

The Possible Is Monstrous

Selected Poems by
Friedrich Dürrenmatt

Translated by
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For Nicole

—D.P.

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Friedrich Dürrenmatt (1921–1990) is considered not only the most prominent author of Swiss literature following the Second World War but also one of the most important literary figures of the second half of the twentieth century, rivaled, some scholars argue, only by Beckett, Brecht, Camus, and Sartre. As an author and dramatist, Dürrenmatt is certainly well known in the United States and throughout the world—as a poet, however, he is not. What only a few readers and scholars realize is that in addition to being a prolific writer of prose, Dürrenmatt was also a formidable poet.

Like his Austrian contemporary Thomas Bernhard, whose first literary hero was his grandfather, Dürrenmatt looked up to his grandfather Ulrich Dürrenmatt (1849–1908), a politician, newspaper editor, satirist, and poet, who wrote and published over 2500 poems. In “Mondfinsternis” (1981), Dürrenmatt describes him as “a strange, solitary, and headstrong rebel” and confesses to his envy of one of “Ueli’s” achievements in particular: “My grandfather was once sent to prison for ten days because of a poem he wrote. I haven’t been honored in that way yet.” In 1946, at the end of an unsuccessful tenure as a university student, the young Friedrich, who had adapted a persona similar to his grandfather’s, decided to dedicate his life to writing. In fact, he had already begun writing short stories and plays, as well as poems, as early as 1942.

There is naturally a long list of authors who either started their careers as poets or whose writing of poetry receives little notice. Norman Mailer, for example, long harbored the secret wish to “be a vast success at the bar of poetry.” In the preface to *Modest Gifts* (2003), Mailer reminds us that his poems simply “offer the reader an easy pleasure,” nothing more. At the same time, Mailer admits that he is not “being altogether candid” and hints at the possibility that his poems represent his “embers,” his purest work. For Dürrenmatt, poetry is not quite the same aside as it is for the American. He comes from that tradition of the *feuilleton*, the literary pages of those newspapers pored over in

Europe's cafés, where a poem need only appear in such a format. Indeed, one could say the book is the sideshow. Thus Dürrenmatt the poet is as sharp, gutsy, and controversial as Dürrenmatt the author and playwright; his poems are concentrated instances that at first may appear to be meant solely for pleasure but inevitably expose, via their purity, his fundamental *Weltanschauung* that lies at the core of all of his creative endeavors.

It is inherently difficult, if not impossible, to pin down a definitive poetics or thematic landscape in Dürrenmatt's work as a poet. He moves effortlessly from epic ballads, nursery rhymes, and exotic forms such as the *maqam*, to short lyric bursts and personal anecdotes, from socioeconomic critiques of Switzerland and postwar Europe, reinterpretations of ancient myths, and poems about craft, to investigations of modern science and culture. If anything, much like his novels, plays, and even essays (Brian Evenson, in *Selected Writings* [2006], sees him as “one of the few real innovators of the essayistic form”), his poetry continuously questions the possibility of language to represent, in a coherent and authentic manner, modern experience and reality. Yet, while Dürrenmatt was always keen to create a certain linguistic and stylistic distance between text and reader, in his poetry, this distance seems significantly smaller, more intimate. Most of the poems in this volume should be read as lyric confessions in which our author is at his most sincere and humane. The Dürrenmatt scholar and biographer Peter Rüedi, who wrote the afterword for the poems in the original edition—included in the present volume—argues that some of the author's verses offer “rare moments of another, lyric Dürrenmatt,” poems “where Dürrenmatt speaks as Dürrenmatt, a voice we can usually hear only in his later prose—pieces where he allows himself some sensitivity.” More significantly, often viewed as mere byproducts of his prose, Dürrenmatt's poems, first written on maps, envelopes, napkins, and odd scraps of paper, undoubtedly represent a crucial narrative that parallels, informs, and illuminates his development as an author and playwright.

In 1993 Diogenes Verlag published *Das Mögliche ist ungeheuer* (*The Possible Is Monstrous*), the first individual collection of Dürrenmatt's work as a poet. Surprisingly, this important part of Dürrenmatt's oeuvre has—until now—never been made available to English-speaking readers, except for several of my individual

translations that have appeared in American and British journals, and “The Minotaur,” translated by Joel Agee for the *Selected Writings*. This publication of Dürrenmatt’s *Selected Poems* in English translation, therefore, fills a crucial gap for readers and scholars interested in Dürrenmatt’s work. And it is my hope that it will give a voice to a hitherto silent part of the author’s canon in translation and to show that “For Dürrenmatt, poetry is not an occasion to retreat back into the ivory tower but, aside from novel, novella, essay, and comedy, an additional form with which he attempts to penetrate and endure the world” (from the original dust jacket).

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Daniele Pantano
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The Possible Is Monstrous

GOTT UND PÉGUY

Wer ist dieser Mensch, sagt Gott, dieser Péguy
der mich da zu einem französischen
Nationalisten machen will?
Was gibt er vor meine Gedanken zu kennen?
Ist er jemals mein Sekretär gewesen
Dem ich meine Briefe diktierte?

Zwar hat er schöne Verse geschrieben, Gedichte
die bisweilen sogar ich gern lese.
Und er ist tot, ich habe ihn zu mir genommen.
Aber diese Zeilen da
Habe ich verworfen. Sie vermodern
wie sein Leib.
Er soll sie mir nicht in den Mund legen.

Denn ich habe es nicht mehr gern, wenn man
auf die Völker zu reden kommt.
Sie haben mir alle im Verlaufe der Zeit zuviel
Blut vergossen
Das ihre Hände rot färbt. Ich will nichts mehr
von ihnen wissen.

Als ob es nicht genügt, wenn ich jeden Menschen
einzeln begutachte
Ihn hin und her wende, ob nicht doch noch irgend
etwas an diesem verpfuschten Ding
zu gebrauchen sei.

Ohne Blick auf die Etiketle, die irgendein
verdrehter Staat quer über seinen Bauch
geklebt hat
Auf der Franzose steht, geboren neunzehnhundert-
zehn als Sohn eines Dramenschreibers und
einer Hebamme
Auch Deutscher aus Dresden, Hinterindier
Amerikaner oder Ukrainer
Etiketle, wie wenn es sich um mehr oder weniger
billige Weinsorten handelte.

GOD AND PÉGUY

Who is this man, says God, this Péguy
 who wants to turn me
 into a French nationalist?
Who's he to pretend to know my thoughts?
 Has he ever been my secretary
Whom I've dictated my letters to?

Though he wrote pretty verses, poems
 even I occasionally enjoy reading.
And he's dead, I took him.
 But these lines here
I tossed out. They rot
 like his body.
He shall not put them in my mouth.

For I no longer want to hear
 talk about the nations.
Over time, they've all wasted
 too much blood
That colors their hands red. I don't want
 to hear anything else about them.

As if it's not enough to examine
 every single man
To turn him back and forth
 searching for something still useful
on this botched thing.

Without looking at the label
 some contorted nation slapped
 across his belly:
French. Born 1910, son
 of a playwright
 and a midwife
German, from Dresden, too, South-East Indian
 American or Ukrainian
Labels, as if we were dealing with more or less
 cheap kinds of wine.

Meint man denn, ich sei ein Restaurateur, der hin
und wieder
Im Keller die Völker besichtigt wie eingemachte
Konfitüren
Einen Topf nach dem andern, und die Quitten
den Stachelbeeren vorzieht?
Als wenn es nicht allein auf jeden Einzelnen
ankäme
Und wenn sein Urahne Kathedralen erfand
um so schlimmer für den Nachkommen
Wenn er keine mehr findet.

Überhaupt lasse man mich ein wenig mit diesem
Frankreich in Ruhe
Mit diesem Deutschland und England, mit all
diesem ewigen Europa.
Ich bin langsam nicht mehr gut darauf zu sprechen
langsam wird es mir langweilig.

Langsam werden mir die Menschenfresser fast lieber
die da irgendwo im Urwald
Im Streit um ein Kamel mit zwei Höckern oder
um einen halbvermoderten Elefantenzahn
Den unnachgiebigen Angehörigen eines fremden
Stammes kurzerhand gar kochen.
Sie beten wenigstens nicht mich an, wie es diese
Europäer vorgeben
Sondern einen Götzen mit sieben Armen und fünf
Beinen
Ein Monstrum, bei dem man nicht weiß, was vorne
ist oder hinten.
Da kann ich doch wenigstens mit gutem Gewissen
diesen armen Schluckern vergeben.

Während diese Franzosen und Schweizer katholische
Aktion betreiben oder reformierte theologische
Zeitschriften herausgeben
Aber nicht den Glauben haben, den ich nun endlich
einmal bei ihnen sehen möchte

Do they think I'm a restaurateur
 who once in a while
Down in the cellar observes the races
 like preserves
One jar after another, and prefers
 quince over gooseberry?
As if it didn't come down
 to every single individual
And if his forefather invented cathedrals
 all the worse for the descendant
If he can no longer find any.

In general one should leave me alone
 with this France
With this Germany and England
 with all this constant Europe.
I don't want to hear about it anymore
 I'm getting bored with it.

I almost prefer the cannibals
 who somewhere in the jungle
Fighting over a camel with two humps
 or a half-rotten tusk
Quickly cook the unyielding member
 of a foreign tribe.
At least they don't pray to me
 like these Europeans pretend to
But an idol with seven arms
 and five legs
A monster, whose front and back
 are indistinguishable.
At least I can in good conscience
 forgive these poor devils.

While these French and Swiss lead
 Catholic campaigns and publish
 reformist and theological magazines
But don't have the faith I finally want
 to see in them

Den Glauben, der Berge versetzt.

Ist irgendwo schon ein schlimmeres Durcheinander
gesehen worden als in diesem Europa?
Solch ein heillooses Kreuz und Quer von Dummheit
und Brutalität, solch ein Wust an unklarem Denken?
Zuerst haben die Spanier gemordet, dann fingen die
Franzosen an
Jedes Volk immer tüchtiger und lustiger als das
andere, mit immer besseren Guillotinen.
Dann die Engländer. Schließlich die Deutschen
und Italiener
Und jetzt, als man schon glaubte, es sei wirklich
einfach nichts mehr anderes möglich als der Friede
Scheint man sich im Osten zu neuen Blutbädern
vorzubereiten.
Ist es ein Wunder, daß mir alle diese europäischen
Völker gleichermaßen verdächtig vorkommen?

Nein, ich habe keinen dieser Morde vergessen
nicht den geringsten und nebensächlichsten
Und keinen General, der sie anordnete, eine
Henry Clay dabei in Brand steckend
Denn ich bin nicht der Gott Frankreichs oder
Deutschlands oder der Sowjetunion
Ich bin ganz und gar nicht ihr Gott, ich bin
nicht der Gott der Sieger—und der Staat
ist immer ein Sieger
Ich bin der Gott derer, die erschlagen am Boden
liegen.

Darum will ich auch nichts mehr von ihren Kreuz-
zügen hören und ihren besten Soldaten
In wessen Namen sie auch kämpfen. Es klingt mir
zu sehr nach Bartholomäusnacht und der
Inquisition.
Charles Péguy schweige davon. Sie stinken mir
zum Himmel.

Was jedoch in diesem jämmerlichen Europa blieb
in dieser ausgebluteten Halbinsel

The faith that moves mountains.

Has there ever been a worse mess
than in this Europe?
Such a bedeviled crisscross of stupidity
and brutality, such a jumble of unclear thinking?
First the Spaniards murdered, then
the French started
Each nation always cleverer and merrier
than the other, with ever-improving guillotines.
Then the English. Finally the Germans
and Italians
And now, while nothing but peace
is imaginable
It seems in the East they are preparing
for new bloodbaths.
Is it a wonder then that all European nations
are equally suspicious to me?

No, I have not forgotten any of these murders
not the slightest or most incidental
And no General who ordered them
while setting a match to a Henry Clay
For I'm not the God of France or Germany
or the Soviet Union
I'm not at all their God, I'm not
the God of victors—and the State
is always a victor
I'm the God of those who lie
slain on the ground.

That's why I don't want to hear any more
about their crusades and best soldiers
In whoever's name they may fight. It sounds
too much like the St. Bartholomew's Day
massacre and the Inquisition.
Charles Péguy, be silent of it. They stink
to high heaven.

But what has remained in this miserable Europe
in this bloodless peninsula

Die ich zwischen zwei Meere gepreßt habe
unter dessen Himmel
Immer noch die Völker weiter herumhantieren
im wackeren Glauben
Ich drücke auf immer und ewig die Augen zu
sind die Tränen
Und die Gebete, die hin und wieder zwischen
den Ruinen zu mir hinaufsteigen:
Sie weinen sie alle und in jedem Land beten
bisweilen einige
Denn die Not ist oft groß. Es ist eine
Blasphemie, zu sagen
Nur eines der Völker weine ehrbar und
nur eines
Spreche ehrbare Gebete.

Zum Teufel mit den falschen Meinungen
die über mich verbreitet werden.

I pressed between two seas
 beneath their heaven
Still, nations continue to fiddle about
 with brave faith
I forever close my eyes to them
 the tears
And prayers that every now and again
 climb through ruins to reach me:
They cry all of them and in every country
 a few pray sometimes
Because the misery is too much.
 It's blasphemous
To say only one nation
 cries decently
Only one speaks decent prayers.

To hell with the wrong opinions
 that are being spread about me.

AN EUROPA

Du ziehst mit leeren Händen
nach immer purpurenern Horizonten.
Im Widerschein deiner Feuersbrünste
glüht dir die Stirne noch einmal.

Immer gieriger verschluckt dich die Dämmerung
die deinem verfehlten Tage folgt.
Das Gras, das hinter dir aufsteht
tilgt deine Spur.

Nutzlos ist, was Du tust. Deine Pläne
ein Geschwätz,
die Stufen zu verkürzen,
die hinab in dein Grab führen, plapperndes Gerippe.

Tor um Tor erschließt dir schweigend die Nacht.
Ungehört verhallt deine Klage.

Europa!

Wie hast du die Gnade verspielt, die dir schien,
Wie hast du deinen Mittag vertan!

Die Sonne erhebt sich nun einem anderen Geschlecht,
das nicht dein Kind ist,
tote Mutter.

TO EUROPE

With empty hands
 you move towards ever-purpling horizons.
 Once more your forehead glows
with your fire's heat in reflection.

Ever greedier it swallows you,
 the Twilight that follows your failed day.
 The grass that rises behind you
blots out your trace.

Your doings are worthless. Your plans
 all talk,
 to shorten the steps
that lead down into your grave, chattering skeleton.

The night silently closes gate after gate on you.
 Your lament fades away, unheard.

Europe!

How you gambled away the mercy that shone for you,
 How you wasted your noon!

Now the sun rises for another race,
 not your child,
dead mother.

WENN ICH DURCH DIE STÄDTE DEUTSCHLANDS GEHE

Wenn ich durch die Städte Deutschlands
gehe,
bei jedem vierten Schritt mich verirrend

Durch diese schwarzen und grauen Einöden,
die man
wie riesige Kloakenansammlungen verbrennen
mußte

Eingeklemmt in die eintönige Masse ihrer
Bewohner,
ihre Sprache hörend, wissend, daß sie uns
als Provinzler verachten

Obgleich sie es sind, die in Wahrheit hinter
dem Mond leben,
die Primusse der Menschheit in jeder nur denkbaren
Lage

Einst Weltmeister im Dichten und Denken. Schinder
nicht aus Wildheit
sondern aus Anmaßung, stolz noch auf ihre
Leiden

Kehre ich erleichtert in mein Land zurück

Und den ganzen Plunder, mit dem ich hier umstellt
bin
nehme ich wieder auf meine Schultern. Erhobenen
Hauptes
beginne ich wieder mit Windmühlen zu kämpfen.

Ein ewiger Don Quijote liebe ich mein Land
indem ich es züchtige
bejahe ich die Welt, indem ich sie verneine

WHEN I WALK THROUGH GERMAN CITIES

When I walk through German cities,
getting lost
with every fourth step

Through these black and gray
wastelands that
like giant cesspits
had to be burnt down

Stuck in the monotonous mass of its
denizens,
hearing their language, knowing
they despise us provincials

Although it is they who are
behind the times,
mankind's prime in every imaginable
situation

Once world champions in poetry and thought.
Oppressors, not out of primitivity
but presumption, proud even
of their afflictions

Relieved I return to my country

And put all the trash
that surrounds me here
back onto my shoulders. With my head
held high I begin again
to fight the windmills.

Always a Don Quixote, I love my country
by castigating it
affirm the world by negating it

Ein besseres Deutsch redend als die Deutschen.

Speaking a better German than the Germans.