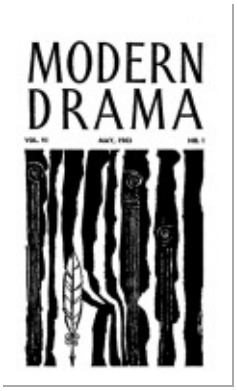
The Death of Tragedy by George Steiner, and: *Tragedy and the Theory of Drama* by Elder Olson (review)



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This translation of *Krechinsky's Wedding* is not only good because some of the qualities of Sokhovo-Kobylin's language and style seem to come through; in choice of words it is excellent. The attractive little volume is a short and most delightful bit of reading, especially for the devotee of Russian literature. Magidoff's rendition would be excellent for a stage performance.

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THE DEATH OF TRAGEDY, by George Steiner, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 1961, 355 pp. Price $5.00.

TRAGEDY AND THE THEORY OF DRAMA, by Elder Olson, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1961, 269 pp. Price $6.50.

In his reading of world dramatic literature, George Steiner has discovered a group of plays that reflect what he apparently considers a fact—"the unaltering bias toward inhumanity and destruction in the drift of the world." Since the causes of pain and disaster, whether they lie outside or inside the human soul, are ultimately inexplicable, suffering cannot be avoided or mitigated by prudence, foresight, good will, or social change. Furthermore, suffering is irremediable; the afflicted man cannot expect to find justice, compensation, or redemption. To dramas that reflect this insight, Steiner gives the name "tragedy." Though tragedy has been one of the most admired of literary genres, it has flourished during only a few short periods of world literature; and after the 17th century few authentic tragedies of artistic merit were produced. Steiner's book is a rapid survey of the history of dramatic literature since Shakespeare, focused on the causes for the death of tragedy.

Some of the more obvious causes were the lack of talent for the drama by practicing artists, the changing expectations of audiences, and the rise of competing artistic forms. But the most important cause was that empiricism was destroying the Christian myth and the conception of the organically related levels of reality that it had fostered. A complete mythology, publicly accepted, is the necessary condition for the production of all great art, for without it an artist cannot create the symbolic structures that are the essence of his art. But the production of tragedy requires a special mythology; it must be one that will support the tragic view of life. According to Steiner, only the ancient Greeks possessed such a mythology. The other great mythologies of the Western world, including the Christian and post-Christian, with their faith in the justice and mercy of God or in empirical reason and progress, have been anti-tragic. Thus tragedy is impossible to Jew, Christian, Marxist, romantic optimist, and social reformer, for they cannot accept the "finality of evil." At best, such artists can create only "near tragedy" or "melodrama"—Goethe's *Faust*, for example, is "sublime melodrama." (Steiner should have been more explicit as to how Shakespeare, living under the Christian dispensation, nevertheless managed to write great tragedy.) Contemporary artists, lacking a public and living myth appropriate for tragedy, must either invent their own myths, return to Greek myth, or write in a nonmythical mode. Steiner briefly examines the work of modern dramatists who have attempted each of these strategies. All have failed. At the end of his book Steiner makes a curious statement: tragedy is "that form of art which requires the intolerable burden of God's presence." It would be interesting to know the details of a theology that could be reconciled with the tragic view of life.

Steiner prides himself on being a practitioner of the "old" criticism. The "old" criticism describes births and deaths of mythologies, movements, civilizations, and literary genres. It loves the Spenglerian sweep, the broad generalization, and the large polar distinction. It conveys its insights through analogy and figure. It flatters the reader by assuming that he has a thorough knowledge of history, literature, and philosophy. In all of these ways it is opposed to the "new" criticism. The Chicago Critics, a group to which Elder Olson belongs, are also in fundamental disagreement with the "new" critics but, like them, have argued that criticism should concern itself primarily with the particularized study of individual literary texts. For this kind of study, the Chicago Critics have been recommending the principles and distinctions of Aristotle and showing how these can be refined, expanded, and supplemented into a full and coherent literary theory. The first part of Olson's book (on the poetics of the drama) is the latest and most complete effort in this direction.

In the second part of his book, Olson presents extended analyses of three plays that achieve a powerful tragic effect (*Agamemnon, King Lear,* and *Phèdre*) and of one that fails (*Mourning Becomes Electra*). His last chapter, "Modern Drama and Tragedy," raises the question why great tragedy is not produced today. His answer is that modern dramatists have committed themselves to the narrow realism of common life and do not imitate characters and actions or present issues that have the quality of "high seriousness" which is indispensable for the tragic effect. "Serious" means "whatever can importantly affect our happiness or misery; whatever can give great pleasure or pain, mental or physical; whatever similarly affects the happiness or pleasure of those for whom we have some concern, or of a good number of people, or of people whom we take to be of considerable worth; or whatever involves a principle upon which all such things depend; or anything that bears a sufficient resemblance to these, or a sufficient relation." The tragic effect culminates in catharsis, in which "the audience is compelled to transcend a *lower* set of moral values to a *higher*; it is compelled to fear and pity, for instance, only to acknowledge in the end that in a higher judgment there are worse evils than those it has been fearing and pitying; and by confronting great misery it has learned, momentarily at least, something of the great conditions upon which human happiness truly depends, and something of the high dignity of which man is capable." Modern dramatists may formulate and defend new definitions of tragedy, but effects of this kind no longer appear in their plays.

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EUGENE IONESCO, by Richard N. Coe, Grove Press (Evergreen Pilot Book), New York, 1961, 120 pp. Price 95 cents.

SAMUEL BECKETT: THE LANGUAGE OF SELF, by Frederick J. Hoffman, Southern Illinois University Press (Crosscurrents: Modern Critiques), Carbondale, 1962, 177 pp. Price $4.50.

Both the volumes reviewed here deal with writers who have made their impact on the public within the last ten years. Yet both have several pages of bibliography appended to the text, containing items for the most part less than five years old. The sudden surge of interest in Beckett and Ionesco, and in the other writers of their kind, is explained at least incidentally in both of these ex-