

The Tragic Flame

Homage to the Tragic Muse, by Angelos Terzakis; translated from the Greek by Athan H. Anagnostopoulos; with a Foreword by Cedric H. Whitman, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978. ix + 206 pp. \$8.95.

THIS IS A BOOK worth reading. It is the best book on tragedy I have read. On the surface it is a modest book, not only because it goes its own pace, casually touching on the main questions as they arise during one's reflections on well-known dramas, but because it does not pretend to do more than consider tragedy as an artistic phenomenon. It quickly becomes apparent that the intense—but still casual—personal tone cannot conceal that the power and success of the consideration comes from reflections on what this artistic phenomenon tells us about life itself.

Angelos Terzakis is a novelist, playwright, critic, editor, and Director of the National Theater of Greece. He is the rarest of winged creatures, a theater director who can think. There is no hopeless gap in him between a man who understands the peculiar dramatic forces in particular plays and a man whose reflective life has received its vocabulary from Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, as well as from Aristotle. The combination is not academic but highly individual, and it is a combination that the reader immediately trusts.

His method seems easy. "I want you to consider with me some of the questions that appear when we think of certain plays you and I both know intimately: above all *Oedipus Tyrannus*, but *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Doctor Faustus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *King Lear* as well." And so we comfortably submit ourselves to his reflections, unsystematic but immensely careful and serious. Almost at once we realize that this book cannot be put down, because it is not so much a book about certain famous plays as a book about the mystery of human life that their authors

were obsessed with, "our anguished association with the world."

That is how he puts it, "our" association. It is not a slip, even though we are looking at Oedipus or Romeo. We do look at them, not because we see them as other selves, but because in some odd way what they experience is closer to us than our apparent stature would suggest. "They have been born tragic, born for tragedy." Can we say the same of ourselves? Perhaps it is our deep fear that we could that justifies the close attention we pay to their progress.

Terzakis insists that we do not distract ourselves by talking of fate. It is the tragic hero, not his circumstances, or even his final destiny that we should observe closely. He is a "marked man." It is a privilege to be marked in his way, born to be a tragic hero. If this seems preposterous, it is only because we judge from a world that does not approve of tragedy. Catastrophe is to be shunned and lamented. We look for causes and for blame. The causes may be psychological or physical, internal or external. They may or may not connect with the sufferer. If they do, we can blame; if they do not we see scandal.

The destiny of Oedipus was dreadful but not scandalous. Nor can we—or he—find him at fault. Aristotle saw him differently. Aristotle seems to have abhorred mystery. But we need not think of Aristotle as Delphic, but rather one like ourselves when we are in the mood of sorting difficult things out and unwilling to leave anything without clear causation. If there is a flaw in tragedy it is in the whole destiny of man, not in the individual hero. For when we observe tragic heroes, we see their passions not their flaws. And it is passion that provokes conflict, not a flaw in the metal.

In the case of Oedipus—and Terzakis is right in calling him the prototype—his passion, the passion that defines the plot of the play, was his insistence on establishing his identity. There is no passion more fundamental to individual striving than this, no passion more contemporary. Could he be blamed if this led him to do most dreadful things? In this play more than any other

is the "hero's organic involvement in the crucial event" obvious, unless one is in the habit of insisting that he was trapped or that he could have avoided his destiny. That is always the principal question about a tragic hero: what is his destiny? And the answer is not given by referring only to his catastrophe, but instead to his vision, his spirit.

I am not comfortable with a phrase like "fundamental antinomy," or even the more somber "a dark presence at the crucial core of life." Nor do I like to dwell for more than a second on "mystery." For fear of being distracted by some implication that there is a place or a mechanism, a force or a set of laws that the vision of tragedy asks our minds to rest in when we have nothing more to say about man himself. I believe Nietzsche is right in discouraging us from imagining some place (metaphysical) other than the stage we are on. "The realm of the utterly dangerous" is right here. And it can be avoided by caution, unless we are unlucky and are destroyed by accident. And if we are destroyed by accident, and most of us will be, we will not be tragic, nor will we have a tragic sense of life.

In the middle of this book the author shows his hand very plainly. "One day I will leave this world wiser but without having understood anything, neither how I lived nor why I lived." We are accustomed to use what we know to construct a way of life that is more or less satisfactory, that we are comfortable with. It would be foolish to ask much more than that. For the nightmare that unsettles most of all is the one that comes late in life, after the arrangements have been made, that says, "I understand nothing at all." We know that can happen. The question is whether, having pulled ourselves together afterwards, we are the wiser. Probably not. Even the beginning of wisdom shows, in an assurance that we need not explain, in a measured treatment of whatever comes. And wisdom of this sort is not only beyond understanding, it is made possible by a combination of the best and the worst. The

best is the spirit, the passion, that defines a person; the worst is that we know enough of life to expect the worst and, like Henry Adams, to find it always worse than expected. That combination is what we find in tragedy; and when we live by it, we are living with a tragic sense of life.

Such a wisdom has dignity. The tragic spirit places dignity higher than hope. The experience of the worst threatens always to erase dignity. When it does not, we not only recognize hope as slightly irrelevant, we understand that what counts most is the unchanging spirit of the human sufferer, suffering because in some way his destiny was from the beginning in his hands. We know we are free to escape a certain definition of our identity, if we wish. Well-wishers have told us how often enough. When we choose not to, we choose our destiny as well as our identity. And who can tell beforehand whether that destiny will be star-crossed or not? All may go well, and we may never know the tragic worst. If all does not go well, we know and others know us as marked, a human horror to behold. A horror but also an enigma. An enigma and also a kind of beauty.

One of the best things about Terzakis' account of tragedy is his insistence that we view tragedy in aesthetic rather than in moral terms. Years ago I would have rejected this. I now see that we miss the point of tragedy completely if we try to appraise the hero and his destiny in moral terms. For his experience has led him beyond comprehensible causality to an acceptance of fate that has no explanation, but that does have dignity. To see this is to see something real and beautiful, even if it is in a world where God is silent, or as Terzakis says, "before he reveals himself." We cannot judge the rules of the game. We can respect the spirit of the player.

Of course, there is "a disparity between moral claim and aesthetic affirmation." It would be fine indeed if we were in a position to settle that claim. We are wise indeed if we can rise to aesthetic affirmation, judging someone to be worthy because he has voluntarily entered into the heart of

light. That the tragic light is ominous as well as luminous we know well from our reading of that dark Apollonian play, *Oedipus Tyrannus*. And, truth to tell, not only is the end dark, but the hero's haunted sense of doom is the equivalent of a sense of primordial guilt. I know how hard it is for modern man, even Christian man, to think of original sin, let alone feel it. But I would say that we should not dismiss the thought that the tragic sense—whether one is thinking of the way the hero feels or whether one is thinking of the way we feel as we watch him—is a sense that to be out of joint is somehow the same as being implicated in being at fault. I suggest, I do not insist. That is part of our "secret destiny."

Wisdom is not acceptance of the worst, it is much more than that. It is the realization that the "chance for a final flame," which is all we have, may be marred by being born in a world that would extinguish that flame if it can, would and probably will.

The late Cedric Whitman who wrote the Foreword was a colleague of mine once. I remember him proposing to a group of us that there was a tragedy of love. We demurred, for reasons I cannot recall. It is most fitting that he should have been chosen to present Terzakis' book, for Terzakis, like Unamuno before him, believes that love has a fundamentally tragic character, "the mirage in the desert, the irony in place of Paradise." Its mystique is "the announcement of possibilities and conditions we cannot reach." And he calls it a "boundary situation" (Jaspers), like pain, struggle, guilt, chance, and death. Love is always a defeat, always desperate, because it is a passion for boundlessness. Is it any wonder that Saint Maria Maddalena de'Pazzi, having run through her convent crying "Love, love, love!" should finally cry "O Lord, No more love, no more love!"

Terzakis says, "love is a despot." Well, so is all beauty, and so is tragedy. "No more tragedy!" He is right when he says that tragedy requires "a certain naiveté," the innocent, clear-spirited passion of youth.

The tragic age is youth, its assumption that quests must be followed to the end. There is a kind of generosity in this, that welcomes all that follows. But I must say for myself that the vision of tragedy does not come from youth, but from Oedipus, from fifth-century Athens, and from the experience of many a lifetime.

Reviewed by RALPH HARPER

Spiritual Models

Soldier, Sage, Saint, by Robert C. Neville,
New York: Fordham University Press,
1978. xi + 141 pp. \$15.00 (paper
\$7.50).

THIS IS A philosophic study of human spiritual development, especially as reflected in the models of soldier, sage, and saint. Neville makes it clear at once that he is speaking as a philosopher seeking to understand mankind's spiritual traditions, not as a guru testifying to his private experiences. The advantage of making a philosophic analysis of traditions is that it discusses funded experiences accessible to every reflective mind.

In considering any study of spirituality, we are likely to raise two preliminary questions. Is spirituality the same as religion? And which type of spiritual outlook is taken as the primary pattern? Neville faces both questions forthrightly at the very outset. He distinguishes between a religion or organized church and a religious attitude or way of life. Church membership is not the same as a religious way of living, although the former may encourage the latter's growth. A religious mode of life encompasses three human concerns: ritual action, cosmological interpretation of the world through myths and symbols, and personal spiritual development. The difficulty today is that politics channels much of our ritual action, and that science and