

## Personal Comments on my Drawings and Paintings

### Friedrich Dürrenmatt

Friedrich Dürrenmatt Werkausgabe, Bd. 32: Literatur und Kunst  
Copyright ©1998 Diogenes Verlag AG Zürich  
Translation: Joel Agee

My drawings are not subsidiary to my literary works; they are the drawn and painted battlefields on which my literary struggles, adventures, experiments and defeats take place. An insight that came to me only now as I was leafing through this book, even though in my youth I only drew and didn't start writing until later. I have always been a draughtsman. But *Crucifixion I* is the first of my drawings that I can still accept, for the simple reason that I am not a compositional but a "dramaturgical" draughtsman. I am not concerned with a picture's beauty but with its possibility. To give an example from "great" art: Michelangelo's "David" is an abstrusity, a colossus more than eighteen feet tall, while Goliath, according to the Bible, was just 9 and a half feet tall. But "David" is an important sculpture because Michelangelo captures him at the precise moment when he is turning into a "statue." It is the moment when David first sets eye on Goliath and stops to wonder how he might conquer him: Where must I hurl the stone? At this moment the youth stands poised in a perfect stillness of reflection and observation. In dramaturgical terms, he becomes a sculpture. Much the same can be said of Michelangelo's "Moses." He is depicted at the moment when he realizes – even though he has already heard this from Yahweh – that the people are dancing around the golden calf. He is still astonished, his wrath has only just begun to rise, he is still holding the tablets of the law in his hand, but in a moment he will leap to his feet and shatter them and then order the killing of three thousand men: This is dramaturgical thinking in

sculpture. In my *Crucifixions*, therefore, the dramaturgical question was: How do I represent a crucifixion *today*? The cross has become a symbol and can therefore be used for decoration, for example as a piece of jewelry suspended between a woman's breasts. The thought that the cross was once an instrument of torture is no longer alive. In my first *Crucifixion*, therefore, I drew people dancing around the cross in order to turn the cross back into the object of scandal that it once represented. In the second *Crucifixion* the cross has been replaced by an even crueler instrument of torture, the wheel, and it is not just one person but many who are being broken on the wheel. Only one person is being crucified, a beheaded pregnant woman with a fetus dangling from her sliced-open belly. Rats climb about on the bloody scaffolds. In the third *Crucifixion* rats crawl over a fat crucified Jew whose arms have been chopped off. These pictures were not produced out of a "love of horror." Countless people have had more terrible deaths than Jesus of Nazareth. Our *skandalon* should not be the crucified god but the crucified human being; for death, no matter how terrible, can never be as terrible for a god as it is for a human being. The god, after all, will be resurrected. Thus in our day, Christianity's *skandalon* is no longer the cross but the resurrection, and that is the only way to understand the drawing titled *Resurrection*, dated 1978. It is not a radiant god but a mummy that is rising from the tomb, without witnesses. Here there is a parallel to my dramatic work: The scandal in "The Meteor" is that a man keeps dying and rising to life again. Precisely because he is experiencing the miracle in his own body, he is not able to believe it. It's different with angels: In 1952, a writer without money, I took out a loan to buy a house in Neuenburg. It wasn't easy. Who at that time was willing to lend a writer money? Not surprisingly, "Pax" Life Insurance, who held the first mortgage, canceled my policy right

away. But we were able to move into the house. Those who were able to help did so. It was then that I painted my two gouaches, *The Astronomers* and *Drowned Lovers*, with a technique I did not use again until 1978 (*The World of the Atlases*). I painted at night, and each night at around 2 am a bat came to visit me, a charming little creature, which I named Mathilde. Once I was unfair: I closed the window and set about chasing Mathilde. After catching her I showed her to the children and told them Mathilde was a mouse angel. Then I set her free. She was very insulted and never came back. Ever since then the theme of angels has obsessed me. Not as mockery, but more as playful exuberance. Mathilde's revenge: I drew countless human angels, including egg-laying cherubs, casually, as caricatures. My sense of humor seduced me. This factor – my principal one – cannot be underestimated: It plays a part in everything I do. It took me a while to realize that angels are really terrifying beings that correspond to Mathilde the way Tyrannosaurus Rex does to a lizard. I began to take a dramaturgical interest in the question of how angels can be depicted in our time, for there are hardly any angels in art that make sense to me, except maybe the pugilistic, assaultive, wrathful angels of Dürer's *Apocalypse*. So I tried to depict angels dramaturgically, the two *Angels of Death* and *Angel*, which I worked on for a long time. Angels, too, are terrible. When Elisabeth Brock-Sulzer wrote about "Dürrenmatt's early sgraffito technique" in reference to my pen-and-ink drawings and saw signs of a "liberation" in the later drawings, such as the quick ballpoint-pen sketches from nature, I cannot agree with her. Those drawings are not dramaturgic, they are conventional. Any painter can do a better job. They were a whim, finger exercises if you will, just like the collages I once did for a week, or the caricatures I am always drawing. The technique I developed in my pen and ink drawings

represents a continuum in my work s a draughtsman: Here I have experience, here a development can be seen. Personally, I prefer to paint. But painting takes me away from work, while my pen and ink drawings evolve at my desk, as of course do the washes. And so the Minotaur series developed quickly – I often worked on it in the early morning, after a hard night of writing. The first *Self-portrait*, too, was painted at five in the morning. I portrayed myself staring into my shaving mirror. But a pen and ink drawing takes me approximately fourteen days. I return to many of them later and rework them. The *Pope* scenes, too, have a dramaturgic intention, not a blasphemous one: After all, it's a scandal for someone to claim he is Christ's representative on earth, infallible, etc. I remember a TV discussion about "The Deputy." Hochhuth was verbally abused by a priest who demanded to know if he wasn't ashamed of offending millions of believers to whom the Pope was holy. The priest should have been asked if he was not ashamed that the Pope's claim was offensive to those who do not believe in it. I do not believe in it. A Christianity that does not recognize itself as a *skandalon* has lost its *raison d'être*. The Pope is the very emblem of the theological and therefore of self-righteousness, of the belief that one is in possession of the truth. One who possesses this belief will fight for it. That is why there are always many Popes – religious and political ones – and why the quarrels among them are endless. Again and again, it's truth against truth, until the last Pope goes riding on the mammoth of his power into the ice-age night of humanity, never to be seen again (*The Last Pope*). As for the drawings of the *Tower of Babel*: My dramaturgical aim was to depict the height of the tower. The Tower of Babel has been represented often in the past. I'm thinking of Breughel's pictures. But for me, the tower was always too small. It was never the Tower as such. On my drawings you

can always see the curvature of the Earth. Proportionally, the tower in the first drawing, *Tower of Babel I*, is nearly six thousand miles high. The “cloud” reaching down to it is cosmic dust licking the Earth. In the background, the sun as it appears when we screen out the sphere of red hydrogen lines. I have been interested in astronomy since my childhood in the village, later physics entered into my thinking, and today I amuse myself mainly with one of its branches, cosmology. Here the modern age is picking up where the pre-Socratics left off. Thus all my pictures in the *Tower of Babel* series are about the senselessness of wanting to build a tower that would reach the sky, and hence about the senselessness of human endeavor altogether. The Tower of Babel is an emblem of humanity’s hubris. The tower collapses, and with it the human world comes to ruin. What humanity will leave behind are its ruins. *Tower of Babel IV* and *V* show this collapse. It occurs simultaneously with the end of the inhabited Earth. The exploding star in *Tower of Babel IV* is a supernova. There remains a white dot, a neutron star, a star of infinite density. Galaxies at various stages of their evolution and dissolution become visible, and one senses the presence of enormous “black holes.” They indicate the terminal states of stars, which in their turn (perhaps) could be the beginning of new worlds. The subject of the world’s end is related to the subject of death: Each person who dies experiences the end of the world as they know it. The fact that in my drawings – as in my plays – the hangman plays a role is not surprising; it would be surprising if he were absent. In our time, man has assumed the role of the good old grim reaper. Man as hangman is no longer “Godfather Death;” on the other hand, I find myself sometimes persuaded by Schopenhauer’s idea that the life of an individual can be compared with a wave on the sea. It passes away, but other waves rise. I cannot imagine that some day I

will “no longer” exist. I can imagine that I am “always” someone. Always someone else. Always a new consciousness that I too will some day experience the end of the world. Thus the end of the world is a permanently topical subject. I treated it on the stage in “Portrait of a Planet.” I conceived of the text as an exercise for actors, in order to be able to say as much as possible with a minimum of dramaturgical means. Before writing the play, I made a pictorial representation in mixed media (*Portrait of a Planet II*): The photograph of a man with one head in his left hand and another in his right had appeared in many magazines at the time of the Vietnam war. In the lower left is a burned-out space capsule in which two American astronauts lost their lives. The *World Butcher* is a figure from the first version of the play. So my dramaturgical thinking in writing, drawing, and painting is an experiment in finding ever more conclusive characters, pictorial finalities. Thus I came upon the theme of Atlas by way of the theme of Sisyphus. The first Sisyphus gouache came about in 1946, at the same time as *Pilate*. I left University and professed that I intended to become a painter. It would have been audacious to say that I aimed at being a writer. I painted the two pictures as a kind of alibi to prove to my fellow students that I was serious about painting. At the same time I wrote the story titled “Pilate” and “The Image of Sisyphus.” Regarding Sisyphus I just want to say that I was above all concerned with the question of what it is that forces Sisyphus to roll his boulder up the hill again and again. Perhaps it is his revenge against the gods: He is exposing their injustice. In the case of “Pilate,” I was obsessed by the thought that from the first moment, Pilate knew that a god was standing before him, and that from the first moment he was convinced that this god had come to kill him. *Atlas* on the other hand, is a mythological character who, paradoxically, can only now be depicted

again, for a man carrying the vault of the heavens on his shoulders seems to correspond with our worldview. If we conceive of the initial phase of the world as a huge compact sphere the size of Neptune's orbit (March) or as a black hole which then leads to the big bang; or if, as the final stage of a world in its imploding collapse due to excessive weight, the vision of an enormously heavy sphere again rises before us, that is a view of the world in which Atlas becomes once again mythologically possible, but at the same time he becomes an ultimate image of man carrying, and forced to carry, his world. The fact that my last play, *The Appointed Time*, was written at the same time that I drew some of my *Atlas* pictures is not an accident, for the play is about two people in Atlas's situation: The first one wants to carry the world, the second doesn't want to but is ultimately forced to continue carrying it. Admittedly, my first treatment of the Atlas theme goes back to 1958, *Atlas Failing*. The people are the most important element in this picture of a world coming to an end. They are bearing inscriptions: "Atlas must not fail," "Atlas must not be allowed to fail," "Atlas cannot fail." The one who wrote, "Atlas will fail" has been decapitated. The predictable catastrophe takes place. More sharply put: predictable catastrophes take place. The idea that everything will be avenged some day is expressed by the drawing with the peculiar title: *The glass coffins of the dead shall be the ramrods*. Dramaturgically formulated: The worst turn of events takes place. The fact that I always depict the worst possible turn of events has nothing to do with pessimism, nor is it a fixed idea. The worst possible turn of events is what is dramaturgically possible; it represents on the stage precisely what makes "David" a statue in Michelangelo's sculpture, and what makes my pictures dramaturgical pictures. For example *The Catastrophe*. The picture is about more than a train wreck with a subsequent chain reaction: Above, the sun

simultaneously collides with another celestial body. Six minutes later the Earth will no longer exist. Here too: the worst possible turn of events, the attempt to depict not just one but *the* catastrophe. The *Ding an sich* cannot be depicted, but images in themselves can. The last treatment of the Atlas motif, *The World of the Atlases*, is one of my favorite pictures. It came from a whim. I attached two 100 X 71 centimeter sheets, my favorite size for gouaches, side by side to a wall in my studio. I wanted to make a hasty sketch. This was in 1965. I have been working on this picture ever since. I should have known. I have never made another sketch for my pictures. It is here reproduced in the state it was in as of June 1975. It's a picture of Atlases playing with globes. The heavier a world, the smaller is its final state. The Atlases in the foreground are gasping beneath their globes. I should mention as well that the effect of a night landing in the airport in New York plays a part, for that was when I first realized how hellishly hot it must be to live on an overpopulated Earth. Now to my portraits: They were made quickly, except for the two first ones. I am glad that with *Walter Mehring* I have succeeded in painting a portrait, something I have not yet been able to do in writing. In many of his late works, this powerfully eloquent poet has survived not only himself but also us. *Otto Rügenbach (Portrait of a Psychiatrist)* is captured in conversation with my wife. He is one of our few friends in Neuenburg and owns some of the most beautiful Auberjonois. The most spontaneous of my pictures is the *Portrait of my Wife* – it was done in no more than ten minutes, in Ste.-Maxime by the Côte d'Azur. We were particularly happy then. We believed we had found a house down there that was just what we wanted, and which fortunately we were unable to buy later on. In her exuberance, my wife didn't notice I was making a portrait of her. It was in Ste.-Maxime, too, that I made the pen and ink

drawing with self-portrait, *St. Tropez 1958*. The thought that at that time people were being killed and tortured on the other side of the Mediterranean depressed me.

Unfortunately the drawing has lost none of its topicality. I painted the actor *Leonard Steckel* from memory in 1965. The portrait of *Varlin* was drawn on October 22, 1977. It was the last day I spent with Varlin. We talked about painting. Varlin told me he considered Matisse the greatest painter of our time. He said; “Here’s the sad thing about painting: You stand in front of a clean canvas, take a brush, and already you’ve messed up the canvas.” Then he drew me, several times, crossed it all out again. He let one of the drawings stand and gave it to me. Then he said he wanted to sleep and that I should draw him. When he woke up, he wanted to see the drawing. He asked me if he really looked like that. I didn’t say anything, and Varlin said, in that case it won’t go on for very long. He died on October 30. The *Portrait of a Hotelier* represents my friend Hans Liechti, innkeeper and art collector from Zäziwil, a forty-five minute walk from the village where I was born. Like me, he ended up in Neuenburg. After writing, I often sit with him at his place until late at night, tell him what I’m writing, make sketches for possible drawings. I don’t know whether I would still write or draw without him. His enthusiasm for painting has a productive effect. I painted his portrait on a Sunday afternoon. He had cooked, his pub had been full at noon, some relatives had come as well, and in the evening there was going to be a banquet in the upper dining room. He came to my studio in his work garment to take a rest. After a little less than an hour he left me to get back behind his stove, and I finished painting the picture. At ten in the evening I called him and asked him to come over. He came, still wearing his work garment, and was pleased with what I had done. My last pen and ink drawings are also

portraits. The *Wrathful God* – is there anyone who doesn't understand his wrath? (I finished the pen and ink drawing at Liechti's with a kitchen knife.) *Mazdak* was the founder of a communist sect. Around 530 B.C., 3,000 of his followers were impaled head-down into the earth by the Persian high king – who thereby planted their idea into the ground. You can kill a person, but the idea lives on. The child born of the leprous and mad *Ophelia* will be neither leprous nor mad. Vultures castrate the Cossack *Mazeppa*, bound to his horse. He lives on in poems. *Chronos castrating Uranus*: Only in this way was it possible for time to begin its rule: the mythological depiction of the big bang. In *Labyrinths* I chose a motif that fascinates me as a writer as well. I first dealt with it in the novella "The Town," and I am now exploring it in a longer narrative, "The Winter War in Tibet." The *Minotaur* is another variant on the theme of the labyrinth. He is a monster, and as such, an emblem of the individual in his isolation. The individual is confronted with a world he cannot comprehend. The labyrinth is the world as seen by the Minotaur. That is why the *Minotaur* pictures show the Minotaur divorced from any experience of an Other, of a "You." All he knows is raping and killing. He does not die at the hands of Theseus, he perishes as a helpless brute. Theseus is not able to track him down. The murder of the Minotaur is a legend. The figure of the Minotaur gave rise, by association, to *The World Bull*, in a somewhat different technique, because the paper I was using demanded it. The *World Bull* is an emblem of the monster we call "world history" running amuck. The picture titled *The Two Beasts* represents a paraphrase of Manichaeism, which has returned in our days as the belief that world history is a struggle between two principles, a good one and an evil one. The two dinosaurs that have locked jaws in the background are equally obstinate. Of course there are also pictures

that are not dramaturgical, for example *Flight I* and *Flight II*, which are associations with literary motifs I treated in stories like “The Tunnel” or “The Trap.” *Two Old Men Fighting* shows how hatred can continue raging after it has lost its motive. I never learned how to draw or paint. I still don’t know how to paint in oils. The only person I ever asked, “How do you paint in oils?” was Anna Keel. And she said, “Use gasoline.” All my oil paintings were done in 1966. The fact that my *Bank* paintings were also done with oil and gasoline does not constitute a critique of the Swiss banking system. On the contrary, I should hope that the dignified end I accorded to our banking system in *Last General Assembly of the Confederate Swiss Banking Association* would raise my credit in the Swiss banks, especially now that I need it more than ever, given the fact -- as I have just read in “Der Brückenbauer” -- I no longer exist for the literary critics. But since then I have returned to painting in watercolors. My *Bank* pictures in particular show quite clearly that my paintings and drawings aren’t always the product of dramaturgical considerations; my bank pictures are an echo of my comedy “Frank V,” an opera about a private bank. A play whose stage version never really succeeded. A revision lies in my desk drawer. But *The Tower of Babel* or *Narses in Captivity* and *Byzantine Saints* with their Byzantine motifs go back to a destroyed work or a fragment. Drawing as substitute action. But of course there are other connections between my literary production and my drawing. All creativity, in whatever medium whatsoever, presupposes a background consisting of impressions, images, and thinking. This background is no longer commonly shared, unless one happens to be a leftist, a Catholic, or both. A contemporary writer, but also a contemporary painter, will as a rule unconsciously look for an ideology, some generality. I have always refused to allow myself to be summed up

under a general category. Consequently I am not understandable to most people. The premises of my literary work, but also of my pictures, are based in my thinking, which is essentially epistemological, and also in my sense of humor, which is essentially subjective; these sources are not immediately accessible. That is why people prefer not to take me seriously, otherwise they would have to think along with me. I am a maverick by choice. I'm not part of the avant-garde. To be in the avant-garde today is to follow a herd. That's why the associations that constitute my images are the results of my personal adventure in thinking and not of a general method of thinking. I don't paint surrealist pictures – Surrealism is an ideology – I paint pictures that I can understand. I paint for myself. That is why I am not a painter. I grapple with the time I live in, and you can't come to grips with our time by the word alone. Conceptual thinking, the methods of mathematics, the necessary abstractness of scientific thought, cannot be abstractly represented in the visual arts. There is nothing more abstract than a formula. It is the ultimate abstraction.  $E=mc^2$ , for instance. Mathematics has a capacity for abstraction that is no longer picturable, which necessarily punctures all attempts at visualization. It is impossible not to depict the theory of relativity abstractly, unless one takes recourse to sensuous metaphors. But sensuous metaphors are not geometric or stereometric shapes, but myths: our myths. Atlas made possible. Perhaps my first drawings were influenced by Bosch, the grotesque images of the beginning (*Apocalyptic Riders, The World as Theater*), before I became a writer. But I don't seek the symbolism that Bosch found. What I seek, both in writing and in drawing, are the images and similes that are still possible in the age of science, an age that achieved what philosophy failed to achieve: an abstract description of reality. If we need four or n dimensions, we

need them because the facts of reality cannot be described in any other way. We don't have a way of simplifying these highly complicated interrelationships and givens. Nuclear physics can't be depicted in a popular form. Nuclear physics can only be paraphrased in a popular form. The only way to comprehend it is by thinking it. A retreat into simplicity is not possible. That which is, by its nature, abstract can at best be depicted through metaphors. That is why abstract art – where it adds up – is at best poetic. The beauty of lines. It is pure form and therefore pure esthetics. Never has painting been more esthetic than it is now. The meaning it claims for itself is merely purported, not integrated. To represent it as an “intellectual statement” is nonsense. Once again: I am not a painter. Technically, I paint like a child, but I don't think like a child. I paint for the same reason that I write: because I think. Painting as the art of making “beautiful pictures” doesn't interest me, just as the art of making “beautiful theater” doesn't interest me. I couldn't be a painter as my primary profession, for the simple reason that most of the time I wouldn't know what to paint. As a draughtsman I am a dilettante. When I was a student in Bern, I lived in a room whose walls I had covered with paintings. Above the bed there was a bizarre crucifixion, next to it scenes from my first play, which was never published. There still exists a drawing related to that play, one of my earliest ones. Thus my paintings and drawings are complementary to my writing: What I can't say in words goes into pictures. That is why I have produced very little “illustrative” work. In writing, too, I don't start out with a problem, but with images, for the primary source is always the image, the situation – the world. For the rest, I am still amazed that Daniel Keel was crazy enough to publish this book, and still embarrassed that Manuel Gasser, to whom painting owes such a debt, actually wrote a

foreword, and now I have to admit – I’m even a little proud that he didn’t deliver a “thunderous word” about my painting and drawing.