

TIMO TIUSANEN

Dürrenmatt

A Study in Plays, Prose, Theory



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DÜRRENMATT

Dürrenmatt

A STUDY IN PLAYS, PROSE, THEORY

BY TIMO TIUSANEN

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Contents



Preface	vii
Abbreviations	x
List of Illustrations	xii
Introduction: A Host of Dürrenmatts	3

PART ONE: ENTERING THE STAGE

1. Early Prose Works: A Dead End	31
2. Poetry in Picture Books: <i>It Is Written, The Blind Man</i>	43

PART TWO: A CREATIVE OUTBURST

3. A Judge of His Own Case: <i>Romulus the Great</i>	73
4. Don Quixote in a Broken Mirror: <i>The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi</i>	93
5. To Whom Grace Belongs: <i>An Angel Comes to Babylon</i>	110
6. Nature Behind the Scenes: Three Novels	127
7. The Absolute Grotesque Takes Over: <i>A Dangerous Game, The Pledge</i>	149
8. More than a Reservoir of Themes: Radio Plays	176
9. A Judge of His Own Craft: <i>Writings on the Theater</i>	202
10. All Roads Lead to Guellen: <i>The Visit</i>	223

CONTENTS

PART THREE: VICTORIES AND DEFEATS

11. Freedom Among the Gangsters: <i>Frank V</i>	255
12. Doctoring a Hopeless Patient: <i>The Physicists</i>	266
13. The Other Half of the Paradox: <i>Hercules, The Meteor</i>	287
14. His Own Dramaturge: <i>The Anabaptists</i>	309
15. "Strindmatt or Dürrenberg?": <i>Play Strindberg</i>	322
16. Shake-Scening the Barbs: Four Adaptations	336
17. Cosmic and Underground Visions: <i>Portrait of a Planet, The Partaker</i>	366
18. Models of the State: Five Prose Works	379
Conclusion: Dürrenmatt and the Stage	417
Appendix: A List of Works	441
Bibliography	443
Index	469

PREFACE

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PREFACE

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"Der Rest ist Dank," Dürrenmatt says: "the rest is thanks."

At Pälkäne, Finland, February, 1977

Timo Tiusanen

Abbreviations



The titles of Dürrenmatt's works not translated into English are given in two languages in the list below.

ANTHOLOGIES

- DK *Dramaturgisches und Kritisches* (Dramaturgic and Critical Writings)
FP *Four Plays*
GH *Gesammelte Hörspiele* (Collected Radio Plays)
K I-II *Komödien I-II* (Comedies I-II)
S *Die Stadt* (The City)
TS *Theater-Schriften und Reden* (Writings and Lectures on the Theater)

PLAYS AND ADAPTATIONS

- B *Der Blinde* (The Blind Man)
EAE *Episode on an Autumn Evening*
Esg *Es steht geschrieben* (It Is Written)
FV *Frank V* (not translated)
H *Herkules und der Stall des Augias* (Hercules and the Augean Stables)
KJ *König Johann* (King John)
M *Der Meteor*
Miss *Die Ehe des Herrn Mississippi*
Mit *Der Mitmacher* (The Partaker; acting edition)
PeP *Porträt eines Planeten* (Portrait of a Planet)
Ph *Die Physiker*
PS *Play Strindberg* (not translated)
TA *Titus Andronicus* (not translated)
TV *The Visit*
W *Die Wiedertäufer* (The Anabaptists)
Wk *Woyzeck* (not translated)

PROSE

- DG *A Dangerous Game* (title in the U.S.: *Traps*)
G *Gespräch mit Heinz Ludwig Arnold* (Interview with H.L.A.)

ABBREVIATIONS

GsG	<i>Griechen sucht Griechin</i>
GuR	<i>Gerechtigkeit und Recht</i> (Justice and Human Rights)
JHH	<i>The Judge and His Hangman</i>
OG	<i>Once a Greek . . .</i>
P	<i>The Pledge</i>
Pa	<i>Die Panne</i>
Q	<i>The Quarry</i>
RsH	<i>Der Richter und sein Henker</i>
SaA	<i>Sätze aus Amerika</i> (Sentences from America)
Sz	<i>Der Sturz</i> (The Fall)
Z	<i>Zusammenhänge</i> (Connections)

DÜRRENMATT'S SOURCES

DoD	<i>Dance of Death</i> (Strindberg)
Re	<i>Urfaust</i> (Goethe, Reclam edition)
TR	<i>The Troublesome Raign</i> (anonymous)

These abbreviations are used when Dürrenmatt's works or sources are quoted. Page numbers are given immediately after the abbreviation. If there are several short quotations from nearby pages within a paragraph, page numbers are given after the last quotation. For fuller details of these volumes, see Bibliography and Appendix, pp. 443, 441.

Where English translations of Dürrenmatt's works exist, the translation, not the original text, is generally quoted. There is a translation of *Der Meteor* (The Meteor); I found it too late to use it. In the discussion I employ mainly English titles, no matter whether the work in question is translated or not. There are abbreviations for German titles when their original versions are referred to. Quotations from untranslated works by Dürrenmatt or from studies in languages other than English have been translated by the author of this study.

The line numbers in two plays by Shakespeare (*King John* and *Titus Andronicus*) are given in the traditional way (e.g., II.i.370).

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

11. *Hercules and the Augean Stables*. World première in Zurich in 1963: Dejeaneira and Hercules.

12 and 13. *The Meteor*. World première in Zurich, directed by Leopold Lindtberg, stage design by Teo Otto. Photographs 7 and 10-13 by René Haury.

14. *Play Strindberg*. Edgar, Alice (May Pihlgren) and Kurt (Göran Cederberg) in a production directed by Carl-Axel Heiknert at the Swedish Theater of Helsinki in 1970. Photograph by Henrik G. Sundström.

15 and 16. *König Johann*. Play directed by Eugen Terttula at the Finnish National Theater in 1975. Photographs by Timo Palm.

17 and 18. *Woyzeck*. World première in Zurich in 1972, directed by Dürrenmatt: a picture from the rehearsals and the family group of the play, with Woyzeck (Hans-Helmut Dickow, second from right). Photographs by Leonard Zubler.

DÜRRENMATT

INTRODUCTION

protected childhood, yet the fairy tales and history books he read and the glimpses of reality he saw when playing games with the village children included macabre, terrifying elements. This can be read from "Dokument," a piece of childhood memoirs written down in 1965. A one-handed greengrocer splitting heads of lettuce; an underpass, "a dark cavern" (TS 32), where the boy went astray when three years old; looking at butchers slaughtering animals:

Terrible-beautiful land of childhood: the world of experience was small, just a silly village, nothing more, the world of tradition was enormous, swimming in a mysterious cosmos, pervaded by a wild fairy-tale world of heroic battles, unfathomable. One had to accept this world. One was delivered to faith, defenceless and naked (TS 37).

Dürrenmatt *in nuce* is here: his Swiss home milieu, elements of the absurd and grotesque, of fantasy and everyday life, of microcosm and macrocosm, of religion and of the fear caused by it. Are his works at least partly rationalizations or fabrications into art of some early experiences of horror and insecurity?—a question that does not mean denying Dürrenmatt his individuality, his somber and hilarious creative fantasy.

"Such influences form us; what comes later, only confirms what was formed before. . . . The village brought me forth, and so I am still a villager," Dürrenmatt writes (TS 30).⁴ What came later included living and going to secondary school in Berne, absent-minded studies at the universities of Zurich and Berne (philosophy, literature, and science), starting to paint and write, floating around in Bohemian circles. His efforts as a painter were doubtless important to the would-be playwright: he grew used to thinking in pictures, to seeing his scenes on the stage. The drawings he has published prove him to be a not uneven caricaturist. Walter Jonas, an artist,

⁴ "I think that a great many things taking place in one's youth, before a literary phase, are very important," Dürrenmatt says in Sauter, "Gespräch mit F.D.," *Sinn und Form*, 18, 4 (Fall 1966), p. 1228. Real-life experiences figure behind his work (G 59).

INTRODUCTION

remembers youthful Dürrenmatt as an incessant debater on thousands of subjects and as an inventive story teller: he could improvise a short story or a fairy tale on any subject given him.⁵

Dürrenmatt did not change as a writer. His polemical fireworks and his immense delight in story telling are among the most characteristic features of his varied work.⁶ It is as if he needs a "subject given" to start his imagination working; this starting-point may be an earlier play or a school of play-writing—or it may be one of his own sudden inspirations. What is in this way beginning to take shape is by Dürrenmatt called "Stoff." "Stuff, material, subject-matter"—the implication is that Dürrenmatt works at something concrete and non-esoteric. And he needs a concrete opponent, as it were, to be at his best, offensive and defensive at the same time. The polemical urge to rearrange, to reshape, not only to shape, seems to be an innate quality in him. When he starts theorizing, he sees himself surrounded by ready-shaped material, and ponders "still possible stories"—as if nothing would be impossible for this imagination embracing heaven and hell.

Dürrenmatt's formative years: a great variety in living surroundings, an abundance of contradictory impulses. Dürrenmatt himself: a Renaissance figure. His works were bound to be anything but dry or monotonous.

Some clues to Dürrenmatt's work can be found in his early experiences and personal qualities. His *Writings and Lectures on the Theater* seems to contain several other clues. Yet combining Dürrenmatt the practicing playwright and Dürrenmatt the theoretician of the theater is a far from simple undertaking. We are, in fact, approaching the most controversial areas in Dürrenmatt research.

⁵ Peter Wyrsh, "Die Dürrenmatt-Story," part two, *Schweizer Illustrierte*, 52, 13 (March 25, 1963), pp. 23–24.

⁶ Urs Jenny speaks of Dürrenmatt's "elementary delight" in comedy (*F.D.*, 1965, p. 11), Elisabeth Brock-Sulzer finds pages in which Dürrenmatt is "a master in polemics" (preface to *TS*, p. 19). Cf. *TS* 56: "I write, . . . because I love to tell stories."

INTRODUCTION

The situation is further complicated by the richness and variety of Dürrenmatt's total output. He plays several contradictory roles with equal gusto. He is a comedian, a religious meditator, a moralist; a child of nature and a theoretician of literature; a dramatist and a prosaist. There is not just one Dürrenmatt, there is a host of them. All this, no doubt, adds to the density of problems, to the *Problemträchtigkeit* of his works. It also limits the argumentative force of any statement found in his essays.

Moreover, Dürrenmatt has been changing within each of his roles. What he said about the situation of the modern playwright in 1955 has not necessarily preserved its validity up to the 1970's. *Theaterprobleme* (Problems of the Theater), the most important and consistent of Dürrenmatt's treatises, has been translated into English and included in a great many anthologies, among them Dürrenmatt's own *Four Plays*. Its formulations about tragicomedy and the grotesque are sometimes taken as authoritative maxims: this is what Dürrenmatt is about, this is what modern drama at large is about.⁷ The essay was, however, originally intended to be only a personal statement, and did not include a guarantee for a year or for twenty years. There are also Dürrenmatt's other treatises to help us to qualify our impressions.

Dürrenmatt's theoretical writings do not form any monolithic whole. They hardly could, written as they were mostly as afterthoughts during thirty years of continuous and capricious development.⁸ "A writer not contradicting himself will never be reread" (TS 8) is the motto of *Writings on the Theater*. The result is that any scholar in Dürrenmatt has to keep reading these pieces over and over again.

⁷ *Problems of the Theater* is seen in a critical perspective, e.g., by Karl S. Guthke: "by no means cogently and lucidly reasoned" (*Modern Tragicomedy*, p. 129). Cf. Murray B. Peppard, *F.D.*, p. 126.

⁸ To refer to just one complete reversal of direction: Dürrenmatt began his literary career as a Kafkaist, yet later turned into an "Anti-Kafkaist" (Hans Mayer, *Zur deutschen Literatur der Zeit*, p. 281).

INTRODUCTION

Dürrenmatt also engages in polemics. "Most difficult of all: not to exculpate oneself" (TS 89), he once wrote. This difficulty proved to be insurmountable. Dürrenmatt is no exception to the general tendency of writers to speak about their intentions rather than about their achievements when defending themselves. He once teased his critics by refusing to lay "the egg of explanation" "in the henhouse of his plays" (TS 108); yet *Theater-Schriften* includes not fewer than sixty-five items, its sequel *Dramaturgic and Critical Writings*, twenty-seven.⁹ Dürrenmatt has laid so big a basketful of eggs that one does not know how to make an omelette of them.

Teasing his critics and interviewers is part of Dürrenmatt's publicity game. He "tells one critic something, another something else, emphasizing every time different things, speaking ironically, dialectically, indifferently, bitingly, exaggerating or playing down according to his whims."¹⁰ A sure way of losing oneself in the wonderland called Dürrenmattiana is to take him over-seriously or to be devoid of sense of irony. All a critic without the compass of irony will see is a glimpse of Dürrenmatt's cloak disappearing around the next bend in his path.

The truths offered to the readers of Dürrenmatt's theories are to be taken "with a grain of salt" (FP 11). A chapter and a part of another will later be devoted to sorting out these statements, with their plentiful inner contradictions and just as numerous interesting revelations. In addition, Dürrenmatt's plays will be compared with his prefaces and other contemporary statements on the craft of playwriting. It is not self-evident that all sayings by Dürrenmatt the essayist

⁹ Cf. Mandred Züfle, "F.D.," *Schweizer Rundschau*, 66, 1-2 (Jan.-Feb. 1967), pp. 29-30.

¹⁰ Werner Oberle in Grimm et al. (eds.), *Der unbequeme Dürrenmatt*, p. 10. Cf. Brock-Sulzer's preface to TS, p. 25, Margareta Deschner, "F.D's Experiments with Man," diss., University of Colorado, 1966, p. 22, and Manfred Durzak's critical remarks on Dürrenmatt's theory in *D., Frisch, Weiss*, pp. 31-34, 38.

INTRODUCTION

and polemicist can be verified even if one devotes the closest of readings to his plays.¹¹ In the final accounting, it is the play that matters.

The plays are ambiguous. This is a result of Dürrenmatt's Renaissance dimensions, and of his conscious choice, not of any deficiency in his talent. "It happens to be my passion, not always a happy one perhaps, to want to put on the stage the richness, the manifold diversity of the world" (FP 22), he wrote in *Problems of the Theater*. To qualify this statement: it was so at least up to the early 1960's. At about that time he started condensing and eliminating his richness.

The bigger part of Dürrenmatt criticism has thus to face considerable difficulties.¹² Blasphemous or pious? Parodic or serious? Profound or shallow? What are the central themes in a given play? So much energy is needed to answer these simple questions that scholars seldom pursue the case to an equally important question: how far is Dürrenmatt successful in dealing with these matters? They are not helped by Dürrenmatt's impatience with any and all interpretations trying to catch him as a propagator of a 'message.' His starting-point is a conflict, not a soluble problem. George E. Wellwarth has characterized Dürrenmatt, with good reason, as a man "with something to say who does not wish to be caught saying it."¹³

Dürrenmatt is fighting a two-front war. On one hand, he is waging the battle for independence of any artist against the over-eager searchers for messages. For them, a work of art is something neatly solved at the end; the world is like an arithmetical problem solved without a remainder. "We have got

¹¹ Cf. Herbert Madler, "Dürrenmatts mutiger Mensch," *Hochland*, 62, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1970), p. 45.

¹² Claus Drese ("F.D.," *Eckart*, 28, 4, 1959, p. 385) and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg ("Zum Drama F.Ds," diss., München, 1963, p. 106) have emphasized the equivocal character of Dürrenmatt's plays.

¹³ Wellwarth, "F.D. and Max Frisch," *The Tulane Drama Review*, 6, 3 (March 1962), p. 14. Cf. TS 208.

INTRODUCTION

to be poets (*Dichter*) for them, that is the difficulty, resolvers of world riddles, exhibitors of prescriptions for living, or even magicians" (TS 147). On the other hand there is Dürrenmatt's paradoxical and polemical attitude to all kinds of formulas of thought. He needs them—to reject them, to rebel against them, to establish a creative tension between them and his own ideas. They may be religious, dramaturgic or social formulas; they are there to balance the second basic feature in Dürrenmatt. There is an endless richness of artistic invention, of *Einfälle*,¹⁴ and a boundless freedom in him, as there was the mysterious and unfathomable world of fairytales in the child Friedrich.

The real danger in interpreting Dürrenmatt is in trying to catch him with the help of too narrow a formula.¹⁵ He may be caught once, quite precisely, with nothing left over; yet the same formula may be inadequate when used next time. Moreover, finding a pattern of thought in a play does not necessarily mean that Dürrenmatt is behind it; he may have needed it just to fight against it.

This brings us right into the middle of a controversy. Is Dürrenmatt a devout product of his religious background or a rebel against it? The critical opinions are far apart. For Elisabeth Brock-Sulzer, Dürrenmatt's works are "without the Christian paradox not at all conceivable"; Robert Holzapfel finds "a divine plan" in all of his plays; and Fritz Buri "the artistic invention of 'grace'" just as widely, at least "in a

¹⁴ According to Deschner, p. 28, *Einfall* "has been variously rendered in English as 'inspiration,' 'artistic invention,' 'brainwave,' etc."; she also quotes the preface by Robert E. Helbling to *The Physicists* recommending "invention" in "its original Latin meaning . . . 'to come on' or, more freely, 'to stumble on' something." Pepard's contribution is "scurrilous inspiration" (p. 23); those of Gerhard Nellhaus in his rendering of *Theaterprobleme* are "flash of idea" (FP 27), "conceit," "inventive idea," and "invention" (FP 33). I shall use "artistic invention."

¹⁵ "He does not fit in any framework" (Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Literatur der kleinen Schritte*, p. 241).

INTRODUCTION

pious mockery."¹⁶ On the other hand, Ruth Blum remarks that Dürrenmatt only reveals the work of Satan and fails to bring forth the positive Christian message, and Hans Mayer says that Dürrenmatt bases his work on a "theology without God."¹⁷

The strongest support for these conflicting opinions on Dürrenmatt's religiousness, whether pro or con, is to be found in his early works.¹⁸ Young Dürrenmatt employed many Christian symbols and concepts. Yet this is not, as such, any proof of a more or less orthodox Protestant faith expressed in his art. The decisive question is how and to what purpose these symbols are employed. A comparable case is Luis Bunuel, the remarkable Spanish-born film director, who has used Catholic symbols to give expression to his doubts and disbelief. Dürrenmatt's attitude will have to be scrutinized case by case; religious formulas of thought or "divine plans" may be among those "subjects given" he needs to start his imagination working.

In his childhood Dürrenmatt felt "delivered to faith." He was so before and during World War II. His religious background can be connected with another central concern: justice. If there is a God, how could He permit World War II? What kind of justice is administered by God? The image of a cruel, torturing God is clearly recognizable in Dürrenmatt's early writings. As a Swiss citizen sensitive to what happened in all of Europe, Dürrenmatt also developed a typical guilt complex—for having been saved, for having

¹⁶ Brock-Sulzer, "F.D.," *Der Monat*, 15, 5 (May 1963), p. 56; reprinted in Nonnenmann (ed.), *Schriftsteller der Gegenwart*. Holzappel, "The Divine Plan Behind the Plays of F.D.," *Modern Drama*, 8, 3 (Dec. 1965), pp. 237, 245. Buri in Grimm et al. (eds.), *Der unbequeme D.*, p. 59.

¹⁷ Blum, "Ist F.D. ein christlicher Schriftsteller?" *Reformatio*, 8, 8 (Sept. 1959), pp. 538-39. Mayer, "F.D.," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, 87, 4 (Fall 1968), p. 483; cf. p. 485.

¹⁸ Marianne Kesting has spoken about Dürrenmatt's "religious question that is later secularized into a humanistic and moral one" (*Panorama des zeitgenössischen Theaters*, p. 225).

INTRODUCTION

“endured peace.”¹⁹ Max Frisch has described the situation of the postwar Swiss generation: “We lived at the brink of a torture chamber, we heard the shrieks, yet we were not among those who screamed; we remained without the depth of suffering endured, yet were too close to suffering to be able to laugh.”²⁰

Switzerland, a neutral country on the roof of Europe, has been right in the middle of fighting armies in two world wars, yet it has preserved its borders intact. This is one side of the coin: Dürrenmatt and Frisch were able to grow up in peace. The other side is that the forces behind the Swiss “hedgehog position” and “mental self-defense” turned out to be a petrifying influence in the postwar years.²¹ Switzerland is not only the home of many a global organization, and the refuge for Lenin and James Joyce, for Thomas Mann and Brecht, for the Dadaists and anti-Fascists,²² it is also a country of solid and self-satisfied prosperity, of petty bourgeois, of bank and office clerks. Its vices and virtues are those of the middle class: preference for stability and security over intellectual daring, for common sense over sensitivity, for careful handling of public and private funds over financial and spiritual encouragement to the arts and artists.²³ Cleanliness of public buildings and of the mind, of clothes and literature, characterize this mountain and garden state for tourists. These features can be called virtues—hardly, however, from the point of view of a creative artist.

¹⁹ Siegfried Kienzle in his article on Dürrenmatt in Dietrich Weber (ed.), *Deutsche Literatur seit 1945 in Einzeldarstellungen*, p. 362. Cf. H. F. Garten, *Modern German Drama*, 1964 (1959), pp. 249–50, and Hans Weigel, *Lern dieses Volk der Hirten kennen*, p. 18.

²⁰ Frisch in his *Tagebuch 1946–1949*, quoted by Kurt Marti in *Die Schweiz und ihre Schriftsteller*, pp. 39–40.

²¹ Marti, pp. 27–30, 56, speaks of a “neurosis of self-defense,” described by Dürrenmatt in *Romulus the Great*; cf. Peter Dürrenmatt, *Schweizer Geschichte*, pp. 710–11.

²² Marti, p. 22; Sakari Saarikivi, *Aikamme maalaustaide*, pp. 232–33.

²³ Herbert Lüthy, *Die Schweiz als Antithese*, 1969 (1961), p. 25.

INTRODUCTION

The consecutive generations of postwar Swiss writers and critics have tended to grow increasingly critical of their home country.²⁴ The term "Swiss malaise" has been coined to describe this disaffection, whose symptoms are irritating uneasiness, even before World War II; efforts to fly from the narrowness of Swiss circumstances, abroad or into fantasy; later, returns to home. Dürrenmatt is not a severe case, though his criticism and satire have grown sharper since the late 1960's. To him Switzerland is a convenient place to live, not a trauma or a problem.²⁵ Yet the small village community of his masterpiece *The Visit* (*Der Besuch der alten Dame*) is a critical picture of his environment, both universal and Swiss in its implications. Its starting-point is an ironical variation of an archetypal event in Swiss literature: the homecoming of a native.

Dürrenmatt's theoretical and practical thinking in matters of the state is basically Swiss. The state exists to serve the people, cabinet ministers are civil servants in the original meaning of the word.²⁶ He is afraid of modern giant states, with powers "too vast, too complex, too horrible, too mechanical" (FP 31) to be controlled by an individual. By contrast, Switzerland is a "community of tiny cantonal and communal democracies";²⁷ it is probably the country in the modern world where direct, non-representational democracy has its greatest say, not always to the good of efficiency. Several religious denominations, four language groups and cultural spheres exist side by side; peace is preserved through

²⁴ E.g., Hans Zbinden and Werner Weber in Bruno Mariacher and Friedrich Witz (eds.), *Bestand und Versuch*, pp. 767-77 and 840-47; Max Wehrli, "Gegenwartsdichtung der deutschen Schweiz," in Kayser, ed., *Deutsche Literatur in unserer Zeit*, 1966 (1959), pp. 119-22; Peter Bichsel, *Des Schweizers Schweiz*, 1969, pp. 12-14, 27, 29.

²⁵ Karl Schmid, *Unbehagen im Kleinstaat*, 1963, pp. 192-93, 197; cf. Bänziger, p. 197, Kieser, p. 79, and Thorbjörn Lengborn, *Schriftsteller und Gesellschaft in der Schweiz*, pp. 18-21, 27, 257-58.

²⁶ Bernardo von Brentano, *Schöne Literatur und öffentliche Meinung*, p. 111.

²⁷ Lüthy, p. 16; cf. p. 7.

INTRODUCTION

a policy of mutual tolerance, or of mutual indifference. Dürrenmatt also belongs to the generation of European writers who suspect that the stem word for "nationalism" is "Nazi."

A Swiss author writing in German has better reasons than most for such a suspicion. He speaks and hears German with a difference: Swiss German. He has a kind of dress-circle view of Germany in the center of the stage in the latest world tragedy; he understands the language spoken and the psychology of the acting; he has critical distance by not being one of the actors.²⁸ Swiss writers and critics are well aware of the dangers of provincialism, yet they also know that the Swiss-German paradox opens the first doors toward an international theater and reading public.²⁹ Besides, one of the best routes into universality seems to go through the local rather than around it. There is nothing so English as Shakespeare, nothing so Russian as Dostoevski, yet these two speak to all nations and ages.³⁰ They have filtered the world through their personal and national experiences and in so doing succeeded in giving it a concrete form, the form of art.

A writer belonging to a small nation may go astray along either of two roads. He may drown in the minutiae of his surroundings and end up in regional literature. Or he may run dry in the desert of the abstract generalities belonging to an adopted, non-personal internationalism.³¹ Dürrenmatt has tried both—and the middle road, too, leading to the goal.

²⁸ The metaphor of a stage is employed by Bänziger, loc. cit., p. 21, and in his article "Kurze Startbahnen," *Merkur*, 11, 10 (Oct. 1957), pp. 992-93.

²⁹ Cf. Hugo Leber, "Gewandelte Perspektiven," *Welt und Wort*, 24, 10 (Oct. 1969), pp. 312-13, Gian Paolo Tozzoli, "Gefahren und Chancen," *ibid.*, p. 320; Heinz-Peter Linder, "Die schweizerische Gegenwart im modernen Roman der deutschen Schweiz," *diss.*, Bern, 1957, p. 8.

³⁰ Similar comparisons and conclusions are presented by Zbinden in "Zur Situation der Literatur in der Schweiz," *Welt und Wort*, 1969, pp. 308-09.

³¹ Cf. Witz in Mariacher and Witz, p. 9.

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes through Germany, sometimes through other regions on the map or of the mind.³²

Dürrenmatt has shown an all-pervasive interest in justice, in judges and judgments, in death at the hands of an executioner. Its origins are in his early religious conviction, in the historical situation during his formative years, or perhaps in an innate inclination like color blindness. When he follows his theme of justice to its logical end, the results are often powerful and grotesque. Prominent examples are the ritual murder at the end of *The Visit*, or the unnecessary suicide of the traveling salesman in *A Dangerous Game*, a major story. With the word "grotesque" we seem to have found a useful clue to Dürrenmatt's world, and a clue to modern literature as a whole.

"The grotesque" has been a relevant concept ever since Wolfgang Kayser published his widely influential book *Das Groteske* in 1957. Not only has this study had an influence on Dürrenmatt research; it was also influenced by one of Dürrenmatt's theoretical statements about the grotesque as a specifically modern form of expression.³³ A few years later Reinhold Grimm was able to prove, point by point, that all the typically grotesque phenomena listed by Kayser are to be found in Dürrenmatt. As Kayser puts it, they express a breakdown in the categories we need for finding our way in the world. Grotesque disharmonies include the mixing up of separate conceptual spheres, abolition of the laws of statics, loss of identity, deformation of natural proportions or historical chronology.³⁴ According to Grimm, these phenom-

³² The possibilities of combining the local with the universal are mentioned also by Wehrli, pp. 122-24; Joachim Kaiser praises Dürrenmatt's and Frisch's ability to make their plays both profoundly symbolic and thoroughly Swiss: "Grenzen des modernen Dramas," *Theater heute*, 5, 12 (Dec. 1964), p. 12.

³³ Kayser, *Das Groteske*. Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung, p. 11.

³⁴ Kayser, p. 199; Grimm in *Der unbequeme Dürrenmatt*, 1961, pp. 72-83.

INTRODUCTION

ena belong to "the demonic grotesque"; in addition, there are numerous examples of Dürrenmatt's vital and playful grotesqueries, for example in his numerous parodies, those "grotesque and provocative mixtures between separate spheres." Dürrenmatt's self-expressed desire to give shape to the unshaped leads to the demonic grotesque, while his inclination to reshape ready-made formulas leads to the parodic grotesque.³⁵ Grimm calls the grotesque "the basic structure" in Dürrenmatt,³⁶ and his conclusions have been accepted, with some shifts in emphasis, by a great many other Dürrenmatt scholars.³⁷ Yet the problem needs some further probing.

Before Kayser, the word "grotesque" was a concept in stylistics. The first merit of his book was that he was able to show how widely grotesque elements have figured in Western art throughout the centuries, especially during the Renaissance and the Age of Romanticism, and in our age. The second merit, not so indisputable, is that he tried to give the word a completely new meaning, no longer limited to stylistics. He wanted to probe deeper, to the contents of grotesque works of art, to the philosophy of life behind them. There is in fact a dichotomy in the way Kayser uses his central con-

³⁵ Grimm, p. 94; cf. TS 33, 38, and especially 136-37: Dürrenmatt's definition of the grotesque as "one of the great possibilities to be precise" and his rejection of nihilism.

³⁶ Grimm, p. 91.

³⁷ Christian M. Jauslin, *F.D.*, 1964, p. 124, chooses provocation as "the basic structure" in Dürrenmatt, the grotesque and parody as the most essential means toward this end. The central position of the grotesque is emphasized, e.g., by Günter Waldmann, "Ds paradoxes Theater," *Wirkendes Wort*, 14, 1 (Jan. 1964), p. 22, by Adolf D. Klarmann, "F.D. and the Tragic Sense of Comedy," *The Tulane Drama Review*, 4, 4 (May 1960), p. 81, and by Volkmar Sander, "Form und Grotteske," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, Neue Folge, 14, 3 (1964), pp. 308-10. Werner Mittenzwei connects the grotesque with "the capitalistic society" [*Gestaltung und Gestalten im modernen Drama*, Berlin und Weimar, 1969 (1964), p. 39], Erich Kühne with "bourgeois literary research" ("Satire und groteske Dramatik," *Weimarer Beiträge*, 12, 4, 1966, p. 549). A recent theory by Arnold Heidsieck interprets the grotesque as a distortion of human values (Robert E. Helbling in *F.D.*, ed. by Gerhard P. Knapp, pp. 234-36).

INTRODUCTION

cept. He finds two kinds of the grotesque, genuine and less genuine.³⁸ "Echte Grotteske" is a work of art giving full expression to a grotesque view of the world, with elements of fear, metaphysical anxiety, and black humor. Our familiar and safe world is suddenly revealed to be "alien and weird." A precipice opens, "demons" or "animals of apocalypse" break into our everyday existence: "grotesque means giving shape to 'Id,' to that ghastly 'Id.'"³⁹ Kayser's "genuine grotesque" might also be called "absolute grotesque," absolute in the sense that it is not submitted to any other artistic aims or philosophical considerations.

Kayser's reasoning somehow captured the spirit of the late 1950's. So did Dürrenmatt in *The Visit*. Yet during the very years Kayser was working on his book, there was a group of playwrights busy writing plays that Kayser might have called "genuinely grotesque." This group was later to be subdivided into the absurdist and the grotesque playwrights. *Sinn oder Unsinn?*, published in 1962, is an anthology of studies, with the subtitle "The Grotesque in Modern Drama." Its discussions cover a wide field, extending from the Italian "Teatro grottesco" to Harold Pinter, from Antonin Artaud to Eugène Ionesco, from Georg Büchner to Wolfgang Hildesheimer.⁴⁰ The separation into different schools of playwriting had not yet taken place, at least in the critical practice of the contributors. In 1961 Martin Esslin, one of the co-authors of *Sense or Senselessness?* had, however, published the first edition of his remarkable study, *The Theater of the Absurd*. With its publication, if not earlier, our second term was coined.

The border line between these terms is not clearly drawn. "Absurdism" is a term with strong philosophical connotations, denoting the work of a group of playwrights expressing

³⁸ Examples of the "genuine grotesque" e.g. on pp. 128, 142, 154, 175 in Kayser.

³⁹ Ibid. pp. 198-99.

⁴⁰ Grimm et al. (eds.), *Sinn oder Unsinn?*, 1962.

INTRODUCTION

a basic experience of the senselessness of human life. This definition brings us into the vicinity of Kayser's "genuine grotesque," also called "absolute grotesque" in my discussion above. Yet things are hardly clarified by the observation that many absurdist use grotesque exaggeration or distortion to express their absurdist philosophy. Furthermore, since the early 1960's it has not been possible to call a situation in drama "absurd," in the original sense of the word, without beginning to wonder whether we have not unwillingly implied that the situation in question or the entire play belong to "the theater of the absurd." Or we cannot use the word "grotesque" without suspecting that we are perhaps hauling behind our ship the whole net of meanings associated with "the theater of the grotesque." And remembering Kayser, Bosch and Brueghel, too.

Drama nach Brecht (1968) by Rainer Taëni is an effort to clean up this mess by building up a systematic framework of thought. Taëni distinguishes three recent possibilities of theatricalism, the Brechtian epic theater, absurdism, and the theater of the grotesque. Playwrights of the epic theater believe in the changeability of the world and aim at making social relationships conceivable to the public.⁴¹ Absurdist proclaim the world not only unchangeable but basically senseless, and let the form of their plays reflect this interpretation of the state of affairs. The world of a grotesque play may be out of joint; it is not totally unreal, as is frequently the case in absurdism. The possibility that a grotesque play deals with specific social circumstances, rather than with life in toto, brings it close to the satiric end of the epic theater. Thus grotesque playwrights take a kind of middle position

⁴¹ The controversy between "Aristotelian" and "epic" theater has lost impetus in recent years; they are now widely seen as two possible alternatives. Anni Carlsson comments on recent changes of taste: morally engaged documentary plays or contemporary period plays were completely passé in the late 1950's—to be resurrected during the 1960's (*Die deutsche Buchkritik*, 1969, p. 363). Cf. Hans Christoph Angermeyer, *Zuschauer im Drama*, p. 29.

INTRODUCTION

in making the existence of a sensible world order questionable.⁴² For them, the world is self-evidently neither rational nor senseless; they are social and metaphysical agnostics.

It seems to me questionable that there are weighty enough reasons to go on speaking about the theater of the grotesque as a clearly definable school in playwriting—although Taëni is by no means the only one to do so. The place of the theater of the grotesque in Taëni's total pattern could be given to an established dramatic genre: tragicomedy. It is a genre speaking specifically to the audiences since World War II; it is an expression of basic uncertainty; it combines comic and tragic elements, as Taëni's theater of the grotesque does.

These three features of tragicomedy are strongly emphasized by Karl S. Guthke in his study *Modern Tragicomedy*, 1966. Guthke follows the theory and practice of tragicomedy from the seventeenth century to the present day, not ignoring Dürrenmatt's contributions as a practicing and theorizing playwright. In his concluding chapter, "The Philosophy of the Tragicomedian," Guthke makes distinctions that help us to place tragicomedy between absurdism and the epic theater, exactly where Taëni located the theater of the grotesque: "Asking questions is in essence what the tragicomedian attempts to do in our time. He is—knowingly or unknowingly—far from asserting that 'meaninglessness' is the last word. He does know, however, that he cannot 'save the world.' That is his wisdom and his despair—which drives him on to literary creation." In his next sentence Guthke quotes Dürrenmatt: "And thus we should not try to save the world, but to bear it. That is the one real adventure which remains possible for us in this late time."⁴³

After this replacing operation, what senses are there left to the term "grotesque" in modern drama? If not valid as the distinguishing characteristic in a school of playwriting, where is it valid? We can certainly think of tragicomedies

⁴² Taëni, *Drama nach Brecht*, pp. 13–17.

⁴³ Guthke, *Modern Tragicomedy*, pp. 171–72; *The Quarry*, p. 161, and p. 141 below include slightly different translations.

INTRODUCTION

devoid of the grotesque: plays by Molière, Shakespeare, Chekhov or Ibsen (*The Wild Duck*). Grotesque tragicomedy is a subdivision of tragicomedy, and a specifically modern way of voicing tragicomic uncertainties, though not the only type of tragicomedy in our age. This means that we need not return the term "grotesque" to stylistics, to its pre-Kayserian usage. There are both valid and questionable observations about the contents of the grotesque in Kayser.

Kayser emphasizes the mysterious, inexplicable features of the grotesque: "the formations of the grotesque are a play with the absurd."⁴⁴ Is it necessarily so? Does this not refer to an extreme form of the grotesque, to be called "absolute grotesque" for example, as suggested above? "Absolute grotesque" means that the tension between the disharmonious or conflicting elements within the grotesque grows to its extreme limits, to a question of life and death, of the existence of a just or sensible world order. This need not, however, bring us into the unreal world of absurdism; it may take place in modern tragicomedies still creating an impression of reality. It takes place in Dürrenmatt's *Visit*. An "absolute grotesque" is a work of art not submitted to any other messages or aims: it is an answer in itself. "Absolute grotesque" approaches the position of an independent aesthetic category like "tragic" or "comic."

On the other hand, there is also the playful or "parodic grotesque." It creates tensions between earlier works of art and new modifications. Third, we can speak of the grotesque without any qualifying adjective and still connect it with certain contents. We can experience the fear or confusion caused by a mixture in the familiar categories of our thought without being shaken in our fundamental beliefs. A definition of this "normal" grotesque is formulated by Lee B. Jennings: "the fearsome made ludicrous in freakish form."⁴⁵ There is

⁴⁴ Kayser, p. 202; there are other references to the absurdity of the grotesque e.g. on pp. 31, 34, and 64.

⁴⁵ Jennings, "Gottfried Keller and the Grotesque," *Monatshefte für deutschen Unterricht*, 50, 1 (Jan. 1958), p. 9. In his introduction to

INTRODUCTION

no reason to give up using "the grotesque" as a stylistic concept; there can thus be grotesque elements within absurdism and the epic theater. It is in its stylistic sense and in these three meanings that the word "grotesque" will be used in this study.

Dürrenmatt's position in the total pattern of postwar drama is somewhere in the middle field. He is neither an absurdist, nor an epic playwright, nor an honorary member in the nonexistent theater of the grotesque. Again, he does not believe in formulas of thought; the world is neither completely senseless nor rational and easily changeable. Dürrenmatt is a tragicomedian and a comedian employing grotesque and other stylistic elements to question the world order, sometimes with the implication that the world is more empty of meaning than is commonly assumed. He flourishes in the grotesque, and this leads him both into easy mannerisms and into final touches of a master's hand. It will be a fascinating aspect of our research to see how far the plays and other works of Dürrenmatt can be called "absolute grotesques," how far the conflicts he experiences in this world of ours release other reactions in him.

All the various forms of the grotesque have something in common. The contrast or conflict inherent in them is unsolvable. The grotesque is not to be made harmless. It is to be experienced. The grotesque is an adequate concept in a discussion of modern literature, with its inner contradictions, stratified structures and elusive contents.

Dürrenmatt is primarily a playwright. He is also a writer working in the closest cooperation with the theater; he was permanently employed as a dramaturge at the Basle City

The Ludicrous Demon, 1963, Jennings approaches my "absolute grotesque," in a way, yet prefers "preserving the unity of the concept 'grotesque'" (p. 17; cf. pp. 25-26). *The Grotesque*, 1972, by Philip Thomson distinguishes the grotesque from a great many related phenomena, and defines the grotesque as "the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response" (p. 27).

INTRODUCTION

Theater in 1968–69. Twenty years before, at the beginning of his playwriting career, he had jotted down in his notebook: “Writing a play also means directing it” (TS 87).

It was natural for a would-be painter to visualize his scenes: “It is impossible for me to write a play, if I do not know what the scenes will look like on the stage. I often sketch designs for the setting before starting to write, and during the writing I sometimes outline even the movements of the actors.”⁴⁶ It is customary for Dürrenmatt to take quite an active part in the rehearsals before the world première of a new play, occasionally also later on. He has himself directed at least *The Visit* and the original productions of two classic plays adapted by him, *Woyzeck* and *Urfaust*. There are problems that are solvable for him only while he is working on the stage and with the stage, not at his desk.⁴⁷ This has resulted in several versions of most of his plays. Dürrenmatt keeps rewriting his scripts, in a notable case for twenty years: *It Is Written*, his firstling from 1946, was reshaped and rechristened as *The Anabaptists* in 1967.

Consequently, Dürrenmatt’s plays must also be seen in their relation to the stage. To read these contradictory and elusive works of art we need all possible help, all available criteria. How far is Dürrenmatt successful in handling his themes? The stage will answer: if not in the form of a new stage interpretation, then in the form of a critical interpretation paying due attention to Dürrenmatt’s stage language.

To take an example, the final scene in *It Is Written* has given rise to several contradictory interpretations. The pious merchant Knipperdollinck and his nihilistic counterpart John Bockelson are dying on the wheel of torture, the former proclaiming God’s grace and man’s submission to God’s will. This scene has been taken as evidence of the profound Christianity in Dürrenmatt: God’s grace is victorious, even

⁴⁶ Wyrsh, “Die Dürrenmatt-Story,” part five, *Schweizer Illustrierte*, 52, 16 (April 15, 1963). Cf. Sauter, p. 1230.

⁴⁷ Horst Bienek, *Werkstattgespräche mit Schriftstellern*, p. 110. Cf. TS 156–57, 204.

INTRODUCTION

at the cost of Knipperdollinck's life. Yet can we forget the grotesque scenic form given to this climax, can we release its inner tensions? Hardly; instead, we should experience it as it is, as a grandiose dramatization of a conflict, full of inner contradictions, ironies, and parodies. It is a stratified scenic image.⁴⁸

This finale is constructed with the help of several scenic means of expression; it does not consist of words alone. The setting is there, the wheels of torture are placed against a wall, the lights are concentrated on Knipperdollinck alone—after a series of short scenes has been played around him (Esg 107–11). The actors contribute to the impact of the scenic image. This is what happens everywhere in drama; a playwright uses *scenic means of expression*, including

dialogue, setting, properties, costumes, sound and lighting effects, music, groupings, the actor's individual expression, his gestures, movements, make-up, vocal and facial expressions.

The closing scene in *It Is Written* is of great significance for our total impression of the play. No interpretation can ignore it. We have thus found the second sign of a scenic image:

A *scenic image* is a scene (or, more often, part of a scene) in which several scenic means of expression are used to achieve an effect charged with thematic significance.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Syberberg sees a Dürrenmatt play as a stratified system of tensions "between antinomies and polarities, such as high and low, banality and greatness, comic and tragic" (p. 126). Cf. the discussion below of the religious interpretations of this scenic image, pp. 53–56.

⁴⁹ There is a detailed discussion of this concept in my previous study, *O'Neill's Scenic Images*, 1968, pp. 11–19. Since formulating it I have attended hundreds of rehearsals and performances of the most varied plays, yet not found anything that would gainsay using it to illuminate a play or a performance. The present discussion includes only a few major arguments for using it.

INTRODUCTION

A scenic image is a rhythmic entity, a pregnant moment in the continuous flow of visual and auditive images filling up the stage.⁵⁰

What to call a "scenic image" in a given play depends ultimately on a critic's individual judgment. Or on a stage director's: two directors of the same play will probably construct scenic images at different points in their productions. Drama research or practical theater work are hardly imaginable without personal points of view. "Personal" is not, however, synonymous with "arbitrary." On one occasion Dürrenmatt allowed quite a lot of creative freedom to the stage director, but not to the point of arbitrariness: different conceptions should strive to "strike the tone set by the author."⁵¹ Listening to the tone is the aim of our scenic analysis, too. If convincing enough arguments are given by the scholar, the concept of scenic image may be a valuable tool in developing drama research toward greater exactness. It can add a decimal fraction to our approximate values. It might also be a worthwhile effort to connect this concept with the general lines of thought prevailing in gestalt psychology.

Analyzing plays with the help of scenic images does not favor any -ism or school of playwriting over other schools. All it presupposes is an imaginative use made of the possibilities of the stage. Any full-length masterpiece will probably

⁵⁰ Guthke speaks of "certain moments of heightened intensity" during which "specific tragicomic essence" or any other tone may become "clearly appreciated" (p. 144). Esslin describes Ionesco's "stratified images" that are "not only verbal but also concretely in situation, decoration, movement, gesture and light before our eyes and ears," and Beckett's archetypal images that "are his message, not only symbols for this message" (*Sinn oder Unsinn?*, pp. 110-11, 121; cf. *Theater of the Absurd*, p. 18). Syberberg mentions certain situations as "essential moments in the dramatic series of events" (p. 13; cf. pp. 65, 119). "Pregnant moment" is a term quoted by Syberberg (p. 48) from Emil Staiger. These are all parallel cases to the concept of scenic image.

⁵¹ Dürrenmatt when interviewed by Leland R. Phelps, "D's *Die Ehe des Herrn Mississippi*," *Modern Drama*, 8, 2 (Sept. 1965), p. 158.

INTRODUCTION

turn out to be a conglomerate of several scenic images, all interacting, all throwing each other into relief, and placed at certain intervals, to make the rhythm of the play and of the performance breathe. Using this concept means analyzing a play in depth; it will not be resorted to if it is possible to describe a play along more general lines, with due concern for its scenic qualities. From the point of view of literary analysis, a scenic image effects a crystallizing moment in the developing themes of a play: a character may be revealed, an idea evaluated anew, the general validity of the events established, or an impression of completeness achieved. Such a moment presupposes coordination between several scenic means of expression.⁵²

When constructing his images, a playwright will resort to similar scenic means of expression over and over again. These favorite means are called *scenic units*. Dürrenmatt loves to duplicate his figures; there are, e.g., the two eunuchs in the grotesque escort of Claire Zachanassian in *The Visit*. Using double figures is one of Dürrenmatt's scenic units.

Scenic analysis is there to complete other methods available for a scholar in drama, not to throw them overboard. In fact, several methods or approaches have already been used in this introduction. Dürrenmatt has been seen from social and psychological points of view, and the literary contents or the themes of his plays have been subjected to a preliminary analysis. It will be so throughout this study. The literary side will have to be thoroughly dealt with for the reason that I cannot suppose American readers to be familiar with Dürrenmatt's works—with the possible exception of *The Visit* and *The Physicists*. Having quite an arsenal of different approaches is certainly no drawback in the case of Dürrenmatt, a many-sided and capricious author. Modern literary and drama research as a whole keeps absorbing the results of philosophy, linguistics, sociology, social history,

⁵² Oberle remarks on the importance of interaction between several scenic means of expression (*Der unbequeme Dürrenmatt*, p. 28). Cf. E. E. Stoll, *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare*, p. 132.

INTRODUCTION

psychology, etc. into its own constructions of thought. This is all fine and sounds up-to-date; yet there are so many interdisciplinary ideas in circulation that scholars in drama are running the risk of neglecting their own discipline.

It is easy to outline the contents of two additional scenic studies in Dürrenmatt. One of these would deal with his dramaturgy, comparing the numerous versions of his plays, noting deletions, additions, and rewritten scenes, and making a concentrated effort to describe his adaptations of classic plays. The other would be a history of his plays on the stage, starting with the world première, paying attention to the first production in Germany, then to a few major interpretations in other languages. These areas will not be ignored in the following discussion, yet the emphasis will be on giving a critical picture of the most important printed versions of his own plays.

Reviews of Dürrenmatt show a clear line of development since the late 1940's. The writings assume a more matter-of-fact tone, and grow richer in ideas and critical standpoints.⁵³ After the première of *The Visit* in 1956 the attitude to Dürrenmatt changes sharply: instead of being one of a great many promising playwrights he is from now on taken to be one of the masters of the modern stage, and every world première of his becomes a major publicity event within the German-speaking world. Since the late 1960's, expressions of disappointment have grown in volume. Dürrenmatt's position is thus still controversial,⁵⁴ and even as a celebrity he has been true to his reputation as a nuisance. Some of the un-

⁵³ In the archives of Reiss AG, Basle, I went through a considerably greater number of reviews and playbills than those mentioned in the Bibliography.

⁵⁴ Oberle speaks of the contradictory reactions to Dürrenmatt: on one hand, he is taken as a talented routinist; on the other, his opinions are mistrusted. For some, he is a "theological poet," for others, a "cynical buffoon" (*Der unbequeme D.*, p. 10). Helmut Prang compares Dürrenmatt with the greatest writers of comedy, e.g., Aristophanes and Shaw (*Geschichte des Lustspiels*, 1968, pp. 19-20, 104, 193, 297).

INTRODUCTION

favorable reviews he receives can be taken as expressions of hurt feelings; his arrows often strike home. Dürrenmatt's defenders favor this explanation, declaring it as his aim to arouse violent reactions from his audiences—pro or con—and this indeed is his achievement. Yet he can hardly be granted a position outside and above all critical standards; his work includes its highs and its lows, its masterpieces and its failures. They should be judged coolly, without prejudice.

An overeagerness to defend Dürrenmatt against any and all critical attitudes somewhat mars the expert publications of Elisabeth Brock-Sulzer. In her preface to *Friedrich Dürrenmatt* she openly confesses to be *pro* the subject of her study; as a polemical attitude this is understandable, yet we may wonder whether a scholar should not rather be for the good works of an author, against his poor ones.⁵⁵ There are two book-length studies published in America, both of them useful and soundly critical. Murray B. Peppard is illuminating and careful, especially in his discussion of *The Visit*; his book is rich in viewpoints. The study by Armin Arnold is at its best when dealing with Dürrenmatt's early works. The main interest in *Frisch und Dürrenmatt* by Hans Bänziger lies in its varied background materials. Valuable points of view, partly also scenic, are included in the books by Christian M. Jauslin and Urs Jenny, and Hans Mayer has made interesting comparisons between Brecht and Dürrenmatt. Three major studies were published while the present work was in progress: Peter Spycher discusses the stories and novels thoroughly, Ulrich Profitlich concentrates mainly on Dürrenmatt's characterization, and Manfred Durzak on his concept of history.⁵⁶ Numerous shorter studies published mostly in American, Swiss, or German scholarly periodicals will be

⁵⁵ Brock-Sulzer, *F.D.*, 1964 (1960), p. 19; cf. critical remarks in Jauslin, p. 15, and in Kienzle (Weber, ed., *Deutsche Literatur seit 1945*, p. 385).

⁵⁶ Peppard, *F.D.*, 1969; Arnold, *F.D.*, 1969; Bänziger, *Frisch und D.*, 1967 (1960); Jauslin, *F.D.*, 1964; Jenny, *F.D.*, 1965; Mayer, *D. und Frisch*, 1963; Spycher, *F.D.*, 1972; Profitlich, *F.D.*, 1973; Durzak, *D.*, *Frisch, Weiss*, 1972.

INTRODUCTION

mentioned as the argument proceeds. They will be needed: we are hunting for a host of Dürrenmatts.

One of these once put the following sigh into the mouth of Mr. Korbes, the author:

I've been interpreted in terms of depth psychology, Catholicism, Protestantism, Existentialism, Buddhism and Marxism, but never before in the manner you've undertaken (EAE 28).

Why not interpret Dürrenmatt, for a change, in terms of the art he practices: as a writer for the stage?



PART ONE
ENTERING THE STAGE



The world is resting in the mirror.
It has a headache.
God is sitting in the middle.
He is asleep.
His hair is white light.
A snake winds itself round His neck.
It strangles.
God is stifled to death.

(Dürrenmatt, 1943)

DÜRRENMATT

finds the Christ-child, with no eyes under the lids, and eats up its halo: "It tasted like stale bread. I bit its head off. Old marzipan. I walked on."³

According to Fritz Buri there is an old German saying calling the taste of Christ and his grace "old marzipan."⁴ Buri does not specify the tone of that saying; the context in Dürrenmatt hardly gives the expression any positive connotations. The air, the stars, the moon, the sun, the echo, the Christ-child, are all dead, and the only living particle in the mysterious endgame landscape does not get any revelation after having tasted Christ's body: "I walked on." God is stifled to death, or Christ is stale bread and old marzipan; if there is a general atmosphere to be read from the matter-of-fact tone of these two exercises, it is that of utter disappointment, of the death of hope, of all human emotions. Dürrenmatt tells his stories of minimum length and maximum chilliness without bringing any moral comments of his own into them.⁵ He is dramatizing conflicts, not solving problems, and his dramatics take the form of a few barren verbal images.

There is a more active attitude in favor of man, against God, in the next exercise. "Der Folterknecht" ("The Torturer," 1943) is a series of visions of terror, emotionally highly charged, though stylistically simple and rhythmically monotonous. In the middle of a concrete description of a torture chamber, the reader is suddenly confronted by human emotion: "the pains cling to the walls" (S 15). There is more of a plot than before, including suggestions of a Dr. Jekyll

³ The entire text, half a page, is published in English in "F.D.'s 'Weihnachten': A Short, Short, Revealing Story," by Edward Diller, *Studies in Short Fiction*, 3, 2 (Winter 1966), p. 138.

⁴ Grimm et al. (eds.), *Der unbequeme Dürrenmatt*, p. 62.

⁵ Diller (p. 139) tries to read a Christian message about man's thirst for God's warmth into "Christmas." Arnold compares it with the "Grandmother's Story" in Büchner's *Woyzeck*, a play Dürrenmatt was to adapt thirty years later, and finds in the story man's criticism against God who "has not treated him in a fairer way and given him a better chance" (*F.D.*, p. 11). Spycher, sensing a conflict rather than a message, says that the story-teller experiences a world void of "a childlike belief in Christ" (*F.D.*, p. 41).

ENTERING THE STAGE

and Mr. Hyde theme, or of a kind of Faustian pact between man—and a Devil-like, sadistic God.⁶ “The Torturer” is comparable with a medieval copperplate engraving, drawn with a crude technique and dealing with a terrifying subject. Living close to a torture chamber was a simile Max Frisch employed to describe his Swiss experience of World War II in a fragment quoted above. At the end of the story, when the torturer is tortured to death, the central idea is expressed with world-wide, as well as religious, implications: “The torture chamber is the world. The world is pain. The torturer is God. He tortures.” (S 20)⁷

The style of these three early exercises is simple, in fact, elementary. Yet their explosive religious ideas make them sound less derivative than the next or middle group of short stories in *The City*, written in 1945–51. With them we enter a Kafkaesque world of nightmare and guilt. In only a few years, Dürrenmatt had grown more conscious of belonging to a literary tradition.⁸ There are clear thematic cross-references; two of the stories, “Die Falle” (“The Trap”) and “Der Hund” (“The Dog”) can be called variations of themes handled in “The Torturer.” Feelings of erotic guilt and death wishes are combined with suggestions about the existence of divided or duplicate personalities.

It is not necessary to give a detailed account of these stories. They or their lonesome heroes show no interest in the usual activities of life; the storytellers just walk around, get

⁶ The story is not easily decipherable: “Dreadful things are asserted and hinted at, but not concretely enough portrayed to be visualized” (Peppard, *F.D.*, p. 19).

⁷ In a way, Dürrenmatt starts from the core of a modern tragicomic vision of life, not far from Beckett’s absurdism. Guthke speaks of God as “the supreme nihilist,” enjoying a “puppet show,” with men as his puppets (*Modern Tragicomedy*, pp. 118–19, 169). Referring to a private letter of Dürrenmatt’s, Spycher concludes that the young would-be writer read philosophy in order to contend with the religious faith of his father, yet rejected nihilism in favor of thinking combined with belief (pp. 17, 24–25, 33, 372).

⁸ There is a careful discussion by Brock-Sulzer on “Dürrenmatt and the Sources” in *Der unbequeme D.*, pp. 117–36.

DÜRRENMATT

engaged in strange undertakings, and see macabre nightmares or visions.⁹ The border line between reality and dream is blurred. The surroundings are highly romantic: houses like labyrinths, sometimes as hopelessly fallen down as Poe's house of Usher, rooms or cells below the surface of the earth, moonlit or foggy nights, lighting conditions abruptly changing between glaring sunshine and menacing darkness, fires glowing red as in hell itself. The executioner, a favorite ghastly figure to Dürrenmatt ever since the slaughterers of his childhood, makes his entrance a few times, as he did in "The Torturer," too. The total effect might be grotesque—yet the other half, the normal everyday life, is lacking. There is no tension between conflicting elements, because the stories dive headlong into the mysterious underworld of crime and punishment, guilt and innocent suffering. The fearsome is not made ludicrous; the texts are chemically pure of humor.¹⁰

It is surprising that the writer of these stories was ready to establish himself as a comedian in his next phase. Dürrenmatt began his work as a heavyweight Kafkaist, not as a realist.

Three stories are worth closer analysis, for various reasons. "Der Theaterdirektor" ("Theater Manager," 1945) moves closer to recent historical reality than any other story in the collection. It is a parable of Hitler's Germany, projected into a sphere of life Dürrenmatt felt tempted to enter, the world of the theater. Its villain is a spider-like theater manager, using his art as a steppingstone to further his political aspirations.¹¹ He reduces the actors to marionettes, the stage to a prison cell without any dimension of depth; all

⁹ Cf. Spycher's summary (pp. 34–36) of Dürrenmatt's themes in *The City*.

¹⁰ Peppard, p. 20, makes a similar reservation.

¹¹ The story "Der Alte" ("The Old Man"), published in the *Bund* in 1945 yet not included in *The City*, is discussed by Spycher, pp. 48–52. Its central character is an early portrayal of a nihilist, thus foreshadowing both "Theater Manager" and Dürrenmatt's detective fiction.

ENTERING THE STAGE

accidental and individual features are cut away from the plays, until there is just one message left, a collectivistic proclamation against human freedom. Dürrenmatt's simile works on two levels: it corresponds to what happened in German theater life in the 1930's and to what was taking place on the political stage.

What Dürrenmatt criticized in this early story is in harmony with his later antipathies as a practicing playwright. There is, however, one notable exception: in his story he sternly rejects the idea of mixing up contradictory tones of voice, a mark of his own later style. "Most devilish of all was that . . . the genres began to intermingle, so that tragedy was turned into comedy, comedy forged to resemble tragedy" (S 62). Brock-Sulzer tries to explain away this surprising attitude by referring to the "extra-theatrical aims" of this theater manager.¹² A more probable interpretation is that mixing the genres was an inborn inclination in Dürrenmatt, and he wrote down that condemnation when caught by a puritan fit of self-doubts. He has his caprices, his path its twists.

The climax of "Theater Manager" takes place during the festive inaugural performance of a new theater. The supreme theatrical manipulations of the manager deify the audience, until anybody daring to contradict the collective ecstasy is found to be guilty of sacrilege. There is such an individual, an actress unwilling to submit to the measured steps of the ensemble. She is literally torn to pieces, in front of the audience, and this scene charged with mass hysteria marks the outbreak of a political revolution. Though the climax is unnecessarily violent and the execution of the story not flawless, Dürrenmatt's metaphor develops, for the first time, the dimensions of an artistic symbol with a multiple motivation. This happens, symptomatically enough, in a story placed in the theater. "Theater Manager" is truthful both as a description of Hitler's gradual stealing into power and as a commentary on the world of the theater.¹³

¹² Brock-Sulzer, *F.D.*, pp. 235-36.

¹³ Cf. Arnold, p. 15.

DÜRRENMATT

“Der Tunnel” (“The Tunnel”), both begun and completed in the early 1950’s, is no longer an exercise. It is the strongest link between Dürrenmatt’s short prose pieces and his novels; it is an achievement that would defend its place in any anthology of short fiction published in German since World War II. The entire story grows into a poetic metaphor of the world suffering from headache. Both its narrative details and its total structure are rhythmically well mastered; the ticktack rhythm of Dürrenmatt’s first exercises is left miles behind, as the writer sends his train into a tunnel not far from his home town. The train is never to emerge from the tunnel.

Dürrenmatt is conscientious in creating an atmosphere of everyday life in the first pages of the story. The normal is emphasized as a contrast to the abnormal that is soon to break into it. The precarious balance between the contradictory elements in the grotesque, lacking in *The City* so far, is now firmly established. Dürrenmatt sketches a hilarious self-portrait to function as the third-person hero of the story: a fat twenty-four-year-old undergraduate engaged in nebulous studies and having the ability to see the terrible behind the scenes (S 151). Before this ability is put to the test, the other passengers in the compartment are outlined with a light hand and with a curious interest in life new to the readers of *The City*.

Then the train passes into the tunnel, and the landscape, golden in the light of the sinking evening sun, is wiped away by the darkness of the tunnel walls. There are no signs of alarm, not even after there should be: the student knows the location of the tunnel well enough, and his watch tells him that the train should already have passed out of the tunnel. He dismisses the possibility that he might have taken the wrong train, then starts pressing the conductor. There must be some explanation for the overlong journey in the tunnel, mustn’t there? Yet people everywhere in the overcrowded train go on with their business as if nothing had happened—and Dürrenmatt goes on furnishing his story with