

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### WALTER KAUFMANN AND SOME PROBLEMATICS IN THE DEFINITION OF TRAGEDY

The term *tragedy* has come to embrace notions that go far beyond tragedy as genre. Today, "tragic vision," the "tragic sense of life," and "tragedy" signify to many a human condition, a universal stasis of which suffering and pain are the constants. The generally accepted assumption is that tragedy as human condition is timeless, a movement of the psyche against mysterious or uncontrollable forces at work in the world, and that tragedy as literature is defined by unaccommodated man, who, although he may will to action, invariably suffers because it is the nature of things for him to be more sinned against than sinning.

Walter Kaufmann, in his knowledgeably irreverent new book,\* seeks to illuminate the meaning of tragedy in general and of Greek tragedy in particular: to show that the theories of the four great philosophers who concerned themselves with it are inadequate, inapplicable, or obsolete; to offer his own Poetics; and to consider the possibility and actuality of tragedy in our time. His humanist approach to tragedy presents a freshness of style which avoids scholasticism and jargon. If his rejection of formalist narrowness is extreme, he makes up for it in part by the fullness of documentation and an infectious enthusiasm for the philosophical and esthetic imagination of the three great Greek playwrights. His characterizations of Aeschylus as "one-sided, not complex like Euripides"; of Sophocles as believing that the "Gods are brutal but man can put them to shame"; and of Euripides as more modern and psychological than the others, offer a new awareness of the richly individual treatment of theme which serves as a caution against over-generalization. Kaufmann's inductive, descriptive method emphasizes the variety over the common elements in Greek tragedy.

But for all his provocative, stimulating thought, in the end the author's pluralistic bent results in an eclectic point of view that dis-

\* *Tragedy and Philosophy*, by Walter Kaufmann. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1968. \$6.95. Pp. 608.

allows a framework, a "scene." His own sometimes shifting definitions of tragedy are of limited usefulness to literary theory. In his preoccupation with the philosophic dimension, the literary dimension suffers. We are left with a marvelously human concern with tragic themes, but with no systematic, comprehensive definition of tragedy as a literary, more particularly, a dramatic, mode of expression. Professor Kaufmann, out of understandable impatience with extreme formalist concentration on imagery, symbolism, diction, and structure, himself goes to the other extreme by denying the importance of structure almost entirely. The tautness of construction of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Aristotle's ideal tragedy, is inextricably bound up with its success in terms of its cathartic function. But Kaufmann underestimates the vital relationship between catharsis as function and the structural makeup of tragedy.

That the literary dimension is overlooked in the interests of an admittedly admirable philosophical-humanist concern, results in an unsatisfying, partial understanding of tragedy and, in the end, of the total literary process. Furthermore, Kaufmann's correct contention that, in addition to the philosophical dimension, the critic must also recognize the historical dimension of literature, seems at odds with his ahistorical treatment of structure and function. He does not consider the possibility that the function of tragedy, i.e., catharsis, has become historically transformed into a more complex emotional response as tragedy itself has become transformed into a more complex form of drama.

Another insufficiency of Professor Kaufmann's literary-historical approach lies in his neglect of the importance of shared values between audience and playwright during the great epochs of tragedy. That this is a far cry from the fact today, when experimental theater is attempting to get back into contact with the audience (however unsuccessfully), should tease one into thought about whether shared values are not one component of the definition of tragedy.

Yet, while Professor Kaufmann himself presents definitions that are wanting, he does succeed in some respects in exposing the deficiencies in the esthetic theories of Plato, Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Hegel.

He turns his attention first to Plato, whose views on tragedy he holds to be of little importance because: 1) Plato never examined a single tragedy; 2) Plato erroneously considered tragedy as immoral and therefore inimical to the *polis*; 3) Plato's metaphysic, which incorporates the theory that poetry is thrice removed from Truth, is obsolete.

Kaufmann is also critical of Nietzsche's popularly accepted notions about the death of tragedy. Asserting that Nietzsche's terms—optimism, pessimism, and cheerfulness—are simplistic categories, he challenges the

Nietzschean propositions that tragedy died at the hand of Euripides, that Sophocles wrote only three true tragedies, and that the only true writer of tragedies was Aeschylus. But in pointing to the optimism and rationalism in the last third of the *Oresteia*, and, probably, in the lost sequel to *Prometheus Bound*, both by Aeschylus, he demonstrates the inconsistency of Nietzsche's assertion. One has only to recall the *Oresteia* in which Pallas Athena settles Orestes' fate through a court of law, and even reconciles the Furies through reason and enlightenment.

But Professor Kaufmann reserves his greatest challenge for Aristotle's *Poetics*; he is sharply critical of its fundamental premises and their easy acceptance by critics. No term in the famous definition remains untouched as he probes the adequacy of certain accepted translations from the Greek, of matters of substance embodied in the definition, and of its applicability to the tragedy on which it is based. Through his empirical examination of virtually every extant Greek tragedy he disputes accepted translations of important words like *spoudaios*, preferring "noble" to the more commonly accepted "serious"; he offers "ruth" for the usually accepted translation of *eleos* as "pity." He is particularly critical of the Aristotelian notion that tragedy must have a tragic hero who falls because of some *hamartia*, usually *hybris*, asserting that not every tragedy indeed has a tragic hero, and that *hamartia*, translated as flaw, frailty, or error in judgment, does not apply to great tragic heroes like Prometheus or Oedipus. In this connection he notes that *hybris* has been accepted as meaning "pride," but should be understood more as crime, outrage, or insolence to be more accurately descriptive of the character of the Greek tragic hero. (This is a substantive question, since pride is a Christian sin and the Greeks were not Believers. The tragic hero's "crime" lay in his assertion of his *humanism*, not in his disobedience.) Finally, Professor Kaufmann disputes the value and importance of the well-known six elements Aristotle held necessary for great tragedy. He concludes that Aristotle's definition of tragedy, as well as his poetics in general, are obsolete and useless. But his lack of attention to the historical dimension of the form, function, and social context of tragedy results in an unsatisfying and disorienting argumentation.

The question of the limited applicability of Aristotle's *Poetics* to other Greek tragedies involves, it seems to me, the larger question of the limitations inherent in the setting up of a model. Models are largely descriptive (sometimes prescriptive, too, as in the case of the *Poetics*) rather than explanatory, and therefore are never complete as definition. To do full justice to a genre definition (genre embodies specific formal

and functional characteristics which are historically determined), the genre has to be seen in time (explanatory) but also has to be extracted from time for purposes of study (descriptive). That Aristotle's definition is incomplete may be understood first by the fact that early scientific methods of observation (on which the definition is based) and classification do not constitute the totality, and also by the fact that literary theory was in its infancy in his time. A complete theory that would encompass causal relationships and extrinsic considerations was not yet historically possible. Art was seen as moral object, not yet in its more socio-historical and psychological dimensions.

It should also be noted that a model cannot be expected to account for unique features in other works which can only be like the model in its basic features but not the same. How the critic defines the basic features of a genre depends in large part on his literary-philosophical world view. Kaufmann's notions seem to derive from a world view that sees in real life a timeless, immutable "human condition," and, it follows, in tragedy, an eternal reflection of this condition.

Professor Kaufmann's evaluation of the *Poetics* as primarily formalist and unphilosophical stems from an ambiguity in the way he considers philosophy. More often than not philosophy and humanism seem interchangeable as concepts. This lack of rigor of definition accounts for his not seeing the *Poetics* as extremely philosophical, with the formal aspects contingent upon Aristotelian philosophical thought. It may be true that Aristotle was not discussing tragedy "as one of the greatest glories of the human spirit" (Kaufmann), although he seems to suggest that it is, but this is not philosophy. The very concept of action as that which tragedy imitates in the Aristotelian definition, is highly philosophical and one that has been delineated in great depth not only by Aristotle, but by Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Engels, to name the foremost, in their basic definition of man as distinct from animal.

The implications of this tenet are fundamental to an understanding of the form, function, and content of drama in general and of tragedy in particular. Aristotle makes this quite clear in defining character as the agent of the *action*, not as some static quality. We know a man, says Aristotle, from his deeds and his actions; it is *character acting in a given situation*—what Kenneth Burke refers to as the "scene-act ratio"—that we respond to in tragedy. Lear's character changes when his position as father and king changes. Prometheus and Oedipus may be the quintessence of character, but the situation, the action they are involved in, reveals this. It is surprising in this connection that Professor Kaufmann does not concern himself more with the concept of *praxis*, a much-

discussed philosophical term and one that has been debated among scholars for years. I don't understand why he omits analysis of this part of the Aristotelian definition when he gives so much attention to less vital elements. In *Search for a Method*, Jean-Paul Sartre centers his definition of man on the concept of *praxis* in distinguishing purposeful human activity from the activity of nature in which man is not involved. With greater usefulness for literary theory, Professor Norman Rudich, in his essay *The Dialectics of Poesis: Literature as a Mode of Cognition*, defines *praxis* as the "object matter" of imitation in tragedy, "the total process of human interaction with the . . . environment . . . the resistance man encounters in the world as well as his actions upon it."

Nor does Professor Kaufmann pay the necessary heed, I feel, to the human-literary-historical dimension of action, which demonstrates that tragedy derives from ritual. Ritual depicts man in his most primitive, his most direct, response to life, manifested in dance, chant, and rhythm, as well as in the conflicts between man and gods. Rituals are communal symbolic forms representing attitudes, values, and desires. Tragedy, while stemming from the basic action of ritual, advances from ritual to a more individual symbolic form (language) and more humanistic attitudes, values, and desires. Aristotle, in defining tragedy as an imitation of an action *in the form of an action*, is not only not neglecting the philosophical dimension, as Kaufmann claims, but is joining philosophy with literary evolution. A more valid criticism, I think, is that because Aristotle omits consideration of the object imitated, he makes a comprehensive literary evaluation impossible and a formalist criticism almost inevitable.

The question of *mimesis* also has long plagued philosophers of literature and criticism. Professor Kaufmann prefers "make-believe" and "pretend," viewing imitation rather narrowly as echo copying of the object of imitation. But here again, it seems to me, the philosophical implications of the term are not properly considered. One needs to draw on the *Metaphysics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, among other of his writings, together with the *Poetics*, to realize how Aristotle distinguishes art from ethics and physics: art is mimetic action and ethics is practical action, while physics includes its own inherent principle of motion. In art an external form is imposed on the object of imitation in the Aristotelian scheme. From this it follows that *mimesis* encompasses both presentation and transformation of the object imitated, which cannot exclude the imagination and vision of the form-giver, or the artist.

There is less difficulty with Hegel, whose theory of tragedy *assumes*

action as primary, although Hegel does not discuss it in its literary and formal implications. And although, like Aristotle, he based his theory on one tragedy, in his case *Antigone*, it seems to me that his larger philosophy of history-as-process made possible a methodology that could be both explanatory and descriptive in a general sense. Hegel, Professor Kaufmann writes, was able to realize that:

at the center of the greatest tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles we find not a tragic hero but a tragic collision and that the conflict is not between good and evil but between one-sided positions, each of which embodies some good.

So the problem of *hamartia* is eliminated, and positions are at issue rather than individuals, as Kaufmann points out. Still, Hegel does not ignore the tragic hero, asserting that there can be no tragedy unless there is a "vindication of a superior view," without which, he says, suffering and misfortune are unjustified. It follows that truly tragic suffering is imposed only on *active* individuals in the relentless one-sidedness of their positions as a consequence of some action of their own for which they are answerable with their whole self. Indicated here is that one of Hegel's "goods" must be superior to the one it collides with, but that both are historically justified. If Antigone is the greatest tragic figure of all, then her "good" must be superior to Creon's, although his position may be historically necessary.

But the chief value in Hegel's theory is that it places "tragic guilt" and "moral fault" in the perspective of inevitable historical collisions in given historical context rather than in individual, subjective, ahistorical terms. In the context of Hegel's analysis of freedom of action and determinism, tragic guilt is culturally determined. If a Greek hero commits a crime against family or state, he is guilty from the very presuppositions of Greek culture. Hegel's theory suggests that if men understood the presuppositions of their culture there would be no tragedy.

This historically-oriented theory of the tragic collision enables us to better understand the similarities and differences between Greek and Elizabethan tragedy. The two historical epochs which gave rise to tragedy were marked by spurts forward in a this-worldly humanism with its emphasis on the individual and the growth of human possibility. Shakespearean tragedy continued to express the family-state collision, but a collision characteristic of the Renaissance, when traditional values were being overthrown by the insatiable lust for power while yet greater possibilities for self-realization were becoming manifest. *King Lear* and *Hamlet* are prime examples. (It should be noted that in some of the greatest Greek and Shakespearean tragedies, noble *political* purpose is

inextricably bound up with individual action. But when purpose becomes purely private and the collision takes place within the individual consciousness, then tragedy becomes modern drama, which Hegel defines as "intermediate between tragedy and comedy.")

In the last third of his book Professor Kaufmann asserts the possibility and actuality of tragedy today. He allows for the proliferation of tragedy as dramatic genre into other genres, especially the novel. He categorizes Hochhuth's *The Deputy* as modern Christian tragedy (a contradiction in terms, in my opinion, because it denies the this-worldly essence of tragedy and offers other-worldly solace). He praises Sartre for the brilliance of character portrayed in *The Flies* and in *Dirty Hands*, while concluding that Sartre is too cerebral for tragedy. He allows for *Death of a Salesman* as "modern tragedy" although the protagonist cannot really be tragic in either Aristotle's or Hegel's terms. And he is critical of Brecht for his denial of the educative value of catharsis, while noting that despite his theory, Brecht evokes a strong emotional response in much of his work. Finally, in applying his excellent literary principle that the artistic, historical, and philosophical dimensions are inseparable in a work of literature, he argues persuasively that William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* fails both as novel and tragedy because Styron does not make his principal character in any way compelling, showing Turner rather as a stereotype. Styron, writes Kaufmann, "has chosen a great theme, but has nowhere come near doing justice to it. His central character is totally unconvincing and the moral of the book does not bear thinking about."

Professor Kaufmann's view that tragedy is an actuality and possibility in our time is not persuasive because he stretches definition to the point where it loses meaning. For if definition is broadened to include a de-heroized hero or a passive protagonist, an other-worldly resolution of conflict, or a resolution in which a sense of renewal is so private that it denies the cosmic importance inherent in great tragedy; if definition is extended into art forms other than drama, then tragedy-as-genre is stood on its head. My own view is that tragedy is a dramatic genre which was born in ancient Greece, which reappeared in its basic characteristics in Elizabethan England, and died when these characteristics were no longer compatible with the extrinsic historical conditions which gave it birth. Just as the epic was the forerunner of the modern novel but *not* the modern novel, tragedy may be said to be the forerunner of modern drama, but *not* modern drama. To note that there is continuity in all literary expression is to note that there is continuity in human existence, and this is important. But for anyone concerned with

the as yet undeveloped field of the philosophy of literature it is more important to establish the kind of genre definition that will explain what remains constant and what new synthesis emerges demanding new definition.

This reviewer has been concerned in the main with the *literary-philosophical* implications of tragedy in Professor Kaufmann's book. Therefore it has not been possible to do more than allude to many of the riches incorporated in its pages: the chapter on Homer and the birth of tragedy; the critique of *Oedipus Tyrannus*; the very stimulating chapters on Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; and the theories of tragedy of Scheler and Schopenhauer. Professor Kaufmann has succeeded admirably in breaking through the encrusted, often uncritical acceptance of the theories of Plato, Aristotle, and Nietzsche, and in making us all more aware of the imagination and vision of the great writers of tragedy. His relentless investigation of a variety of tragedies makes us understand better why we weep at Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, but not at Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*; why Oedipus accepts his "guilt" even though we cannot see that he has cause for guilt. We are led to ponder the larger questions: Is there an eternal human condition in which it is man's fate to suffer? Is alienation permanent? Can there be tragedy when the possibilities exist for man to control and change his fate? Is an individual tragic hero possible after Auschwitz? Can an abstract humanism or a Thoreauvian individualism be an effective affirmation today against the destructive values of a decaying order?

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