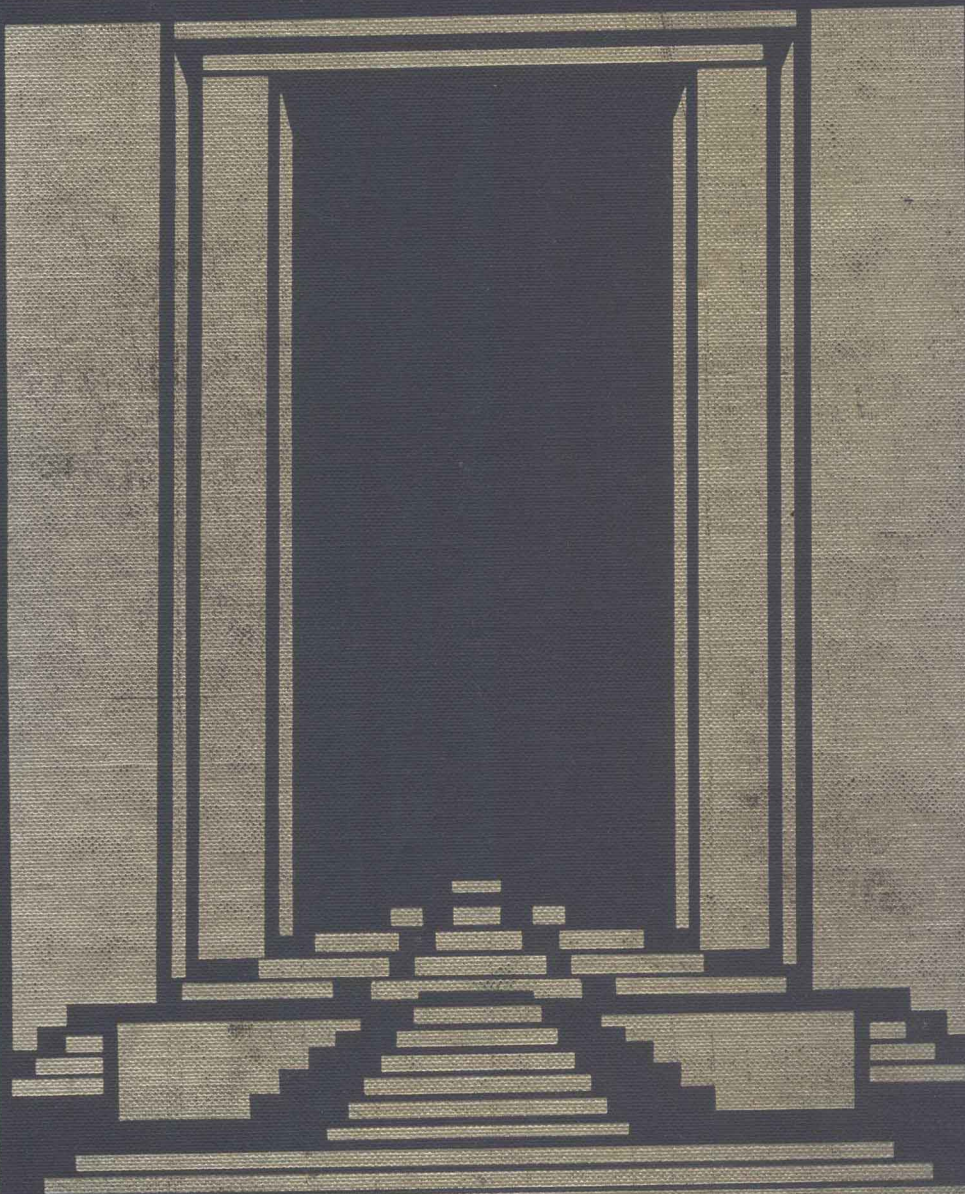


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T W E N T I E T H  
C E N T U R Y



# DRAMA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Comparative and Critical Essays

EDITED BY

Clifford Davidson  
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## Preface

THIS BOOK brings together a group of twenty-two essays on drama of the last one hundred years. The emphasis is on critical writing—on writing that sharpens vision and understanding—rather than on writing designed primarily to inform. The critical modes of the essays are deliberately various and have been selected (with the frustrations usual to anthologizing) not only for intrinsic excellence and for their coverage of many desired works and authors, but because they well illuminate the richness and diversity of modern and contemporary drama.

Importantly, the editors have also chosen essays which explore drama in relationship to other disciplines and other literary forms, for example, the two pairs of framing essays (on “Entropy,” “Retrospective Technique,” “Verse Drama,” and “Mirror as Stage Prop”). George Kurman argues that tragic theory may best be understood by our attention to “a concept well known to the physical sciences and to mathematics, but seldom thought of in connection with the drama—namely that of entropy.” Charles Hallett explores the parallels between the retrospective plots of such plays as *Oedipus Rex*, *Ghosts*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *Equus* and the mystery stories of popular culture: “In fact, the archetype of the retrospective plot is the detective story.” William McCollom attempts to “map the terrain shared by poetry and verse” and reassesses twentieth-century verse drama, including the “poetry” of Samuel Beckett, William Alfred, John Heath-Stubbs, John Arden, and Howard Nemerov, among others. And Thomas Adler examines the “use of the mirror as an important stage prop” not only in the works of Pirandello, O’Neill, Camus, and Genet, but also in three recent major musicals—*Man of La Mancha*, *Cabaret*, and *A Chorus Line*.

In other essays, Arthur Ganz discusses Shavian drama via the “misty grandeurs of the Wagnerian universe,” while Enoch Brater studies



Pinter's cinematic adaptation of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* and concludes that it provides "the cinematic analogue for Pinter's own recent experimentation with the games Time plays with Memory on his stage." Marc Roth decries the "critical neglect of the bulk of Auden's operatic collaborations," and Kristin Morrison argues that "throughout Beckett's career, the fiction with its greater explicitness has provided an important context for words and phrases which appear in the plays."

In these and in the selection of many of the other essays included here, the editors have attempted to provide new perspectives for the reader—perspectives which are suggestive, challenging, and stimulating.

The essays included in this volume are reprinted from *Comparative Drama* and appear as originally printed except for minor corrections requested by several authors.

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*Kalamazoo, Michigan*

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# Entropy and the "Death" of Tragedy: Notes for a Theory of Drama

George Kurman

## I

Recent commentators agree that tragedy as an art form has undergone an irrevocable transformation. Some critics date this change at around the first decade of our century, while others would have it begin as far back as the era of Racine. In any case, within a year or two of each other, during the early 1960's, George Steiner wrote eloquently of the "Death of Tragedy," Martin Esslin tellingly coined the term "Theatre of the Absurd," and Lionel Abel contrasted older tragedy to "Metatheatre."<sup>1</sup> Later in the same decade, Walter Kaufmann took issue with portions of Steiner's argument and terminology, but nevertheless conceded the decline of tragedy, linking this decline to the sense of despair occasioned by the horrors of modern history.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, and in the same year, Geoffrey Brereton agreed that "all critics have experienced the same real difficulty in deciding what happened to dramatic tragedy in the present century. Merely to say that it died is unsatisfactory. No doubt it did die [however] as a single body. . . ."<sup>3</sup> To sum up the views of the critics cited above (together with the opinion of many other observers), it would be just to say that while there existed a coherent notion of tragedy among the dramatic stages of fifth-century Athens, Elizabethan England, and seventeenth-century France, the contributions to tragedy by Goethe, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekov and other writers since Racine are either problematic or transitional, and (during the last seventy years it has been at best questionable and at worst mere nominalism to apply the epithet "tragic" to modern dramatic literature. The purpose of this essay is to suggest that the apparent disappearance of or disjunction in the notion of tragedy can be parsimoni-

ously accounted for in terms of a concept well known to the physical sciences and to mathematics, but seldom thought of in connection with the drama—namely that of entropy.

Entropy (Greek *entropia* “transformation,” cf. *trope* “turning”) was introduced into the modern languages by the German physicist R. Clausius (who had based much of his thinking in this area on the earlier work of S. Carnot) at the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Not long thereafter, with the subsequent development of thermodynamics as a branch of physics, the concept of entropy was co-opted into what has since come to be known as the Second Law of Thermodynamics, mathematically expressed in 1872 by L. Boltzmann as the formula for thermodynamic entropy.<sup>5</sup> One year earlier, however, J. C. Maxwell, in his *Theory of Heat*, had followed Clausius by stating that the entropy of a closed system cannot decrease in the long run: that eventually any closed system will tend toward the leveling of energy potential, increasing disorganization and randomness. In short, Maxwell postulated the gradual evolution of cosmos into chaos. As Wylie Sypher puts it:

Technically entropy is spoken of as a drift toward thermodynamical equilibrium—a squandering of energy into a permanent state where no observable events occur. Every isolated system increases in entropy until it reaches a condition of rest.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the rise in entropy is a measure of the irreversibility of certain processes, all of which contribute to a decrease of available energy or order or structure in the system in question.

Now, as the universe itself may be thought of as a closed system (in addition to being composed of a plurality of systems), and as the universe, like all closed systems, exhibits—in the long run—rising entropy (the degradation of energy, ending in an eventual “heat death”), some scientists have extrapolated from the Second Law of Thermodynamics a statement of the only demonstrable purpose of the universe, namely that the only observable *telos* of creation is to contribute to the rise in entropy. Nevertheless, the Second Principle of Thermodynamics applies, by definition, only to closed systems, while man and other living organisms have been termed “open systems” by current system theory.<sup>7</sup> The *telos* of the metabolism of living organisms (open systems) can be said to be *not* a rise in entropy but homeostasis, or equilibrium; “open systems can maintain themselves in a state of high statistical improbability, of order and organization”;<sup>8</sup>

that is to say, living things tend toward a steady state of energy. Yet the Second Law is not contradicted by the existence of apparently homeostatic open systems such as man. Even if living organisms do maintain an equilibrium within their system, they nevertheless contribute to the rise in entropy of their surroundings. And in any case, all living organisms die. "Therefore the laws of nature are not violated, because the end result of the interaction between a living [i.e., open] system and its environment is still a contribution to rising entropy."<sup>9</sup> Thus, in spite of the seeming generality of the law of rising entropy, this universal trend remains counterpoised by—however short-lived they may be—regions of stable or falling entropy in the form of open systems such as living organisms, along with certain of their groupings or their products.<sup>10</sup> And as the physicist Arthur Eddington observes usefully: "entropy, as it is treated today, is 'an appreciation of arrangement and organization' and therefore deserves to be placed 'alongside beauty and melody'."<sup>11</sup>

If we turn now to theories of tragedy, the applicability of the concept of entropy becomes readily apparent.<sup>12</sup> For example, G. Brereton defines "the archetypal tragic situation" as "that of the individual or the community going down a slope which leads to destruction" (p. 267). Clearly, Brereton's metaphorical slope intersects with the rising entropy of Boltzmann's equation. Without specific reference to sudden entropy rise, Brereton also observes that "the death of a great man in an air-crash qualifies for tragedy unequivocally; if he is killed in a sports-car, the tragic quality becomes more dubious; if by falling off a bicycle, the whole conception is endangered" (p. 18), and Brereton goes on—when speaking of the "tragic flaw"—to refer to

a different notion, for which there is no exact word. . . . A society—or, for that matter, a species—dies out on account of some defect which prevents it from adapting itself to changed conditions. A hereditary flaw or a defect of character (the commonest instances in tragedy) leads an individual to disaster. (pp. 40-41)

The intent of the present essay is to associate this defect or flaw observed to be central to tragedy with the concept of entropy as known to science and mathematics—in short, to furnish the lacking "exact word" referred to by Brereton in the quotation above. Max Scheler is even more metaphorical, but no less in accord with his fellow critics. "The tragic," Scheler suggests, is

"an essential element in the universe itself. The material appropriated by artistic presentation and the tragic poet must contain the dark ore of this element."<sup>13</sup> One more quotation should suffice to illustrate my point:

Tragic drama tells us that the spheres of reason, order, and justice are terribly limited and that no progress in our science or technical resources will enlarge their relevance. Outside and within man is *l'autre*, the "otherness" of the world. Call it what you will [*and I propose to call it rising entropy*—G.K.]: a hidden or malevolent God, blind fate, the solicitations of hell, or brute fury of our animal blood. . . . It mocks and destroys us. (Steiner, pp. 8-9)

## II

In the sixth century before Christ, Greek science, radically different in concepts and approach from earlier Egyptian and Babylonian science, suddenly emerged. "It was in Ionia that the first completely rationalistic attempts to describe the nature of the world took place."<sup>14</sup> It was in Athens during the following century that the first completely theatrical attempts to describe the nature of the human condition occurred. Such a sequence was hardly fortuitous.<sup>15</sup> There is little doubt that Athenian tragedians were aware of the philosophical and scientific speculations of the Presocratic philosophers. Indeed Kirk and Raven (p. 212) have remarked on the stylistic similarities between the choral parts of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and the writings of Heraclitus. But is there any evidence that the Presocratic philosophers of the sixth and fifth centuries dealt with notions akin to entropy? The concepts of *chaos* and *kosmos* are central to Presocratic thought. *Chaos*, a condition of unbound energy, disorder, and randomness is clearly a limit to rising entropy. It is commonly given (as early as in Hesiod's *Theogony* and as late as in Parmenides' "Poem") as the condition preceding creation, as well as (albeit less often) eschatologically cited as the final condition of man and the universe. Anaximander (fl. 547), for example, postulates a necessary return of all things to the "Indefinite" from which they came. And the possibility has been considered that Anaximander envisaged

an even greater cycle, in which the appearance of this differentiated universe out of the Boundless would itself be periodically balanced by the return of all things, including the elements, back into their original source. This doctrine is ascribed to Anaximander by some doxographers. . . .<sup>16</sup>



Clearly, the view that the world is returning to a primordial chaos is an anticipation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. *Kosmos*, already used by the Pythagoreans to denote the orderliness of the universe, plainly describes a situation of stable or falling entropy. It is no accident that for Heraclitus, in the early fifth century, *kosmos* "is perhaps best translated as 'organism'."<sup>17</sup> In addition, the "philosophic sense of this term [i.e., *kosmos*] is as familiar to Heraclitus and Parmenides as it is to Anaxagoras, Empedocles, and Diogenes" (Kahn, p. 111). Furthermore, Hippocratic texts contemporaneous with the Attic tragedians "employ the word *kosmos* for the universal order, and apply this notion in detail to the structure and function of men's bodies" (Kahn, p. 112). Clearly, then, not only are the concepts of *chaos* and *kosmos* isomorphic with the limit of rising entropy and a condition of falling or stable entropy, respectively, but the application of *kosmos*, "order," to a living organism anticipates the entropic distinction between closed and open systems.

The Presocratic anticipation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics is further evident in Heraclitus' well-known identification of fire (cf. heat energy, rising entropy) as the central process (or ubiquitous presence) of the universe.<sup>18</sup> Heraclitus further asserts that the soul of man is composed of fire, a fire related to the world fire and subject to the same laws (Kirk and Raven, p. 205). Finally, Parmenides anticipates application of the concept of entropy to human life in his observation that "Old age rises from the loss of heat."<sup>19</sup> Or as an early fifth-century thinker, Alcmaeon of Croton, phrased it: "Men die because they cannot join the beginning to the end" (Hussey, p. 76).

Having established the existence, among the Presocratic thinkers, of concepts much like the thermodynamic application of the idea of entropy, and assuming the already indicated link between such thinkers and the Athenian dramatists, it should suffice, in the interest of brevity and for the broad purposes of the present essay, to discuss two instances of the awareness of thermodynamic entropy in the drama of Aeschylus.

It was Prometheus who gave mankind not only fire, according to Aeschylus, but civilization and history as well. "Hear what troubles there were among men," the chained Titan tells the Chorus,

how I found them witless and gave them the use of their wits  
and made them masters of their minds. I will tell you this,

not because I would blame men, but to explain the goodwill of my gift. For men at first had eyes but saw to no purpose; they had ears but did not hear. Like the shapes of dreams they dragged through their long lives and handled all things in bewilderment and confusion. They did not know of building houses with bricks to face the sun; they did not know how to work in wood. They lived like swarming ants in holes in the ground, in the sunless caves of the earth. For them, there was no secure token by which to tell winter nor the flowering spring nor the summer with its crops; all their doings were indeed without intelligent calculation until I showed them the rising of the stars, and the settings, hard to observe. And further I discovered to them numbering preeminent among subtle devices, and the combining of letters as a means of remembering all things, the Muses' mother, skilled in craft.<sup>20</sup>

But all of these gifts would have been without value, indeed fraught with peril, had not Prometheus also "caused mortals to cease foreseeing doom" by having "placed in them blind hopes" (ll. 250, 252). Indeed Aeschylus' text can be interpreted as an instance of the tragic poet's cautioning his public about the consequences of culture—heroes bearing gifts; for not only must Prometheus be spectacularly tortured, but *Prometheus Bound* ends with Hermes' stern admonition to the chorus:

Remember then my warning before the act:  
when you are trapped by ruin don't blame fortune.  
Don't say that Zeus has brought you to calamity  
that you could not foresee: do not do this:  
but blame yourselves: now you know what you're doing:  
and with this knowledge neither suddenly  
nor secretly your own want of good sense  
has tangled you in the net of ruin, past  
all hopes of rescue. (ll. 1071-79)

This statement of the consequences of cultural revolution ending in man's self-awareness is followed by Prometheus' own tableau of the necessary end of historical existence—the last word in the play:

Now it is words no longer: now in very truth  
the earth is staggered: in its depths the thunder  
bellows resoundingly, the fiery tendrils  
of the lightning flash light up, and whirling clouds  
carry the dust along: all the wind's blasts  
dance in a fury one against the other  
in violent confusion: earth and sea  
are one, confused together: such is the storm  
that comes against me manifestly from Zeus