

Introduction

WALTER KAUFMANN WAS born in Freiburg in Breisgau, Germany, on July 1, 1921, and died in Princeton, New Jersey, on September 4, 1980, far too young, at fifty-nine, for someone of his vitality.¹ His colleague, the Princeton historian Carl Schorske, remained lucid until his death in 2015, after having celebrated his one-hundredth birthday.² Arthur Szathmary, who together with Walter Kaufmann joined Princeton's Department of Philosophy in 1947, died in 2013 at ninety-seven; and Joseph Frank, emeritus professor of comparative literature at Princeton, with whom Walter debated an understanding of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, passed away in 2013 at ninety-four, some months after publishing his last book.³ It is hard to imagine Kaufmann's sudden death at that age arising from an ordinary illness, and in fact the circumstances fit a conception of tragedy—if not his own. According to Walter's brother, Felix Kaufmann, Walter, while on one of his Faustian journeys of exploration to West Africa, swallowed a parasite that attacked his heart. In the months following, Walter died of a burst aorta in his Princeton home.

His death does not fit his own conception of tragedy, for his book *The Faith of a Heretic* contains the extraordinary sentences:

When I die, I do not want them to say: Think of all he still might have done. There is cowardice in wanting to have that said. Let them say—let me live so they can say: There was nothing left in him; he did not spare himself; he put everything he had into his work, his life.⁴

He would also not want it otherwise than to have his readers oppose him, for only some of this claim would prove true. Against his will, and yet at no threat to his nobility (for “nobility squanders itself”), readers will think of all he might have done.⁵ This awareness, too, is heartbreaking, when one reads

more and more of his vast and lively work as philosopher, essayist, poet, photographer, translator, and editor. I think of all the joy of creativity denied to him—and to us, who study him with intricate pleasure and with a response that needs to be creative. Indeed, as Kaufmann's former student and colleague the philosopher Alexander Nehamas has written, we are working "in a field ['the philosophical tradition'] that sometimes considers agreement a form of discourtesy."⁶

In a disarmingly simple sentence in *The Faith of a Heretic*, published in 1961, Kaufmann writes of the commitments made by two formidable writers, Hermann Hesse and Martin Buber: "Their personalities qualify their ideas." Kaufmann means that such commitments—Hesse's apolitical reclusiveness and Martin Buber's "selfless" principles of Bible translation—may not have the same value "when accepted by men of a different character." Here we have his recurrent insistence on the exemplary importance of great personalities "if we ever are to learn the meaning of humanity."⁷ He might have quoted Stephen Spender: "I think continually of those who were truly great."⁸ Shakespeare, Goethe, Nietzsche, and Freud are Kaufmann's distinctive examples. This high valuation of character over culture—a character informed by what may be called *virtù*—*will, flooded with intelligence*—could make Kaufmann's thoughts seem out of season in our acquisitive, culture-besotted age. But his distaste throughout the 1950s and 1960s for the feeling that the times could no longer countenance greatness of soul would have survived him into our century. His short life gives us a good, strong taste of what such greatness of soul would be like.

Walter's father, Bruno Kaufmann, a cultivated lawyer, was born a Jew but converted to Protestantism; his mother, Edith née Seligsohn, did not convert, as we discover from a poignant interview conducted shortly before Kaufmann's death. Even as a boy of eleven, as he recalls, he was unable to understand who or what the Holy Ghost was and asked his father for an explanation. The explanation fell short, and he replied, "Well, I don't believe in Jesus and I don't believe in the Holy Ghost either, so it seems I just believe in God, and then I cannot really be a Christian."⁹ He took this conclusion very seriously and, not yet twelve years old, formally abjured Christianity and received a document confirming his decision.

The abjuration of Christianity was not an abjuration of the subject he found "intensely interesting"—religion—an interest he would maintain for the rest of his life.¹⁰ Still a boy of twelve, he converted to Judaism, ignorant of the fact that *all* his grandparents were born Jewish. He then became bar mitzvah, partly

under the guidance and participation of Rabbi Leo Baeck, at that time the acknowledged leader of the Jewish community in Germany.¹¹ To elect, as he did, to be bar mitzvah in Berlin in the year 1933 might be called a gesture of Socratic protestantism; it might also be reckoned the expression of a self *never* inclined to bend—and might have led (or not) to the burst aorta that took Kaufmann's life at the unquiet age of fifty-nine.

In the years following his conversion, Kaufmann met the charismatic Martin Buber as well; and he was much impressed, then and long afterward, by the writings of both thinkers. He translated a volume of essays by Leo Baeck, *Judaism and Christianity*, admiring especially the essay "Romantic Religion," and Buber's *I and Thou*, often acknowledging its importance.¹²

Kaufmann would soon encounter Nazi social viciousness head-on. He was denied entrance to a university but was able to use profitably even those years of not yet lethal persecution. In March 1938, at age seventeen, having graduated from the Grunewald Gymnasium in Berlin, where his family now lived, Kaufmann entered the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (Institute for Judaic Studies), where he completed a semester and a half of work in Jewish history. Thereafter he went to Palestine for three weeks; he was to revisit Israel many times afterward.¹³ On returning to Berlin, he began studying Talmud at the *Lehranstalt* of the institute in preparation for the rabbinic before emigrating in January 1939 to the United States. He prepared for the rabbinate, he explains, since

in Germany at that time, there was nothing else to study. As a Jew I couldn't go to the university, so, being terribly interested in religion at that time, and in Judaism in particular, . . . [becoming a rabbi] is what I thought I would do. When I came to United States, I took all the religion courses I could take in college, majored in philosophy, and one thing led to another.¹⁴

Kaufmann escaped the fate of several members of his family. Their change of faith meant nothing to the Nazis; the entire family, Walter Kaufmann included, could have expected certain death had they not left Germany. One of Walter's uncles, fighting for Germany in the First World War, died in Russia; two others were murdered. The dedication to the volume *The Faith of a Heretic* reads:

To My Uncles
WALTER SELIGSOHN
who volunteered in 1914 and was
shot off his horse on the Russian front in 1915

JULIUS SELIGSOHN
AND
FRANZ KAUFMANN

both Oberleutnant, Iron Cross, First-Class, 1914–18,
one a devout Jew,
one a devout convert to Christianity,
one killed in a Nazi concentration camp in 1942,
one shot by the Secret Police in 1944,
both for gallantly helping others
in obedience to conscience, defiant

Kaufmann arrived in the United States alone in 1939 and in the fall enrolled in Williams College, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, with sophomore credit. He mastered English with exceptional speed, graduating two years later with high honors. Details of his intellectual progress at Williams are found in the alumni archives of the Williams College Library, where they have been examined by Eric v. d. Luft and inserted into a brief—and in part painfully derogatory—biography in the *Dictionary of American Biography*.¹⁵ Kaufmann studied with John William Miller, who lectured on the philosophy of history, “grounded,” according to v. d. Luft, in the “free act proposing systematic consequences.”¹⁶ Kaufmann’s other mentor was James Bissett Pratt, who lectured on comparative religion, a course that Kaufmann attended zealously.¹⁷ Pratt taught the pertinence of bodily experience to religious feeling,¹⁸ and his comments on mysticism recur in Kaufmann’s 1958 opus *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*. About these opposite ideas of freedom and bodily determinism, v. d. Luft notes that “both strains of thought were later manifested in Kaufmann’s own thought.”¹⁹ Early in his undergraduate years, Kaufmann abandoned his commitment to Jewish ritual while developing a deeply critical attitude toward all established religions.

After graduation, Kaufmann’s likely path led to graduate school, to write a doctoral thesis in philosophy, but his ever-present will to action, and now with a war on, urged him, after a year at Harvard, to join the US Army Air Force and thereafter serve as an interrogator for the Military Intelligence Service “in an old German penitentiary in the Rhineland.”²⁰ His experience with the occupying troops was morally vexing, and a poem in his volume *Cain* tells of his chagrin:

“Occupation”

Parading among a conquered and starving people
among the ruins

with patches and stripes and ribbons and hash marks
one for a year in the army
for having grown callous and dumb
one for a year in the States
for learning to goldbrick and pass the buck
one for the fight and one for the occupation
for drinking and whoring and black marketeering
one for the victory that is melting away
while they parade among the ruins with ribbons and stripes.²¹

He deplored the collapse of military discipline. A piece published in 1979 in Princeton's student newspaper the *Princetonian* reports Kaufmann's remark, during a lecture on Nazism, that in 1944, as part of an American military intelligence team, he witnessed American soldiers who, in the course of their interrogations, beat and killed German prisoners.²²

In Berlin Kaufmann bought a copy of the Musarion edition of Nietzsche's collected works and was captivated.²³ He returned to Harvard with the intention of writing his doctoral dissertation on Nietzsche, which he did in a year, earning his PhD in 1947 with a thesis titled "Nietzsche's Theory of Values." That very fall he began teaching at Princeton, where he continued to teach for the next thirty-three years.

In 1950, just three years after arriving in Princeton, Kaufmann published his remarkable first opus, with signature provocativeness, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, which would transform the reception of Nietzsche in America and Europe. In Kaufmann's hands, Nietzsche emerged as a deeply productive philosopher, altogether more engaging than his pejorative image as wild man and proto-Nazi would suggest. Nietzsche studies in America flourish as a rigorous discipline entirely aware of Kaufmann's intellectual revision. It is hard to find a single monograph on Nietzsche in the fifty years following that does not take pains either to agree or to disagree with his work. At Princeton Kaufmann would be promoted to full professor in 1962, but as an "avowed critic of religious institutions,"²⁴ his rise to this position was visibly delayed, and it took another seventeen years for him to occupy the distinguished Stuart Professorship of Philosophy.²⁵

There is a sort of permanent youthfulness—zest and pugnacity—in all of Kaufmann's writing, consistent with the picture of him in life that many people retain. The filmmaker Ethan Coen, who studied philosophy at

Princeton, mentions Kaufmann's special dedication to undergraduates.²⁶ I first saw Kaufmann in 1955, in the early summer following my graduation from Columbia College, when he came to lecture on that new and exciting philosophical movement called existentialism. To my regret, I was unable to feel myself addressed for the very callow reason that I could not expect a professor who himself looked like an undergraduate and, as I recall, wore lederhosen, to speak with much authority. (I was used to the solemnity and air of mature grandeur that attached to the great figures at that university—Quentin Anderson, Moses Hadas, Lionel Trilling, et al.).

Part of my first impression of Kaufmann was shared by others, to judge from passages in a story titled "Princeton Idyll" by Princeton's own Joyce Carol Oates. One of her two narrators writes, "I do remember the philosopher and Nietzsche translator Walter Kaufmann, who came by on his bicycle to introduce himself . . . and who became one of my grandfather's good friends. So boyish-looking, people mistook him for an undergraduate at the University." The second narrator, a semiliterate housekeeper recalls: "One of them [the geniuses] came alone on his bicycle. I thought he was a student, but this was "WK" who was so kind to me. . . . Once on Olden Lane I was walking & WK stopped his bicycle to walk with me. He wore cordroy trousers and a V-neck sweater like a boy. His hair was very dark and his eyes were dark and lively. He was not much older than I was."²⁷

Kaufmann's life, even as a tenured university professor of philosophy, was full of incident and adventure, which he achieved quite possibly in earshot of the mutterings of some colleagues. In a passage from an earlier work, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, we read in italic, "*That those who prefer freedom to the existence of the intellectual shut-in must of necessity be unable to make up their minds or to act with a will is a myth popular in institutions.*"²⁸ He went his own way, with striking independence, in love with proofs of his autonomy. Something of the scope of the lands he surveyed is suggested in the 1979 preface to the book *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, whose first edition preceded by a year the appearance of *The Faith of a Heretic*. There, he writes of discovering, in summer 1979, his penchant for returning again and again to places that had once fascinated him in the course of "traveling around the world *for the fourth time.*"²⁹ On returning to Rembrandt's "Large Self-Portrait" in the Vienna art museum, he had a sort of moral epiphany. Seeing "integrity incarnate" in the painter's eyes, he felt as if he were being "mustered" by that gaze. He explained: "One has to do something for a living, especially if one has a family, but I felt that I want to write only in the spirit

in which Rembrandt had painted himself, without regard for what might pay or advance my career.”³⁰

He would write (following Stendhal) with what he called “the logic of passion” for a larger reading public. After completing his breakthrough study *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* when he was not yet thirty, he finished his fourth decade by publishing four volumes in nearly consecutive years, the above-mentioned *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, in 1958; a book of his essays, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, in 1959; a commented anthology of religious writings, *Religion from Tolstoy to Camus*, in 1961; and *The Faith of a Heretic*, again, in 1961. The scope of his intellectual concerns is stunning, the erudition breathtaking, and for one so young, the tempo of production uncanny: each of these four near masterpieces is around four hundred pages in hard covers. And this is to overlook his publication, in 1958, as well, of an edited translation of a volume of essays by Leo Baeck, *Judaism and Christianity*; in 1961, two volumes of a commented *Philosophic Classics* and in the same year his redoubtable translation of Goethe’s *Faust*; and finally in 1962, his edition and translation of *Twenty German Poets* and a volume of his own poems, *Cain and Other Poems*. At this early stage he had already created what in German is called *ein Werk*, a substantial, coherent, interrelated body of work. And this prolific evidence of a sustained life of writing and reflection would be present to the very end of his days.

The memorial composed by Princeton’s Philosophy Department on Kaufmann’s death sums up the life beautifully, if too briefly:

He lived his life with a truly dazzling expenditure of energy, giving tirelessly of himself. The life he wanted, he said, was one “of love and intensity, suffering and creation.” That is exactly the kind of life he had.³¹

The pages that follow deal closely with almost all of Kaufmann’s books, highlighting their relevance to arguments and issues vibrant today: the God question, the crisis of the individual subject in an age of aggrandizing technology, the fate of the humanities, and particularly the good of philosophy. Because you will read here and there in dictionaries that Kaufmann was “not a philosopher,” I want to stress how his concerns are also professionally timely.³² Consider a passage from the short biography composed by Ivan Soll, Kaufmann’s student, himself a professor of philosophy. Soll writes, “In *The Faith of a Heretic* [1961] Kaufmann . . . argued that what essentially defines our philosophical tradition, and makes it valuable, is its critical or ‘heretical’ character.” He quotes Kaufmann at length:

In medieval philosophy, apologetics triumphed over criticism. In modern philosophy, critical thinking re-emerges. Both tendencies are prominent in the great modern thinkers. But as we examine their progression, we discover that their rationalizations have proven less enduring than their criticism. And instead of seeing the history of philosophy as an accumulation of fantastic systems, one may view it as the gradual analysis of, and liberation from, one illusion after another, a stripping away of fantasies, a slow destruction of once hallowed truths that are found to be errors.³³

How interesting it is to compare this passage with a sentence from a book on Plato by the current and rightly much-celebrated philosopher Rebecca Goldstein:

The progress to be made in philosophy is often a matter of discovering presumptions that slip unexamined into reasoning, so why not the unexamined presumption that got the whole self-critical process started?³⁴

In this matter of Kaufmann's relevance, apropos of his fundamental interest in religion, consider this citation from the *New York Times* in 1986:

I remember [Paul] de Man looking me in the eye, [J. Hillis] Miller recalls, and saying, "For me, the most important questions are religious questions." So much for [de Man's] "nihilism."³⁵

It remains for us to wonder what part of Kaufmann's preoccupation with religion is an affair of devotion and what part is ethical and intellectual interest. His interviewer Trude Rosmarin-Weiss wonders as well: "He described himself as an 'agnostic' and a 'heretic,' but he wrote so much on religion and defended Judaism against Christianity with such fervor and vehemence that it seemed to me that Professor Kaufmann 'doth protest' too much against religious belief."³⁶ Kaufmann's credo from a later work titled *Existentialism, Religion, and Death* gives further direction to our concern: "Religion deals with faith, morals, and art. I am much less interested in metaphysics and theology than in what religions do to people—how they affect human existence." This is the position of the religious rationalist—religion matters only as it might serve human intellectual and ethical interests. But Kaufmann then adds, "In that sense, my own ultimate concern is existential."³⁷ The term "existential" implies a more than rational disposition. It implies commitment—*belief* in a matter to which one

brings empathy and care. Equally, it does not exclude intellectual interest, for Kaufmann's existence—his *life*—is informed by an unrelenting *libido sciendi*, a craving to know. It is now wonderfully coherent that Kaufmann's first committed project would be a study of Nietzsche, the greatest modern expert on “what religions do to people.”