FROM SHAKESPEARE TO EXISTENTIALISM: AN ORIGINAL STUDY

Essays on Shakespeare and Goethe; Hegel and Kierkegaard; Nietzsche, Rilke, and Freud; Jaspers, Heidegger, and Toynbee

BY WALTER KAUFMANN

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TYPOGRAPHY BY SUSAN SIEN

AUTHOR'S NOTE

All translations from the German, poetry as well as prose, are mine. Much of this material has never before been offered in English.

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From Shakespeare to Existentialism

TO THE MILLIONS MURDERED
IN THE NAME OF FALSE BELIEFS
BY MEN WHO PROSCRIBED CRITICAL REASON
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

Preface (1979)

In the summer of 1979 I traveled around the world for the fourth time, visiting half a dozen countries to which I had been before. Upon arriving at San Francisco from Tokyo, I drove to the Monterey Peninsula and Big Sur. There I explored some of the same sights more than once, although I had been there several times before. Suddenly it struck me that it was odd that instead of seeking out new places I keep returning to so many that keep fascinating me. Yet some people invest in a summer house and go back there year after year. At least my repertory is larger than that. Then it occurred to me, as the sea showered the rocks with veils of lace, that it is no different in the realms of scholarship. We are, most of us, of one piece.

I keep going back to the same men, deepening my understanding of them. Yet even as my most recent photographs of India and Bali do not supersede those taken some years ago, the essays in this volume are not, I think, dated.

Of course, this is an unusually personal approach to scholarship. But even in 1949, when my first two articles on Goethe appeared on the occasion of the poet's two hundredth birthday, I stressed the intimate connection between character and work as well as the philosophical dimension of much of the greatest poetry. These themes recur in many of the other essays in this volume, and they have remained characteristic of my work ever since.

Some philosophers are interested primarily in words, in systematically misleading expressions, or in odd propositions that they find in the writings of their predecessors. Many more con-

cern themselves primarily with arguments. All these approaches are legitimate if not particularly humanistic. It is no less legitimate, though certainly less fashionable, to view the writings of philosophers and poets as expressions of human beings and to inquire about their central concerns and their experience of life.

In any case, even a stringent academic taste permits some references to the author in a preface, and when a collection of essays that has been in print continuously for twenty years is reprinted again in the twenty-first by a different publisher, he is expected to explain its relation to his more recent work.

To two of the ten men to whom these twenty essays are devoted I have not returned: Jaspers and Toynbee. There was no need to return to Toynbee. I aimed to show in the last chapters of this book that he was vastly overrated, and this view, originally shared by only a few others, has won the day. Nor do I seem to stand alone in finding little nourishment in Jaspers.

Most of the essays in this book were inspired by great admiration. That is true not only of Shakespeare and Goethe, Hegel and Nietzsche, Rilke and Freud, but also of Kierkegaard. But admiration, of course, does not entail agreement.

To Shakespeare I returned in *Tragedy and Philosophy* (1968, Princeton University Press 1979) and in the last part of *Man's Lot* (1978), which was also issued separately under the title *What is Man?* To Rilke, in the first part of the same trilogy, which was also issued separately as *Life at the Limits*. To Hegel I devoted a whole book (1965), and to Kierkegaard another essay (1962), which is included in my *Existentialism, Religion, and Death* (1976). Freud is the subject of a chapter in *The Faith of a Heretic* (1961). And now I am publishing another trilogy, *Discovering the Mind*, which consists of three volumes: *Goethe, Kant, and Hegel* (1980), *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Buber* (1980), and *Freud versus Adler and Jung* (1981).

These books build on some of the essays collected in the present volume and sometimes refer to them. Some of the essays brought together here have also been reprinted in anthologies, but naturally not all have had an equal impact. Referring specifically to the first two Hegel essays as well as to my *Hegel*, Anthony Quinton said in *The New York Review of Books* in 1975: "In the United States the revival of interest in Hegel was initially the work of Walter Kaufmann." But my essay on Heidegger's

later thought has not been so fortunate. His star is still in the ascendance, especially in the United States, and it is for that reason that I have returned to him in the second volume of *Discovering the Mind* to finish the job, if possible. But this critical animus is reserved largely for Heidegger and Toynbee. Most of the chapters are inspired by enthusiasm, if not love.

The essays closest to my own heart have not had the greatest impact. Chapters 12 through 14 deal with matters of which relatively few scholars seem to have had much experience. Yet most scholars seem to assume implicitly that the men about whose works they write were on the whole not very different from themselves. Often this does not seem to be the case. Again we face the question of the man behind the work, or rather *in* the work. I feel that those three chapters may still contribute something to the understanding of Nietzsche and Rilke, poetry and art.

These essays first appeared in book form in 1959, and some additions were incorporated in the first paperback edition a year later. It would not make sense to revise them now, or to update the Bibliography significantly. But I have made a few small changes in the Bibliography, beginning on page 430.

I am grateful to the Princeton University Press for bringing together under its imprint four of my books. The relationship of this one to the other three is so close that it does not need laboring.

Preface (1960)

The history of a book may constitute a large part of the author's life—and therefore concern him alone. Yet false assumptions about the genesis of a work may abet serious misconceptions of the writer's valuations.

Many a chapter in this book was rewritten again and again, some passages easily twenty times, before a preliminary version appeared in some book or journal—a piece of a work in progress. Eventually the time came to worry and work over these chapters, along with others not yet published and still others yet to be written—a time of rewriting and polishing and rewriting again until the book was ready to be offered to a publisher. Accepted and threatened with the relative permanence of print, a manuscript cries out for final scrutiny and hundreds of last-minute changes: here the prose could be tightened, there a phrase might be brought a little closer to perfection. Some writers gladly leave such tasks for editors; I should as soon request another man to see or suffer, live or love for me. For writing is a form of seeing and of suffering, of life and love.

After that, what reaction would be most amusing: to have the book read as an explication of the first two chapters, which in fact were written last? or to find the whole considered as a casual collection of a score of miscellaneous essays? or to be congratulated on publishing a book a year? My *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* had appeared only a year earlier, in 1958. But a book a year? Rather, two books in nine years; or, counting my *Nietzsche,* originally issued in 1950, three

books in thirty-eight years. The volumes which I translated and edited were by-products.

My books are not noncommittal. They praise what is rarely praised. But today "commitment" is associated with the refusal to stand alone, and "nobility" is not in favor. In this book "nobility" means being hard with oneself, making demands on oneself, devotion.

People use moral terms without thinking about them. They confound devotion with devoutness, and humility with meekness. Yet nothing makes one more conscious of one's limitations than bold aspirations, which are not self-effacing. People decry ambition, but ambition teaches humility. One need not be a Freudian to see that, but it helps to know Freud, the undevout, devoted man in whom humility and pride were fused.

Love, unlike nobility, is popular and frequently commended as if, even when the word is not used as a euphemism, it were most enjoyable. But what do those know of love who do not know that it is a cross? Surely, the Buddha was right that love is the fountainhead of hurt and misery, suffering and despair. He also taught that life and love were not worth while. But to take this cross upon oneself with open eyes, that is nobility, that is devotion, that makes life worth while.

In the first chapter, partly in an effort to provoke, nobility, even when not fused with love, is considered with a great deal of respect. We are used to distortions of the history of ethics and aesthetics, and it is worth pointing out that Aristotle and such celebrated tragedies as *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet, Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar* confront us with a great tradition in which nobility is not associated with love. Here is dedication, courage, and severity against oneself, but no love. This is not the acme of humanity but an interesting contrast to that modern cult of sentiment which does not issue from tremendous depths of feeling but, quite to the contrary, from lack of depth and feeling. People enjoy feelings which are not intense enough to torment them, and think it would be nice to feel what they do not quite feel. If the treatment of this problem in the first chapter should be provocative to the point of misleading the reader about my own valuations—which matter far less than the attempt to make the reader reconsider *his*—the

angelo's masterpieces, merely to indicate ideal types, completely disregarding levels of achievement. Surely my books are more like the master's Slaves, struggling out of the stone, unfinished, than like his Pieta in St. Peter's. Some readers, alas, will feel reminded more of his Last Judgment. But I should rather like to think of these books as torsos—a beginning rather than a final statement, groping rather than definitive, not sicklied over by the deadly cast of scholarship but a challenge.

W. K.

February 1960

Preface (1959)

This book is the fruit, albeit not the only one, of almost ten years' work. Drafts for various chapters have appeared here and there, but all of them have been revised, for the most part very extensively. One can—and unfortunately almost every reader will—begin with any chapter that may strike his fancy. Read straight through, however, the book traces a historical development—and gradually various themes are developed. Even those who read only the first four chapters before they begin to skip will find more in the later chapters than readers who approach nonfiction as a kind of smorgasbord.

The outlook toward which this book points is developed more fully in my *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*. Here are some of the historical studies out of which my *Critique* has grown; there are some of my own conclusions. Alas, it works the other way around, too, and a few contentions in the present volume had to be backed up by references to my *Critique*.

This is certainly not positivistic historiography but writing that comes perilously close to existentialism, although Heidegger and Jaspers are sharply criticized in both books, and Toynbee is accused, among other things, of being an existentialist historian. But we need not choose between positivism and existentialism of that sort any more than between Christianity and materialism. One can write with—and can remember that the men one writes about had—"dimensions, senses, affections, passions," without embracing the profoundly unsound meth-

ods and the dangerous contempt for reason that have been so prominent in existentialism.

While this book has considerable continuity, it is certainly not Procrustean, and the ten subjects of this study are not reduced to grist for the author's mill. The approach varies in almost every chapter, and a juxtaposition of "Nietzsche and Rilke" leads to a more systematic discussion of "Art, Tradition, and Truth," and hence to an essay on "Philosophy Versus Poetry." Throughout, the interrelations of poetry, religion, and philosophy are emphasized; and so are a few remarkable falsifications of history. One conclusion may be anticipated. The book denies that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty"; but it finds both in Shakespeare and neither in Toynbee.

Shakespeare is seen in an unconventional perspective, and so are the other nine men studied in this volume: Goethe, Hegel, and Kierkegaard; Nietzsche, Rilke, and Freud; Jaspers, Heidegger, and Toynbee. It is part of the purpose of this book to view them all in a new light—not only singly but also as figures in a story that begins and ends in England but unfolds for the most part in Germany. No attempt is made to be "complete" by padding this revaluation either with obeisances to Schiller, Schelling, and Schopenhauer—who are merely noticed occasionally, from a distance—or with capsule outlines of the views of those considered. This book deals intensively with a few men and is more concerned with issues and interpretations than with the recital of facts and events which may be found in good encyclopedias. Every chapter tries to make a few points, and not one tries to repeat what can be readily found elsewhere.

Whatever else might be said in this Preface is said in the first two chapters. My own view of life is made plain in Chapters 1 and 2, and 12 through 14, though not only there. I agree with Paul that love is more important than faith and hope; but so are honesty, integrity, and moral courage. The world needs less faith and more love and nobility.

W. K.

From Shakespeare to Existentialism

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I

SHAKESPEARE: BETWEEN SOCRATES AND EXISTENTIALISM

That history is at least often written from a point of view —and that the Nazis and the Communists developed different accounts, not only of the recent past, but of the whole development from ancient Greece to modern times—is now a commonplace. But that a warped and tendentious view of the present age and its relation to the past is current in our midst and more indebted to Christianity than to any political ideology requires showing.

It would be tedious to present a catalogue of noteworthy offenders and to argue, one by one, with each. And it would be silly to suppose that they conspired with each other. What the guilty writers share is not a platform or a set of dogmas but a deep dissatisfaction with the time in which it is their lot to live.

This widespread feeling, like many another, was formulated definitively by T. S. Eliot. He persuaded millions that the modern world is a waste land, and he proclaimed (in *After Strange Gods*) that "the damage of a lifetime, and of having been born in an unsettled society, cannot be repaired at the moment of composition." Thousands of writers feel sorry for themselves, and some who do not greatly admire Eliot believed Gertrude Stein when she blamed society for her inability to write better and when she told them that they were a lost generation.

This self-pity and self-deception involve, among other things, a comprehensive distortion of history. It is not uncommon for modern writers to talk themselves and others into the fancy that our generation is unique in having lost the motherly

protection of a firm religious faith, as if Socrates and Shakespeare had been reared with blinders and as if the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the nineteenth century were all contemporary inventions. Some turn such men as Socrates and Shakespeare into honorary Christians; others sob wistfully about Dante and Aquinas.

Godless existentialism is pictured as the philosophy of our age: the modern poet is not offered the fine edifice of Thomism, as Dante was; he is confronted, we are told, by a bleak doctrine that proclaims that man is not at home in the world but thrown into it, that he has no divine father and is abandoned to a life of care, anxiety, and failure that will end in death, with nothing after that. Poor modern man!

In fact, a disillusionment that used to be the prerogative of the few has become common property; and what exhilarated Socrates and Shakespeare, who were in a sense sufficient to themselves, is found depressing by men who lack the power to find meaning in themselves. It has almost become a commonplace that the modern artist has lost contact with his audience and that the public no longer supports him as in previous ages. In this connection one simply ignores Rembrandt and Mozart, Villon and Hölderlin, Cézanne and Van Gogh. Hundreds of works by modern artists hang in museums largely because the public is so eager to treat unconventional artists better than former ages did. But Rembrandt did not need a public: he had his work and himself. Many moderns are not satisfied with themselves and their work and blame their failures on the absence of a cultured audience.

There have never been so many writers, artists, and philosophers. Any past age that could boast of more than one outstanding sculptor or philosopher the whole world over and of more than three good writers and painters wins our admiration as unusually productive; and many an age had none of great distinction. It is not the public that is at fault today but the excess of pretenders. But instead of recognizing their own lack of excellence, many resort to styles that will allow them to charge their lack of success to the obtuseness of the public.

Rembrandt had the ability to maintain a great reputation but preferred to paint in his own way, saying in effect, as