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The Dürrenmatt-year: Hugo Loetscher on Friedrich Dürrenmatt*

Labyrinth with connections

A “genuine Dürrenmatt” does not have to mean a text or an image by Friedrich Dürrenmatt himself. A Dürrenmatt has become standard currency in our catalogue of metaphors and in our imaginative world. Which should not be understood as meaning that we are worried about the exchange rate: about how many different writers we can get for a Dürrenmatt.

But where would one look for a Dürrenmatt? Not at any rate in the political pages and not in the feature columns either, but we might well find something under the heading of “Accidents and crime”.

The fact is that this rigid separation into departments is no longer applicable. We cannot know whether “Accidents and crime” may not graduate to the higher categories of politics, culture and economics, or whether the latter may not descend into the more generally readable “Accidents and crime”. No “Dangerous Game” in real life was ever as exciting as the one by Dürrenmatt.

If we follow the latest extravaganzas reported in the newspapers of today with all their convolutions, we have the feeling that we have read something similar before, in the shadowy life of one of Dürrenmatt’s accomplices perhaps. As to money laundering and mafia methods in finance and economics, have we not heard someone singing on about it in the drama about Frank V’s private bank? And as to abuse of power and the judicial system, is there not a Dürrenmatt which tells us all about it more efficiently and more comprehensively than any court reporter, in a book like “Justice”, for example?

This seems to prove yet again that art imitates reality. But we may well ask why it is not a Friedrich Schiller which does the imitating best, but rather a Friedrich Dürrenmatt. This may relate to the fact that Dürrenmatt approached reality not so much by portraying it directly as by trying to find out all the possibilities which it contains.

One thing is clear. We do not get anything very nice or pleasant in exchange for a Dürrenmatt. It is a disas-

ter currency and in consequence extremely appropriate today. But it is not valid for any specific disaster. Dürrenmatt always made it clear that he was not interested in one particular disaster, but in the nature of disaster itself. As a man and as an author, he was very demanding.

The “genuine Dürrenmatt” could be minted and brought into circulation because in his vast linguistic and artistic body of work Dürrenmatt created a world of his own, and as such he was also the stage manager of its downfall.

Suddenly the “genuine Dürrenmatt” is not so genuine after all but in spite of this is worth more than we imagined when we first tried to put a value on it. Alongside the slapstick we have poetic imagery, and the lyrical passages of his work are followed by derisive parody. Out of the apparent cliché, pathos suddenly emerges. He forces himself to follow the rigorous lines of a concept and suddenly we can admire the brimming and overflowing nature of his metaphor.

These riches are the result of the wealth of artistic possibilities which are constantly being tried out. The most intense and the most exciting illustrations of this are in his plays. His work about and for the theatre comes in the most remarkable variety. Dürrenmatt, who never made a secret of his contempt for German literature as a discipline, was one of its most splendid exponents. Seldom has a writer given so many sources of nourishment to so many literary critics and so many academic publishers.

The search for a definitive and inescapable conclusion does not permit Dürrenmatt to stray. That is, if he is true to his own credo by which a story is only thought through to its end when it turns in the direction which is the most terrible imaginable. In this respect, he hits the right note every time.

We may on the other hand ask the question how it comes about that this thinking through to the end arrives at so many different conclusions. This is certainly not explained by any kind of dialectic nimbleness by which the quintessence of his work would bend to every passing political breeze. Nor can we be satisfied with the assumption that the thinking is perhaps not quite precise enough. But a type of drama which is on

Hugo Loetscher on Friedrich Dürrenmatt: This portrait dates from 1978*



the look-out for all the opportunities provided by the stage logically involves all the possibilities of drama itself. It does not therefore come to one specific conclusion or another but to a sum total of all possible conclusions.

In this process of thinking through to the end, it is not only the method lying behind the reflection which counts. Of equal importance is the posture which underpins the question put and permits its solution. This implies a radical method of thinking which is present at the beginning and pushes through to the end without any compromise at all.

In a country where compromise comes not at the end but at the beginning, such radical thinking is bound to be provocative. And this is particularly so when Dürrenmatt fine-tunes his wicked view of Switzerland. Or when he shows how Switzerland’s retreat into itself results in a type of diffidence which seals off the country by the virtue of its very determination to protect its freedom. This is a perfect example of the radical insistence on a metaphor such as that of the “prison”. It also shows the extent to which conjuring with words and total artistic commitment can go hand in hand.

For Dürrenmatt, wandering abroad is the fundamental experience of humanity. But he does not, in the manner of a blinkered moralising teacher, spin off an Ariadne thread of hints for living. He frees us from the labyrinth by circumscribing it. Wandering abroad is expressed in a network of relationships, and the way out is seen as a series of connections. From the connections which he thus obtains he creates a whole new world, his own world, which hangs together in itself so well that we can indeed say of a piece of literary work that it is a “genuine Dürrenmatt”. ■

* Abridged from Catalogue of the Dürrenmatt exhibition at the Literaturarchiv Bern and at the Kunsthaus Zürich. © 1994 by Diogenes Verlag.