

Dürrenmatt's *Der Verdacht*: A Defective Mystery Story or a Sophisticated Novel?

Friedrich Dürrenmatt's three mystery novels¹ take place in Switzerland and deal with a crime or crimes committed in this country and investigated by members (active or retired) of the Swiss Police Department (either of Berne or Zurich). His first mystery novel *Der Richter und sein Henker* (*The Judge and his Hangman*, written in 1950) is undoubtedly one of the most exciting and entertaining novels in German literature. Its popularity is based mainly on its gripping incidents and breath-taking plot. From a narrative point of view, this pure event-novel testifies to the remarkable talent of Dürrenmatt as an imaginative fabulist and beguiling storyteller. Throughout this novel, Dürrenmatt never loosens his grip on the narrative strings or permits real moral questions and serious philosophical issues to slink into the story and obstruct the unfolding of the plot.

Dürrenmatt's by now well-known anti-illusionistic devices (such as the presentation of extremely grotesque situations, the inclusion of absurd and implausible events, the portrayal of bizarre characters, and the ample use of ironic, satirical, and sarcastic elements), which play an important role within his dramatic works, are kept here at a minimum. By avoiding the use of his favorite "estrangement effects" as much as possible, and by employing a plain and straightforward style, Dürrenmatt has considerably reduced the literary and artistic merit of his first novel, but has, in return, created a very suspenseful story.

Dürrenmatt's third novel, *Das Versprechen* (*The Pledge*, written in 1957) which has the subtitle *Requiem auf den Kriminalroman* (*Requiem for the Mystery Novel*), is also a very exciting one in spite of the author's intention to ridicule the traditional pattern of the nineteenth-century detective story. That his "genius" protagonist, inspector Matthäi, fails to apprehend the murderer (contrary to what the reader of conventional mystery stories expects, and different from the ending of the film version entitled *Es geschah am helllichten Tag*), does not change the fact that Dürrenmatt has succeeded in narrating a very enthralling incident. This success is also due to the absence of serious issues and philosophical questions ("jenseits des Pädagogischen," p. 244), and to the terse and lucid style the author employs in relating the events.

Aside from the few ironic and witty remarks made by the author and the narrator from time to time (which deal with the difference between serious poetry and trivial literature, or the discrepancy between the investigation of a crime in fiction and in real life), and except for the grotesque and highly theatrical scene featuring the dying and confessing wife of the murderer, Dürrenmatt has succeeded in controlling his intellectual whims and dramatic impulses and in dedicating all his efforts to the narration of the story.

But Dürrenmatt's second mystery novel, *Der Verdacht* (*The Quarry*, written in 1951), which also deals with the detection of a crime, differs greatly—intrinsically as well as extrinsically—from his other two works. Because the author reveals the identity of the murderer and unveils the mystery surrounding Dr. Emmenberger and his hospital very early in the game, this novel has been regarded by a few critics² as a defective work which ignores the very nature of the mystery novel.³ While in the *Richter* the identity of the murderer of police lieutenant Ulrich Schmied is kept in the dark till the very last pages, and in

Das Versprechen the fate of the criminal is disclosed at the end of the book, in *Der Verdacht* the reader is told in the middle of the story that Dr. Emmenberger is the *SS-Folterknecht* (Nazi torturer), exactly as inspector Bärlach—and the reader—has suspected. And this, of course, causes great disappointment for the typical reader of mystery novels.⁴ A much more important reason for the reader's dissatisfaction with the *Verdacht* is caused by the novel's relatively high intellectual content as well as by its many anti-illusionistic, and thus anti-narrative, elements.

More than in his other two mystery novels, or, for that matter, more than in any other work by Dürrenmatt, *Der Verdacht* is—especially in its second part—full of sermonizing passages and lengthy ponderous speeches which deal with serious philosophical issues such as the human will (p. 83), law, power, and authority (p. 84), poverty and misery (p. 85), good and evil (p. 87), morals and profitability (p. 92), ethical nihilism and traditional beliefs (pp. 107-108), coincidence and free choice (p. 109), justice and freedom (p. 111).⁵ In addition to the several political questions⁶ he refers to in this novel (pp. 16, 31, 33, 69, 82, 107), Dürrenmatt incorporates many satirical remarks on Switzerland, its people, its cities, and its institutions (pp. 52, 53, 54, 55, 61, 77, 90, 91, 92, 101), as well as earnest comments on humanity and the state of the world.⁷ For no apparent stylistic or narrative reason does he insert these meditative remarks which—although sharp-witted and penetrating—could not be artistically justified. Also by referring to famous authors, thinkers, and artists,⁸ and by alluding to mythological figures and dramatic characters,⁹ Dürrenmatt has increased the intellectual substance of his book; but the question now is whether these elements have supported or damaged the intrinsic structure of this “mystery” novel.¹⁰

If compared with Dürrenmatt's other two mystery novels, *Der Richter und sein Henker* or *Das Versprechen*, the style used in the *Verdacht* is much more sophisticated.¹¹ The peculiar diction and phraseology of *Der Verdacht*, the rhetorical nature of many passages,¹² and the affluence of controversial issues make this work—contrary to what Wolfgang Kayser expects from a mystery novel¹³—something that could be read, reread, and always enjoyed.

The following *one* sentence is cited as an example of the lengthy sentences the reader often encounters in *Der Verdacht*:

Zwar war dem Kranken noch, als ob sich die Vorhänge da drüben am Fenster wie die Segel eines dahinschwindenden Schiffes blähen, als ob ferner das Rasseln eines Rolladens vernehmbar sei, der sich in die Höhe schob; dann, noch undeutlicher, als ob ein riesenhafter, massiger Leib hinab in die Nacht tauche; aber dann, da durch die klaffende Wunde des offenen Fensters die unabsehbare Fülle der Sterne brach, stieß im Alten ein unbändiger Trotz hoch, in dieser Welt zu bestehen und für eine andere, bessere, zu kämpfen, zu kämpfen auch mit diesem seinem jammervollen Leib, an welchem der Krebs fraß, gierig und unaufhaltsam, und dem man noch ein Jahr gab und nicht mehr, grölend sang er, als der Wodka wie Feuer in seinen Eingeweiden zu brennen anfing, den Berner Marsch hinein in die Stille des Spitals, daß die Kranken unruhig wurden. (pp. 38-39)

The following quotation is an example of the rhetorical nature of many passages:

Die Freiheit! Wie muß der Mensch sie lieben, daß er alles zu dulden gewillt ist, sie zu bekommen, so sehr, daß er auch damals in Stutthof freiwillig in die flammendste Hölle ging, nur um diesen erbärmlichen Bankert von Freiheit zu umarmen, der ihm da geboten wurde. Die Freiheit ist bald eine Dirne und bald eine Heilige, für jeden etwas anderes, für einen Arbeiter etwas anderes, für einen Geistlichen etwas anderes, für einen Bankier etwas anderes und für einen armen Juden in einem Vernichtungslager, wie Auschwitz, Lublin, Maidanek, Natzweiler und Stutthof, wieder etwas anderes: Da war Freiheit alles, was außerhalb dieses Lagers war, aber nicht Gottes schöne Welt, o nein, man hoffte in grenzenloser Bescheidenheit nur, wieder nach einem so angenehmen Orte wie Buchenwald oder Dachau zurückversetzt zu werden, in denen man jetzt die goldene Freiheit sah, wo man nicht Gefahr lief, vergast, sondern nur zu Tode geprügelt zu werden, wo noch ein Tausendstel Promille Hoffnung bestand, durch einen unwahrscheinlichen Zufall doch gerettet zu werden, gegenüber der absoluten Sicherheit des Todes in den Vernichtungslagern. Mein Gott, Kommissar, laß uns kämpfen, daß die Freiheit für alle die gleiche wird, daß sich keiner vor dem andern für seine Freiheit zu schämen hat! (p. 36)

Of course, for the reader who is interested solely in the unfolding of the plot, these stylistic and philosophical elements would be regarded as "estrangement effects," as obstacles which hinder—or at least slow—the vigorous and continuous narrative flow which he expects to experience when he sees the tag "*Kriminalroman*."¹⁴ This kind of reader not only appreciates suspense and entertainment more than enlightenment and information, but he is also accustomed to certain stereotyped characters rather than to the unpredictable and highly dramatic ones he encounters in *Der Verdacht* (such as the terminally sick but extremely bold protagonist,¹⁵ the sadistic and nihilistic murderer, the biblically heroic and ruthlessly vindictive giant, the apathetic and spiritually mutilated accomplice, the fanatically religious and criminally naive subordinate, the inhumanely exploited ape-like dwarf). These overdimensional characters who would enliven the dullest play, would also blunt the most exciting mystery novel, for they continuously divert the reader's attention from the action.

Mystery stories are usually noted for their adventurous but plausible events; in *Der Richter* as well as in *Das Versprechen*, the plot is very gripping without being unbelievable. In *Der Verdacht*, however, the reader, even by stretching his imagination to the extreme, will not be able to believe that a criminal surgeon like Dr. Emmenberger "who kills out of love" (p. 90), could run his hellish sanatorium in the center of a big city undisturbed by the relatives of the murdered rich people and unsuspected by the authorities. Of course, the mad doctor and the crazy scientist are characters often used in horror stories and penny dreadfuls, but not so often in detective stories and mystery novels.

The portrayal of Dr. Emmenberger (a mixture of Raskolnikov and Dr. Faustus), and the many unbelievably gruesome crimes he commits and philosophically justifies, make him the personification of evil rather than a real and convincing character. Also the way the other figures talk, act, and react, shifts this story towards the allegorical, the grotesque, and even the absurd. Because of scenes similar to the one on the last page in which Gulliver bends the iron bars with his bare hands (one of which is deformed), carries the dwarf on his back "as if he were carrying the whole world, the earth, and humanity" (p. 121), and disappears into the night, the reader is not only encouraged, but strongly urged to look for deeper meanings and profounder significance.

All of these elements combine to make *Der Verdacht* less of a mystery story and more of a literary novel.¹⁶ By increasing the intellectual substance and the poetic merit of this book, Dürrenmatt has created a highly sophisticated work of literature instead of a pure adventure story as he had originally intended. *Der Verdacht* is undoubtedly Dürrenmatt's only "mystery" novel which invites serious literary examination and tolerates different philosophical interpretations.¹⁷ But at the same time, and because of this, it is his most labored and tedious story.

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NOTES

¹Editions cited: *Der Richter und sein Henker* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1955); *Der Verdacht* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1961); *Das Versprechen* (Zurich: Die Arche, 1958).

²In her book *Friedrich Dürrenmatt: Stationen seines Werkes* (Zurich: Die Arche, 1964), Elisabeth Brock-Sulzer regards *Der Verdacht* as a "Werk . . . das sicher nicht zu den gelungensten Dürrenmatts zählt. . . . *Der Verdacht* ist ein eilig hingeschriebenes und deshalb weniger scharf von der Selbstkontrolle gezähmtes Werk als andere Dürrenmatts" (p. 192). In his book *Frisch und Dürrenmatt*, 9th ed. (Berne: Francke, 1971), p. 169, Hans Bänziger notes that "Der Verdacht trägt das persönliche Anliegen des Dichters deutlicher zu Schau und wirkt unbeholfener." On p. 170 Bänziger adds: "Doch außer der Bestätigung einer im Gesamtwerk zu ahnenden Richtlinie ist der *Verdacht* von geringer Bedeutung."

³See, for instance, Dietrich Naumann, "Der Kriminalroman: Ein Literaturbericht," *Deutschunterricht*, 19,1 (March 1967). ("Die Struktur des Kriminalromans ist bestimmt durch die Konstruktion des Falles, dessen reine Faktizität am Anfang, dessen Auflösung am Schluß steht"; p. 3).

⁴In his book *Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Köpfe des XX Jahrhunderts*, 57, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Colloquium, 1971), p. 52, Armin Arnold justifies this narrative flaw by stating that "es geht hier aber nicht mehr darum, herauszufinden, wer der Mörder ist, sondern darum, ob und wie Bärlach wieder aus der Falle kommt, in die er hineingeraten ist."

⁵Armin Arnold defends the inclusion of these lengthy and cumbersome "meditations" by noting that "Dürrenmatt geht es in erster Linie um eine Analyse des Nihilisten und Existentialisten Emmenberger . . . Höhepunkt des Romans sind die beiden Gespräche Bärlachs mit Edith Marlak und mit Emmenberger" (p. 54).

⁶"Im Unterschied zu Gastmann [of *Der Richter und sein Henker*] ist er [Emmenberger] nicht nur der zeitlose Böse aus Prinzip, sondern auch der Vertreter einer bösen zeitgeschichtlichen Erscheinung: des hitlerischen Nazismus. Darum ist *Der Verdacht* mehr ein politischer Roman als *Der Richter und sein Henker*." Peter Spycher, *Friedrich Dürrenmatt: Das erzählerische Werk* (Frauenfeld: Huber, 1972), p. 168.

⁷"Wiederum entsteht, auf Schweizer Boden, ein Gemälde der ersten Jahre nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg. Und wiederum erweitert sich dieses Gemälde einer Epoche zu dem des menschlichen Daseins in der Welt überhaupt." Spycher, p. 167. ". . . Dürrenmatt hält im *Verdacht* seinen Landsleuten und sich selber . . . einen Sittenspiegel vor . . . Doch wie immer, so übt Dürrenmatt auch im *Verdacht* nicht bloß zeitgeschichtliche, sondern menscheits- und weltgeschichtliche Kritik." Spycher, p. 174.

⁸Dante, p. 29; Molière, p. 29; Kant, p. 49; Lessing, p. 52; Schiller, p. 53; Goethe, p. 56; Beethoven, p. 56; Botticelli, p. 75; Dürer, pp. 92, 113; Archimedes, p. 112.

⁹Wilhelm Tell, p. 53; Don Quijote, pp. 53, 54, 55; Herkules und der Stall des Augias, p. 55; Faust, p. 56; Argos, p. 118; Odyß, p. 118; Sisyphos, p. 120.

¹⁰Hans Bänziger believes that "Der zeitgenössische Hintergrund wird übersteigernd kommentiert, nicht erhöht. Rasch hingeworfene mythologische Parallelen stören" (p. 170).

¹¹See, for instance, p. 21 ("Der Abend . . . unrige."); p. 22 ("Entsetzt . . . Antlitz."); p. 37 ("Das sind die Taten . . . gleichermaßen."); p. 65 ("Dann blickte . . . dachte er."); p. 87 (" . . . das Gute und das Böse . . . zum Schlechten."); p. 88 ("Die Welt ist faul . . . erlangen.")

¹²See, for instance, pp. 35-37, 43, 49, 54, 55, 64, 83, 84, 85, 91-92, 107-108, 109, 110.

¹³"Detektivromane gehören grundsätzlich nicht zu der Literatur, die wiedergelesen werden kann und will." *Das sprachliche Kunstwerk*, 11th ed. (Berne: Francke, 1965), p. 206.

¹⁴Dürrenmatt himself calls *Der Richter und sein Henker* and *Der Verdacht* "Kriminalromane." See Spycher p. 123. Elisabeth Brock-Sulzer, p. 190; Armin Arnold, p. 84, G. Neumann, J. Schröder, M. Karnick (*Dürrenmatt. Frisch. Weiss: Drei Entwürfe zum Drama der Gegenwart* München: Wilhelm Fink, 1969), p. 51, label *Der Verdacht* as "Kriminalroman"; Hans Bänziger, p. 168 calls it "Kriminalgeschichte."

¹⁵In *Der Verdacht*, Bärlach, the protagonist of Dürrenmatt's first two novels, has been endowed with many new dimensions: "Mehr noch als im *Richter und seinem Henker* ist Bärlach im *Verdacht* eine vielschichtige, spannungsgeladene Persönlichkeit: vom Tode gezeichnet und lebenshungrig, bürgerlich und antibürgerlich, freiheitsliebend und autoritär, gütig und hart, tapfer und furchtsam, stolz und demütig, gläubig und zweifelnd, menschlich und dämonisch" (Spycher, p. 178).

¹⁶"Darum ist *Der Verdacht* viel eher ein Gleichnis des verzweifelten Kampfes gegen das Böse als ein Detektivroman" (Spycher p. 168).

¹⁷For instance, the reason behind Bärlach's silence when challenged by Emmenberger to take a stand on the many nihilistic issues he introduces, is one point that has been interpreted differently by scholars and critics. See Spycher, p. 195; Elisabeth Brock-Sulzer, p. 194; Armin Arnold, p. 55.