

TRAGEDY AND PHILOSOPHY. By Walter Kaufmann. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1968. xvii, 388 p.

"It is never the way that is the most trying, but rather the most trying is always the way"—this paradoxical demand of Kierkegaard's would in my opinion epitomize succinctly and adequately the spirit of Walter Kaufmann's latest book *Tragedy and Philosophy*, in respect to both the subject treated, i.e., the essence of tragedy, and the author's approach to his subject. Being as pugnacious a heretic as ever in his previous writings, Kaufmann here again challenges and most likely irks the rigorous specialists in several disciplines, as he attempts to examine "the most influential reflections on tragedy by a few philosophers" (p. xi).

Kaufmann's contribution stands out for a variety of reasons. It opens new vistas on the concept of tragedy in general and offers illuminating interpretations of individual plays, based on careful textual analysis. In his methodological approach, Kaufmann combines the historical viewpoint with the aspect of genre. Spanning an era of 2500 years from Attic tragedy to the contemporary drama (including Sartre, Brecht, and Hochhuth), his book focuses on the theories of tragedy by the major philosophers (from Plato and Aristotle to Nietzsche, Hegel, and Schopenhauer) and attempts to test the validity of their principles as applied to the individual masterpieces whence they are derived—mainly Greek tragedy and Shakespeare's plays.<sup>1</sup> Most of the prevailing conceptions of tragedy and "the tragic" prove to be unsound because they rest on historically false assumptions (p. 85). Thus, in substantial chapters on Aristotle, Homer, and Attic tragedy, Kaufmann offers a reinterpretation of the Aristotelian terms *phobos* and *eleos* as "terror" and "ruth" (instead of "fear" and "pity," pp. 48 ff.), and argues for a thorough revision of most of the prevalent clichés on the three Greek tragedians.

This inductive method of analysis enables the author to question and refute most of the prevailing notions and to present his own theory on tragedy. Basically this "New Poetics" of his, as presented in Chapter III, results in the following theses: (1) Tragedy is not a genre posited a priori but a historically generated species. (2) Thus "the tragic" is not a phenomenon per se, based on a common human experience, but depends on the point of view under which events are being represented (p. 40). (3) Consequently one cannot establish any normative criteria for "tragedy as such" setting up a definition of the "ideal" tragedy or using any single play as a timeless model.

From these common basic assumptions, Kaufmann derives his own definition of tragedy: Tragedy is . . . a form of literature that moves into the center immense human suffering . . . releasing us with some sense (a) that suffering is universal—not a mere accident in our experience, (b) that courage and endurance in suffering or nobility in despair [accepting tragic guilt and responsibility though not a moral fault] are admirable, not ridiculous, and usually (c) that fates worse than our own can be experienced as exhilarating (p. 85).

The inevitability of the catastrophe, taken for granted by most critics, is not indispensable with tragedy (p. 130). Nor does tragedy require a "reverence for the gods" (p. 192). This last point, however, in my opinion necessitates some clarification and distinction—especially as it becomes extremely relevant for the last chapter which discusses the possibility of tragedy today. Surely we cannot follow George Steiner's argument that "tragedy requires the intolerable burden of God's presence" and that its death in our age is due to our lack of faith (p.

<sup>1</sup> German and French tragedy are not taken into account as the philosophers did not consider them at length (see p. 270).

## COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

192). But if not *reverence* for the gods, tragedy certainly does require a *reference* to the gods—that means: The tragic hero always finds himself in some way exposed to a higher sphere—be it the Greek ‘moira,’ the olympian deities or, in Hölderlin’s cosmos, ‘das Numinose.’ “Daß der tragische Held den Gott überhaupt beleidigen kann, ist seine Auszeichnung; und seine Kraft wieder ist es, daß er göttliches Unrecht lieben kann.” Thus Wolfgang Schadewaldt relates Hölderlin’s concept of Empedokles;<sup>2</sup> thereby, in my opinion, penetrating the very essence of tragedy in general. Only challenged by some divine powers—either bound towards them in submission as Antigone, or pitted against them in defiance as Prometheus, or even exposed to their cruel indifference and wantonness as King Lear—is the tragic hero able to reveal his inherent supremacy and rise to gigantic stature. Wrestling with the superhuman antagonist, he will accomplish the almost impossible “to love even the divine injustice”: that means to be stronger than his fate and thus achieve his final greatness: to triumph over the “absurdity of being.” This is not a question of worthiness and moral value but of dimensions: Man needs the gods as antagonist to release the titan in himself.

If, as in Dürrenmatt’s *Der Besuch der alten Dame*, the divine injustice has been debased to the “richest woman in the world,” that is, to the merely corruptive power of unlimited money to create justice and constitute the moral world order within the play, the protagonist no longer has a chance to attain heroic stature. For all his immense suffering and profound despair, the merchant Ill does not possess the majesty of a tragic hero. Even if his eventual decision to accept his self-sacrifice as a kind of atonement may be admirable as a good deed, his death nevertheless lacks greatness, and thus the power of any purifying effect on the events or on the spectator. The leveling of the divine antagonist to the profane reduces the superhuman stature of the hero to the ordinary, and tragedy becomes—tragicomedy. The predominant role of tragicomedy among contemporary drama depends, for Kaufmann, on a tendency of our age “for experimenting and mixed genres” (p. 320). But I think the basis for this fact lies deeper. Somewhat roughly, one could formulate a brief explanation of tragicomedy as “secularized tragedy.” The current flowering of this genre appears then to be the final step of a long-range process in which the realm of the divine, the “numinous atmosphere” is gradually receding and vanishing within the drama. Evolving from Shakespeare’s plays, this trend would lead through Büchner’s *Danton* and *Woyzeck*, Kleist’s *Amphitruon* and Hauptmann’s tragicomedies to the theater of the absurd today. But with that we touch upon the topic of yet another volume—the history of tragicomedy. The book in question is a study of tragedy and thus, in our democratic conformistic age of mediocre majority, an “untimely” appraisal of the few great-souled—those who have the courage and the strength to stand out from the rest. “Menschengröße, Größe überhaupt, beruht zuletzt darauf, daß wir das Maß nicht schlucken, sondern damit konstruieren.”<sup>3</sup> Kaufmann’s latest work gives an impressive proof—and for some of us it may be a reassuring one—that without *this* greatness there would be no tragedy—and no creative criticism.

Duquesne University

DOROTHEA SCHÄFER-WEISS

---

<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Schadewaldt, “Hölderlin’s Übersetzung des Sophokles,” (1956), in *Antike und Gegenwart: Über die Tragödie* (München; Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1966), p. 132. “That the tragic hero can offend ‘the god’ at all is his mark of superiority; and again it is his strength that he can love the divine injustice” [Translation is mine.].

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Kassner, *Umgang der Jahre* (Erlenbach-Zürich: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1949), p. 177.