are of the blk/poets. They are breaking down the language itself, creating a medium to convey precisely the black experience. Within this frame of reference blk/poems brush against those of e. e. cummings or Hart Crane. It's because that search for true words and newer worlds creates a mutualism of expression; parallel but wantonly incoherent to the other.

Incidentally, the phrase "third world" is not a political term; rather it is a state of Black Awareness. As Rimbaud says: "Blackness transcends all artificial borders—blackness will speak of and to the Third World." Also a Third World Press publishes the works of black artists.

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### Jazz

IN REVIEWING *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language—College Edition* in the Reference Book Roundup (SR, Nov. 16), David Glixon refers to an ap-

parent discrepancy between the treatment of the entry *jazz*, where the origin of the word is said to be unknown, and a statement in the preface giving the origin. I assume that this latter passage is the brief comment, p. xxi, in the article by Professor McDavid. Professor McDavid is not discussing the etymology of the word, but rather its sense development. Strictly speaking, the etymology is a different matter. Some etymologists speculate that *jazz* comes from a Creole patois word; others, that it is of West African origin. For its part, the RHDC accurately reflects the fact that next to nothing is really known about the origin.

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NO DOUBT THE RHDC EDITORS had valid reasons for omitting from its etymology any such interesting educated guess as that indulged in by the editors of *Webster's New World Dictionary—College Edition*:

"Creole patois *jass*, sexual term applied to the Congo dances (New Orleans); present use from Chicago, c. 1914, but ? from earlier similar use in the vice district of New Orleans."

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### What They Read in 1908

IN SR'S CHECK LIST OF CURRENT BOOKS Nov. 30 I noticed a reissue of a book that I have not heard of for sixty years; I refer to *Cashel Byron's Profession*, by C. B. Shaw. Apparently it is not so forgotten as I thought, as I found a reprint in one of our libraries dated 1946. On reading it again I could see flashes of the future Shaw, and in spite of its long-windedness it seemed more interesting than some of our present-day books full of perversion, horror, etc. I read it in 1908 just before I was sixteen.

That fall I was sent to a small Eastern boarding school, and when the principal asked me, "What books have you been reading, my dear?" I reeled off a list that made her goggle-eyed. In our house my parents were away a great deal and no one supervised my reading, so I simply went through the shelves. In the large walnut bookcase there were the usual "sets" of Scott, Dickens, Schiller, Napoleon's life, histories of the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, etc. In the smaller mahogany bookcase were Balzac, DeMaupassant, Hardy, Henry James (mostly boring), James Lane Allen, Jerome K. Jerome, Richard H. Davis, Oliver W. Holmes, the American Winston Churchill, *Quo Vadis*, all of Shaw published up to that year, George Ade, *Alice of Old Vincennes*. Does anyone remember Ouida? I am sure I have skipped some, but that will give an idea of what some people read in 1908.

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