


seemed worried about his burlesque attacks on organized religion, his demoticized treatment of relations between the sexes and the exuberant detail with which he described them, and the savage, often sadistic, inventiveness of his prose when he was writing about things that had been held sacred by the pre-war generation.

Grass might have responded to those who decried the bluntness of his language that they were rather missing the point and forgetting the fateful role language played in creating National Socialism, propagating its doctrines, and concealing its crimes. In his novel *Hundejahre* (*Dog Years*), Grass launched a devastating attack on the bureaucrats, soldiers, philosophers (particularly Martin Heidegger and his followers), professors, and churchmen who manipulated and corrupted the German tongue during the Nazi period. He held the conviction that the German language had to be purged of this debasement to make it worthy of serving the new German democracy. The prose of *Die Blechtrommel*, its frankness, its explicitness, its outrageous humor, and its insistence on calling a spade a spade, marks the beginning of Grass's important contribution to the cleansing process.

See also 1500 (Eulenspiegel), 1638, 1670 (Grimmelshausen), 1831, 1943, 1946/1947, 1967

Bibliography: Günter Grass, *Die Blechtrommel* (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, 1959); *The Tin Drum*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Random House, 1961). John Reddick, *The "Danzig Trilogy" of Günter Grass* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974). Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Wilhelm Meister, auf Blech getrommelt," in *Von Buch zu Buch: Günter Grass in der Kritik*, ed. Gert Loschütz (Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1965), 8–12. Michael Minden, "A Post-Realist Aesthetic: Günter Grass, 'Die Blechtrommel,'" in *The German Novel in the Twentieth Century: Beyond Realism*, ed. David Midgley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 149–163. Patrick O'Neill, ed., *Critical Essays on Günter Grass* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987). Hans Dieter Zimmermann, "Günter Grass: Die Blechtrommel (1959)," in *Deutsche Romane des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts*, ed. Paul Michael Lützeler (Königstein/Ts.: Athenäum, 1983), 324–339.

Gordon A. Craig

 1962, February

Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Die Physiker* abolishes tragedy at the height of the cold war

From a Tragedy of Physics to a Physics of Tragedy

For a brief shining moment in the early 1960s, Swiss playwrights dominated the German stage. Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Die Physiker* (1962; *The Physicists*), first performed in Zurich on February 20, 1962, was the most successful play of the season, and Max Frisch's *Andorra* (1961) was a close second. The main reason for the enthusiastic reception of Dürrenmatt's play was, no doubt, its topicality. Between its conception in 1959 and the end of its first season, the United States and the Soviet Union almost went to war over Cuba, an American spy plane was shot down over Russian territory, the Berlin Wall was erected, France tested its first atom bomb, and Switzerland held a referendum

on whether or not to acquire nuclear weapons. Clearly, *Die Physiker* was a play under the bomb, and audiences reacted accordingly. It also benefited from a marked change in literary taste. The postwar preference in German theater for modern classics that had been banned under the Nazis, followed by a brief predilection for the theater of the absurd, was winding down, and the reign of politically committed documentary theater was about to commence. Dürrenmatt's play appeared to bridge the gap. A comedy that piles up corpses, a police drama that turns into a paranoid display of paradoxical twists of logic and grotesque sexual-atomic slapstick, a satire that, in violation of ancient rules, precedes rather than follows the tragedy, it catered to audiences familiar with theater of the absurd. Its focus on the ethics and effects of modern science also pointed toward more politically engaged plays, such as Heinar Kipphardt's *In der Sache J. Robert Oppenheimer* (1964; *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer*). The interesting question, however, is not why the play received such a warm welcome but what underlying qualities enabled it to become one of Dürrenmatt's (1921–1990) critically most acclaimed and financially most rewarding ventures, second only to the perennially popular *Der Besuch der alten Dame* (1956; *The Visit*).

The main source of inspiration was Robert Jungk's *Heller als tausend Sonnen* (1956; *Brighter than a Thousand Suns*), a best-selling history of nuclear physics that focused on the scientists rather than the science. By retracing the gradual decline of physics into politics, Jungk provided Dürrenmatt with a background narrative that took the shape of an elegy, a chronicle of the avoidable loss of atomic innocence. It was avoidable because Jungk endorsed Werner Heisenberg's belief that in the summer of 1939 twelve people—that is, an exclusive group of top researchers including Heisenberg himself—"might still have been able, by coming to mutual agreement, to prevent the construction of atom bombs" (*Thousand Suns*, 81). But mutual distrust, opportunism, political expediency, and the takeover by the war machine conspired to turn the international scientific fraternity into—to quote Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo Galilei*—"a race of inventive dwarfs who can be hired for any purpose" (*Life of Galileo*, 109). Brecht said much the same, though he moved the pivotal year of disgrace back to 1633, when Galileo was summoned to appear before the Inquisition. Toward the end of the play, Galileo argues that a more defiant posture on his part could have resulted in a Hippocratic oath for scientists, a vow to use their knowledge exclusively for the common good. Now, however, the gap between social and scientific progress had become so pronounced that the scientists' "cry of triumph at some new achievement will be echoed by a universal cry of horror" (*Life of Galileo*, 109).

Such sentiments are absent from *Die Physiker*. No alliance of socially enlightened scientists can predetermine how their work will be used. The isolation of the physicists at Les Cerisiers—the name pays homage to Anton Chekhov's equally ineffective landed gentry secluded in its cherry orchards—stands for the inability of the gifted few to influence a constitutionally mindless world that cares little for their motives and aspirations and that treats the

results of their labor "as a pimp treats a whore" (*Physicists*, 22). Dürrenmatt's "21 Points to *The Physicists*" spells out the futility of individual action: "Every attempt by an individual to resolve for himself what is the concern of everyone is doomed to fail" (*Plays and Essays*, 156). Since the effect of physics is of concern to all, no individual scientist, not even Heisenberg's group of twelve, can take care of these matters. "What concerns everyone can only be resolved by everyone" (*ibid.*). At first glance this may sound like a Brechtian appeal to the masses, but it actually presupposes what the play clearly rules out: a collective action that will cut through the walls of Les Cerisiers.

Neither does *Die Physiker* allow for withdrawal into the privacy or innocence of so-called pure research. "Everything that can be thought"—the megalomaniacal Mathilde von Zahnd informs her inmates—"is thought at some time or other. Now or in the future" (*Physicists*, 89). There is no exclusive ownership of ideas, no genius that guarantees a monopoly of insight; rather, there is a kind of statistical distribution that prescribes, for instance, that during the 1930s some members of a loose group of interchangeable individuals focusing their experiments on the atomic nucleus will achieve nuclear fission and some will not. The question, then, is not: who had the idea first? But: which agency is the first to get its hand on it and make it work? Furthermore, the play emphasizes the simple fact—too simple, indeed, for many philosophical discussions—that an idea becomes a social event not when it is publicized or put to use but when it is stored. Cassandra can speak the truth only under the condition that nobody will believe her; Möbius will write the truth only under the condition that, locked up in his self-imposed exile, nobody can read him. But that condition is never met: everything Möbius writes and then destroys, the mad doctor possesses in duplicate. Mechanical reproduction is the basis for Möbius's concluding insight that "what was once thought can never be unthought" (*Physicists*, 92). In Dürrenmatt's paranoid universe, there is no space that cannot be observed. Even the ivory towers that claim to observe the world are themselves closely scrutinized; and if, as in the case of Les Cerisiers, there is no outside agency looking in (in the play, the police fails to do so), the institution is bound to have its own internal observers.

These issues have made *Die Physiker* part of a group of German plays—ranging from Brecht's *Galileo* and Kipphardt's *Oppenheimer* to Carl Zuckmayer's *Das kalte Licht* (1955; *The Cold Light*)—that attempt to spell out the social, political, and ethical implications of the paradox best expressed by Kipphardt's *Oppenheimer*: "We, the physicists, find that we have never before been of such consequence, and that we have never before been so completely helpless" (*Oppenheimer*, 106). Most of the plays build on each other but advocate very different points of view of what scientists did, could have done, or should do. *Die Physiker*, for instance, has been labeled a direct revocation of Brecht's *Galileo*. This highly exploitable mixture of ethics and didactics, especially potent in the sequence Brecht-Dürrenmatt-Kipphardt, is a schoolmaster's dream and has done its share to earn *Die Physiker* that most indisputable mark of canonization: a guaranteed presence in German high school exams. Yet, what ulti-

mately makes it such a compelling text is that underneath the "tragedy of physics" there lurks what may be called a "physics of tragedy."

Die Physiker strictly adheres to the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action. "The action takes place among madmen and therefore requires a classical framework to keep it in shape" (*Physicists*, 10). This might be dismissed as one of Dürrenmatt's sarcastic asides were it not for his explanation, in his essay on "Problems of the Theater," of how these unities came about. "Greek tragedy was possible only because it did not have to invent its historical background; it already possessed one. The spectators knew the myths with which each drama dealt" (*Plays and Essays*, 236). Greek audiences were thoroughly familiar with the stories and could therefore concentrate on how they were presented and playwrights were able to perform all the feats of condensation and abbreviation, including the strict adherence to the three unities, that were later codified as poetological prescriptions. In *Die Physiker*, however, the audience knows nothing, and most of what it learns in the course of the play turns out to be wrong. Möbius may be a modern Oedipus who, knowing the danger that he poses to others, tries to avoid his fate only to end up where he should not, but the background of the story is constantly reinvented as characters and institutions keep changing their identity. Nonetheless, despite the conspicuous absence of a common framework that gave rise to tragedy, *Die Physiker* retains, indeed foregrounds in highly self-conscious fashion, that very form. Why did Dürrenmatt choose to do this?

Tragedy always required more than mere familiarity with staged events. There had to be a degree of identification that would allow dramatized events to represent the world in such a way that solutions found onstage would influence subsequent behavior offstage. By identifying with Oedipus, we learn to avoid his fate. This, however, requires a comprehensible, tangible story of hubris, guilt, and responsibility: a clearly identifiable subject has to commit clearly identifiable transgressions that result in clearly identifiable consequences, which, in turn, will (or will not) be realized, maybe even regretted by the perpetrator. Dürrenmatt, however, declares that all this no longer exists: "Tragedy presupposes guilt, despair, moderation, lucidity, vision, a sense of responsibility. In the Punch-and-Judy show of our century, in this backsliding of the white race, there are neither guilty nor responsible individuals any more. No one could do anything about it, and no one wanted to. Indeed, things happen without anyone in particular being responsible for them. Everything is dragged along and everyone gets caught somewhere in the sweep of events" (*Plays and Essays*, 254).

This passage may be mimicking the self-exculpatory rhetoric common in post-Nazi Germany, but the diagnosis is also linked to both the history and the content of modern physics. In essence, it distills the story told in Jungk's *Heller als tausend Sonnen* of how the road to Hiroshima was paved with good intentions. From the innocent days of early atomic research to the advent of the hydrogen bomb, the participants are caught up, dragged along, swept away; and try as they may to control events and predetermine the outcome of their ac-

tions, things keep happening that nobody ever wanted to happen. "Thus, the sum of a thousand individual acts of an intensely conscientious character led eventually to an act of collective abandonment of conscience, horrifying in its magnitude" (*Thousand Suns*, 209). To other writers, the modern scientist appears to be one of the last figures capable of representing the tragic: here, so it seems, is a tangible structure of hubris and nemesis, here are great men succumbing to ambitious dreams, only to be felled by powers they thought they could control.

In Dürrenmatt, the exact opposite applies: the story of modern science—with its erosion of responsibility, manipulation of intentions, and blindness for future consequences—defies the very basis for tragedy and calls instead for comedic and grotesque forms of representation which alone can do justice to the essential fuzziness of physics and politics. Guilt arising from tragic failure can, if at all, exist only "as a personal achievement, as a religious act" (*Plays and Essays*, 255). At the end of the play, Möbius/Oedipus is free to retire into his personal realization that he was unable to protect the world from his actions, but that is a purely private matter and altogether irrelevant, considering the fact that the mad Mathilde von Zahnd is about to conquer the world. The very foundation of tragedy—that the fate and the eloquent self-realization of the hero have some impact on the world—is abolished.

Finally, it is important to realize that *Die Physiker* also links the obsolescence of the tragic to the content of modern physics. While the play has little to say about any particular theory, it does appear that the relationship between play and society is similar to that between modern scientific models, especially within the realm of microphysics and reality. "The state has lost its physical reality, and just as physics can now cope with the world only in mathematical formulas, so the state can only be expressed in statistics" (*Plays and Essays*, 253). After all, tragedy had always been a somewhat Newtonian business: it presupposed a certain proportionality of cause and effect as well as a discernible clash of distinct and stable bodies with more or less predictable results, not a fuzzy, chaotic world in which microscopic causes may have unpredictable macroscopic effects and in which the appearance of particles depends on the ways in which they are observed. No wonder, then, that a world devoid of stable, clearly definable elementary particles should find its aesthetic correlative in dramatic constructs that are equally devoid of stable, clearly definable subjects. In *Die Physiker*, with its grotesque plot twists and constant surprises, the action on stage is as paradoxical and unpredictable as events in the physical and political world. If the physical structure of the world has changed so dramatically, how can the physics of tragedy remain the same? "A drama about physicists must be paradoxical" (*Plays and Essays*, 156).

This, then, is the beautiful paradox of the play: *Die Physiker* represents the fact that the political and physical worlds can no longer be represented; but it is precisely this paradoxical endeavor that compels Dürrenmatt to adhere strictly to a bygone aesthetic form. The play does not represent society in any conventional fashion since that would contradict the basic diagnosis of unrepresenta-

bility, which takes its cue from the formal apparatus of modern physics. Just as with the increasingly complex mathematical formulas of microphysics, the dramatic form of *Die Physiker* is so perfect because its referential function is so tenuous. But there is still an understanding that this procedure in itself will be able to tell the audience something about the world, that is, fulfill some representative function with limited political import. Not enough to rally the audience to challenge or change the world, because that would presuppose an understanding of how an essentially fuzzy world works and how it can be influenced with predictable results, but enough to give up old illusions of taking charge. "Drama," Dürrenmatt concludes "21 Points about *The Physicists*," "can dupe the spectator into exposing himself to reality but cannot compel him to withstand it or even master it" (*Plays and Essays*, 156).

See also 1949, 1953 (March 26), 1964

Bibliography: Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Die Physiker: Eine Komödie in zwei Akten*, vol. 7 of 37 vols. (Zurich: Diogenes, 1998); *The Physicists*, trans. James Kirkup (New York: Grove, 1964). ———, *Plays and Essays*, ed. Volkmar Sander (New York: Continuum, 1982). Bertolt Brecht, *Life of Galileo*, trans. John Willet (London: Methuen, 1986). Robert Jungk, *Brighter than a Thousand Suns*, trans. James Cleugh (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958). Heinar Kipphardt, *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, trans. Ruth Speirs (London: Methuen, 1967).

Geoffrey Winthrop-Young

1963

Ingeborg Bachmann begins writing her cycle of novels *Todesarten* against the backdrop of the Auschwitz trials

Love as Fascism

Thirty years after her untimely death, Ingeborg Bachmann (1926–1973) remains an enigmatic figure. Her life and writings are a contested legacy in post-war German literature. Championed by an older generation of writers and critics in the early 1950s, Bachmann first became known as a poet. Two collections of formally accomplished, passionate, yet austere and biting verse—*Die gestundete Zeit* (1953; *Mortgaged Time*) and *Anrufung des großen Bären* (1956; *Invocation of the Great Bear*)—made the young Austrian from Klagenfurt a media star in Germany and an instant classic for the literary establishment, a worthy heir, she was called, to Rilke, Mörike, and Hölderlin. For many of her readers, Bachmann never surpassed her early triumphs, and her turn to prose in the 1960s was seen as a betrayal of her poetic vocation and a descent into popular, even trivial literature. A more recent generation of readers, however, has interpreted this turn as Bachmann's epoch-making rejection of a patriarchal, classically oriented literary tradition. The novels and unfinished fragments collectively known as *Todesarten* (variously rendered as "Ways of Dying," "Death Styles," or "Manners of Death"), which Bachmann herself characterized as "a new manner of writing" conceived in response to "new experiences of suffering" (*Interviews*, 139), have attained almost cult status as the beginning of a