

CRIME AND DETECTION IN A DEFECTIVE WORLD: THE DETECTIVE FICTIONS OF BORGES AND DURRENMATT

TAMARA HOLZAPFEL
The University of New Mexico

Of the many variants of detective fiction spawned by Edgar Allan Poe's «The Murders in the Rue Morgue» (1841), the most noteworthy contemporary examples, from a literary standpoint, may be Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Kriminalerzählungen* and some of Jorge Luis Borges' fictions. These authors have taken a strikingly similar approach to a genre considered by many marginal to mainstream literature. Reality to them is inscrutable; therefore they do not posit the criminal case as a problem with a possible solution, but as a problem with philosophical and linguistic implications. The world view that emerges is that of the difference between language and reality. Their recourse to the detective genre also reflects a shared attitude toward what Borges has called the «exhausted» perspective of modern literary creation.(1) By doubling back on a «tired» or «stagnant» genre, they point not only to its survival--in a modified form-- but to the possibility of literary continuity as well.

Borges and Dürrenmatt have written relatively few stories that can be classified as detective fiction, though both authors have used the properties of the genre to good advantage in their literary endeavors. Borges has only one story, «Death and the Compass,» that conforms to the classical puzzle pattern. Many of his stories, however, play with the notion of detection, while others come close to qualifying as genuine examples of modern detective fiction.(2) Dürrenmatt wrote four *Kriminalerzählungen* during the time he was also struggling to establish himself as a playwright: *The Judge and His Executioner* (1952), *The Quarry* (1953), *Traps* (1956), and *The Pledge* (1958). Once he achieved recognition in the theater, he gave up writing detective fiction

altogether, although he continued using the detective story mechanism in his dramas.

A difficult problem concerning detective fiction has been the definition of the term, as it is generally loosely employed to cover not only the classic puzzle story, but also mystery stories, action thrillers, suspense novels, spy novels, etc. This problem does not diminish when we look to other languages for clarification. The German *Kriminalroman* or *Kriminalerzählung*, popularly known as *Krimi*, the French *roman policier*, and its Spanish equivalent *novela policíaca* or *novela detectivesca*, include just as great a variety of popular fiction, short and long, as do the English «detective story» or «detective novel.»(3) In recent years critics of the genre have sought to establish more rigorous definitions. They tend to agree that the term «detective fiction» seems better suited than «crime fiction» --which sounds too broad-- to cover the classic puzzle story as well as a variety of modified versions. And most of these critics point out that modern stories dealing with crime and detection must be appreciated as a hybrid and as a genre that has sought to draw attention to its status as literature worthy of serious consideration.(4) The following quotation from Melvyn Barnes sums up some of the most common «acceptable» deviations from the standard whodunit pattern:

Mainly there are works in which the identity of the criminal is not concealed from the reader, and indeed is revealed in some cases on the first page. Sometimes the criminal is the narrator and his thought processes are thus laid bare. They qualify for inclusion mainly because they are logical extensions of a literary form which, at times, in its history, has displayed signs of becoming tired. A detective novel which poses the question why? or how? is considered no less appropriate than one that asks who? In many of these cases the reader is in possession of all the evidence before the detective appears, and yet there is still a puzzle element involved in deducing how the detective will establish the criminal's guilt. In other cases no actual detective appears, and it must be appreciated that his absence does not invalidate a detective story-- here the word is interpreted in its adjectival sense.(5)

The kind of detective fiction that poses questions other than whodunit? has been a phenomenon of the past thirty years, a

period that has also witnessed a continuing decline of the omniscient detective. Poe, who is credited with having originated the genre,(6) made his detective, Auguste Dupin, a pure logician. His first legitimate follower, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes was, like his predecessor, a true hero of ratiocination. He has become a legendary figure, surviving to our time as «the most convincing, the most brilliant, the most congenial and well-loved of all the detectives of fiction,»(7) and has served as a model of the super sleuth to countless practitioners of the genre. But despite the immense popularity of the detective as a rationally superior human being, this image begins to fade relatively early in the development of the genre. There is first of all G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown (1911), who in appearance and behavior stands in complete contrast to Sherlock Holmes. It is true that he resembles the latter in that he solves crimes by applying logic. But his special insight into the motives behind the deeds represents a kind of divine insight. The reader of the Father Brown stories, constantly confronted by this discrepancy between human and divine reason, is not induced to place much trust in the rational process. What was transparency in nineteenth century detective fiction becomes transcendence in Chesterton.

A further transformation of the super sleuth took place in the American hardboiled school of the 1930s. Neither Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe nor Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade, the most famous characters of private eye detective fiction, are infallible thinking machines. Their shortcomings as super sleuths reflect the impossibility of combating crime by legal means in a world that has become too complex and too impenetrable for any one individual to comprehend. The detective's stature is undercut to the extent that he can no longer escape the corrupting influence of his society. In *The High Window* (1943), for example, Philip Marlowe not only becomes implicated in crime, but is unable to trust his superiors and must resort to extra legal means to solve a series of murders. Similarly, Sam Spade's chase after the Maltese falcon is no more than «an act of material and personal preservation.»(8) In this story (1931), ratiocination begins to doubt itself; detective and reader are put on false trails by the guilty party, and suspicion falls even on the detective himself.

Critics of the genre see most detectives in our century as

«decadent knights errant who continue playing a role that is no longer possible.»(9) Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot and Dorothy Sayers' Lord Peter Whimsey are no exceptions, although in many ways they revert to the nineteenth century model of the omniscient detective. They play the game according to the old rules in a traditionally circumscribed setting. However, Poirot's extravagant logic and Lord Peter Whimsey's feudal arrogance strike us as naive and even ludicrous when viewed in the context of contemporary reality. Of course, verisimilitude is not among the primary demands that readers of detective stories make of the genre. Yet it is significant that detective fiction as a whole, like «serious» literature, reveals a high degree of historical consistency in so far as it reflects the behavior, the technological developments, and the socio-economic conditions of the times.

The modern *Zeitgeist* of human instability and disorientation in a confusing world permeates the work of Borges and Dürrenmatt as a whole. Those of their stories that have a detective as a central character function as critiques of pure reason. The detective is a super sleuth and at the same time a fallible human being whose clever actions are subverted by incalculable chance. These authors have also experimented with other popular variants of the genre. Dürrenmatt's *Traps* is a courtroom novel,(10) and Borges' «Emma Zunz» an inverted whodunit.(11) They are detective fictions in the sense that they are designed «to arouse the reader's curiosity by a puzzling problem, which usually, though not always, concerns a crime.»(12)

An important aspect of detective fiction is its impact in the twentieth century and the considerable influence it has exerted on writers such as Camus, Butor, Robbe-Grillet, Graham Greene, Nabokov, Handke, to mention a few, as well as Borges and Dürrenmatt. These writers have turned to the murder mystery not so much because it enjoys widespread popular appeal, but because it lends itself generously to innovation and parody. There are other reasons too, some of which will be defined within the confines of this study.

Detective fiction provides an important escape from psychology and individualism as well as the possibility of creating a «lighter» literature, primary concerns in both Borges and Dürrenmatt. For Dürrenmatt, writing psychological fiction in a time when psychology has become established as a science would be a contradiction. At the end of *Problems of the Theater*, discus-

sing the proliferation of criticism and the problem this creates for the contemporary writer, he proposes the detective story as a possible means for his survival as artist: «Perhaps the writer can best exist by writing detective stories, by creating art where it is least suspected. Literature must become so light that it will weigh nothing upon the scale of today's literary criticism: only in this way will it regain its true worth.»(13) Interestingly, most critics did initially view his *Kriminalerzählungen* with suspicion, dismissing them as trivial works written with financial gain in mind. In the meantime, however, as detective fiction, formerly despised by the *littérateur*, came under the scrutiny of the *Literaturwissenschaftler*, they have revised their opinion and accepted his detective stories as authentic literary creations.

Borges' skepticism regarding the search for truth in human psychology and literature is expressed in his theme of the negation of individuality and in his belief that literary truths are probably nonexistent or at best of a very modest nature. Mostly he considers literature, as he does metaphysics, to be little more than an absorbing game. And game-playing is an important element of detective fiction that has helped shaped Borges' esthetic and has furnished him, as it has Dürrenmatt, with a logic for fiction that could replace «psychological motivation and at the same time be applicable to the mythic essentials of literature.»(14)

The Swiss and Argentine writers came to detective fiction by different routes, formulating their esthetic theories accordingly. Borges' involvement with the early masters of the genre, De Quincey, Poe, and especially Chesterton, is well documented. Ronald Christ explains that what fascinated and attracted him in the Father Brown stories was «not the customary detective story mechanism» nor «Chesterton's kind of metaphysic,» but «an esthetic, purely formal view of the subject matter.» At an early stage Chesterton furnished Borges with «the disposition to view subjects analytically, esthetically; the metaphor of the criminal as artist; the detective as critic; the logic of deterministic word and event, that is, the 'magic' of causality; the minimal esthetic of the detective story.»(15) Dürrenmatt's art of detective fiction cannot be as readily traced to other masters of the genre as that of Borges'. Instead, critics usually point out the close relationship that exists between his stories and plays, basing their assertions on his theory of *Einfall* (conceit) and *Zufall* (chance).(16) The first refers to the creative motive-- not a fully formulated idea-- that makes

possible the transformation of reality. *Einfall* is external to the work but leads to a hypothesis that influences the unfolding of the story. *Zufall* replaces *Einfall* in the work itself, functioning as a device that makes it possible for the game to be played. Through chance, the events of the narrative take the worst possible turns; chance always hits the characters unexpectedly, confronting them with the reality of a chaotic world. In nineteenth century detective fiction chance was simply good luck. It was assumed the world order was intact. In a whole world chance could play only a beneficent role. But Dürrenmatt and Borges find the world infinitely perplexing and subject to catastrophic hazard.

Whereas in Borges this view of the world is the result of his suspicion of all metaphysical systems, in Dürrenmatt it is derived from Protestant-Christian dogma. The religious implications of the latter's detective stories may be opaque, but his work as a whole is «circumscribed by thoughts about the hidden God, unpredictable grace, the immutable world, and human beings troubled by the question of whether or not their earthly efforts are at all important to a terrible divine force.»(17) Except for the concept of grace, both authors resemble one another in their view of the human predicament. The impotence of Dürrenmatt's not unintelligent characters, their foundering «because of an unnatural world» is close to the central concern in Borges' fiction, where the human quest «to decipher the universe» merely leads to the discovery of the futility of such an undertaking.

Borges' «Death and the Compass» is a brilliantly executed detective story and at the same time an elaborately construed metaphor about the nature of reality, synthesized in four essential themes: the problematical nature of the world, of knowledge, of time, and of the self. The detective Lönnrot, «a pure reasoner,» is duped by his enemy Red Scharlach into believing that the pattern of three murders, one of them a hoax, committed at intervals of one month and at locations corresponding to three of the cardinal points, will be followed by a fourth. The irony of the story is centered in the fact that the first crime, the killing of Rabbi Yarmolinsky, was a chance happening -- a fact that was immediately intuited by Inspector Treviranus. But Lönnrot rejects his colleague's idea of a mistake, preferring to look for a more intellectual explanation in the rabbi's mystical works. Thus chance is responsible for setting in motion a series of events that will be a catastrophic for Lönnrot.

In plotting his revenge against Lönnrot, Red Scharlach also takes his clue from chance. He constructs a pattern of crimes inspired by a line Yarmolinsky happened to have left in his type-writer: «The first letter of the name has been articulated.»(18) This literary inspiration leads him to commit one real and one sham murder and to plant all kinds of clues to ensnare the clever detective as well as the clever reader. His criminal mind constructs a labyrinth in order to confuse and destroy Lönnrot. Because only Scharlach knows its secret rules, the reader can gratify his intellectual arrogance by seeing him as God, a deliberately perverse god who leads man astray and indulges his intellectual vanity only to mock and finally kill him: «For the death that God provides for all men is like the death Red Scharlach provides for Lönnrot; the ultimate mockery of all those vain attempts at rational explanation they may have indulged in.»(19)

Clues in the story and commentary by Borges (20) suggest that «Death and the Compass» is not a simple allegory about man's attempt to explain God. It is possible that Red Scharlach and Lönnrot are the same man. The word 'red' is not just the criminal's first name. It is contained in both last names: *rot* and *scharlach* are German for 'red' and 'scarlet' respectively. For Borges, all men are one man; the history of the world is potentially contained in one day in the life of one man. We merely live to re-enact the same gestures, the same emotions, and the same perceptions of those who have lived before us. Free will exists only as an illusion of the present; from the perspective of the past all our acts appear as predetermined, and as those who have lived before us, we are doomed to intellectual failure and death. Thus, the killer and his victim are mirror images of one another. By killing his mirror image Scharlach is killing himself. Just as Lönnrot could foresee his own death but not prevent it, so Scharlach's death is prefigured in his killing of Lönnrot. While on the one hand the criminal is invested with the powers of an irrational god, on the other, he is defective, like all men, and ultimately subject to obliteration. This paradox leads us to consider another possibility, namely that the real labyrinth maker may be our own mind. This story, like so many Borges has written, demonstrates the impossibility of proving or justifying anything on the evidence human reason can marshal.

Dürrenmatt's *The Pledge*, subtitled *Requiem for the Detective Novel*, is like Borges' «Death and the Compass» a critique of

pure reason and an interpretation of reality as subject to the irrational intervention of chance in human affairs. Dr. Matthäi, in his efforts to solve the sexual murder of three girls, brings to trial an innocent man who confesses under pressure and commits suicide. Realizing his error, Matthäi vows to pursue the real murderer at all cost. A second attempt to solve the case begins upon his return from a prolonged journey. Through some drawings that one of the murdered children has made he is able to reconstruct a hypothetical sketch of the murderer. His hypothesis, however, remains a «fiction.»(21) Matthäi devises an ingenious plan to trap the murderer using a fourth girl as bait. When the murderer fails to appear at the scene because he is killed in a car accident, the detective brutally beats the girl. Matthäi thus becomes both victim and perpetrator. As in Lönnrot's case, his plan was flawless as a mental construct, but failed because of the catastrophic intervention of chance. Unaware at first of the role chance had played in subverting his apparently flawless scheme, Matthäi waits for the murderer indefinitely, degenerating into an alcoholic. So inextricably enmeshed is he in the logic of his plan that when he later finds out about the accident, he refuses to accept the idea that all human planning fails in the face of the incalculable. Paradoxically, his theory makes him a genius who succumbs in the end to a state of morbid apathy because of the discrepancy that exists between reality and his hypothesis.

Dürrenmatt's *The Pledge* and Borges' «Death and the Compass» use the uncommonly clever detective to meditate on the reaches and limitations of the detective genre as well as on the reaches and limitations of the human mind. Traditionally, the the detective story has offered a solution that restored the order that the crime had disrupted. But in Borges and Dürrenmatt it is impossible to speak of a solution in the positive sense, since the detective himself falls victim to incalculable accident. Both authors emphasize the insufficiency of reason to solve what in their work amounts to the riddle of life. The pure reasoning their detectives apply turns out to be a limited and vain enterprise. Lönnrot, who thinks of himself as a pure logician, a kind of Auguste Dupin, is also somewhat of an adventurer and gambler. However, his limited game fails simply because it cannot be played to perfection in a world abandoned to chance or to one governed by a god or gods whose laws we cannot decipher. Similarly, what leads Matthäi astray and ultimately destroys him

is on the one hand his belief in the power of reason and, on the other, his human fallibility. But unlike Borges, who approaches all metaphysical systems with scepticism (as well as playful superstition) Dürrenmatt's understanding of man's helplessness and his failure to comprehend the world is based on a Christian point of view. In relationship to God's immeasurable greatness and his infinite creation, man, in his finiteness, is pitifully insignificant. The gulf that separates the human from the divine is insurmountable except through God's grace which, however, is unpredictable, and sometimes, as in *The Pledge*, remains conspicuously absent.

In *The Judge and His Executioner* Dürrenmatt has created another detective figure who exemplifies the impotence of human reason. This story moreover exhibits many striking coincidences with Borges. The relationship between the detective and the criminal in particular resembles that between Lönnrot and Red Scharlach. Also, the references to mirrors, symmetries, labyrinths, artifice, and nihilism, recourse to symbolic names and mathematical deductions, as well as insistence in the text on the fictive nature of the work strike a note with which the reader of Borges is most familiar.

The story opens with the murder of a young police lieutenant who has been tracking down Gastmann, a highly elusive criminal and an old enemy of detective Bärlach. The latter has been pursuing the evildoer, who has succeeded in gaining respectability and fame in the world in the forty years since their wager. Gastmann's contention that the confusion that characterizes human relationships makes it possible to commit crimes that go unproved is rejected by Bärlach, who contends that a crime is inevitably detected precisely because of human imperfection and the unpredictable manifestations of chance. Both base their proposition of the belief in the inevitability of chance. Furthermore, their bet initiates a terrible and irrevocable game that will last all their lives: «We cannot give up our game. You became guilty that night in Turkey because you offered the wager, Gastmann, and I, because I accepted it.»(22) As in Borges, a recondite game determines the relationship between detective and criminal. To win it, Gastmann commits crimes while Bärlach does his

utmost to catch him.

Bärlach is cast in the mold of the armchair detective. His role is a passive one; he merely sits back and observes his assistant Tschanz--whose name is a German spelling of English 'chance.' The latter's role in the story complicates the plot considerably, but he is not as important as Gastmann, the extraordinary criminal. Bärlach knows from the start that Tschanz is responsible for the recent murder of the police lieutenant. His knowledge of the facts of the crime cancels out the need for detection, but he allows Tschanz to take charge of the case, intending to use him to kill Gastmann. This irregular procedure-- not operating according to the books-- seems crass and unscientific, but it is the only way open to Bärlach under the circumstances. Because the unmasking of Gstmann as a criminal would have implicated a number of important people, Police Commissioner Lutz, Bärlach's superior, prevents him from carrying out a legal prosecution. Consequently Bärlach has to employ Tschanz as his instrument. However, when the latter finally kills Gastmann, Bärlach, paradoxically, loses his bet. In using Tschanz as his executioner he has not only contradicted his own assertion to Gastmann that «people cannot be manipulated like chess figures,» (p. 79) but he becomes criminally guilty for having resorted to means outside the law in order to destroy his enemy. Bärlach's failures and failings exemplify human fallibility in a chaotic world.

Dürrenmatt presents the pursuit of the criminal by the detective also as a conflict between good or evil. The scene where Gastmann's huge dog attacks Bärlach is a symbolic confrontation with the demonic force. They engage in a titanic struggle from which Bärlach is able to escape partly because of his own foresight and partly because of the intervention of Tschanz. It is ironic that the detective can only succeed through Tschanz, by setting «beast against beast.» (p. 142) Whether good can triumph over evil without employing evilmeans remains an unanswered question. What is clear, however, is that man cannot give up the struggle against evil despite the odds against him.

In Dürrenmatt, as in Borges, man's fragility is not an entirely desperate one. Within the religious frame of reference applicable to the former's works, the seemingly hopeless struggle of man is what imparts greater brilliance to God's glory: «Let His glory blaze forth fed by out helpless futility,» is the closing sentence

of Dürrenmatt's *The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi*.(23) Borges, on the other hand, associates a certain splendor with human fragility itself; he sees it as «a measure of the odds against man and a measure of his spirit.»(24) For both authors man is an ambivalent creature, thus they create characters like Red Scharlach and Bärlach who are both omnipotent manipulators of others-- «implacable chess players»-- and impotent humans doomed to succumb to the chaotic complexity of the world.

In the final encounter between Bärlach and Tschanz the former has prepared a Gargantuan dinner, a gallows meal and a kind of grotesque judgment for both characters. There is a veiled play on the word *Gericht* which in German has the double meaning of 'meal' and 'judgment' or 'trial.' Bärlach, who will submit to an operation the following day, eats voraciously as he terrorizes Tschanz by recounting impassively his crimes. «Humanity needs a diet not an operation,» Dürrenmatt has said elsewhere.(25) Here both characters are «incurable.» Bärlach will undergo an operation and Tschanz will die the same night. Tschanz's trial at the hands of Bärlach represents a kind of self-judgment, for though the old man lets him go free, he is killed or kills himself in a collision between his car and a train.

With Tschanz's death the story comes to an end. But Gastmann's death leaves the conflict over the wager unresolved--the workings of chance remain impenetrable to human reason. His death, furthermore, is a meaningless victory for Bärlach: «The dead are always right,» (p. 132) he concedes, and the thought that he has only one year to live fills him with melancholy resignation. As in Borges, the conclusion of the game signifies something more than an ending to the story:

Thus they met for the last time, the hunter and the wild beast which now lay finished off at his feet. Bärlach intuited that both their lives had run their course, and for the last time he glanced back through the years, his spirit traveled through the secret passageways of the labyrinth that their lives had been. Now there was nothing left between them but incommensurable death, the judge whose sentence was silence. (p. 132)

Lönnrot too experiences a similar melancholy moment at the final fusion of persecution and revenge. When he reaches his

last destination, the villa Triste-le-Roy, he is singularly overwhelmed by its labyrinthian structure, real and imagined: «Other things are making it seem larger: the dim light, the symmetry, the mirrors, so many years, my unfamiliarity, the loneliness. (p. 84) His being lost in a labyrinth becomes even more pathetic when he proposes to his murderer the simplest of geometric designs, a straight line, for his death in a future life.

Both Borges and Dürrenmatt build into their works a reminder of their fictive status. Borges usually proceeds with great subtlety to remind the reader that what he is reading is a story, a fiction. His favorite method consists of developing illusionists' tricks-- scholarly footnotes, references to real people, precise dates, etc.-- before demolishing them as fiction. This method of playing with the reader is characteristic of all his writings. «Death and the Compass» additionally contains all the clichés of the detective puzzle story, thus being both a commentary and a parody of the genre. Dürrenmatt, in *The Pledge* and in *The Judge and His Executioner*, inserts his commentary on detective fiction and on the difference between the real world and that created by art in the form of a discussion between a writer-- a thin disguise for the author-- and a fictional character.

A discussion about detective fiction between the author and Dr. H. provides the frame for *The Pledge* and sets out to establish the story as a fiction and its author an artificer. Dr. H. attacks the usual logical scheme of the genre: a crime has been committed, the criminal tracked down, the crime expiated, and thus a normal world order reestablished. This kind of writing infuriates him because logical thought is incapable of apprehending reality. Moreover he criticizes the type of murder mystery Dürrenmatt writes. Here too, he contends, the author constructs a world he can manipulate and which is vastly different from the real world. He resents the fact that the narrator has no choice but to tell the story in accordance with the author's plan. To illustrate his thesis that reality and fiction are entirely separate worlds, Dr. H. proceeds to tell Matthäi's story.

In *The Judge and His Executioner* Bärlach and Tschanz pay a visit to the writer as part of their routine investigation of the recent murder. However, any new clues the reader will discover there are of a purely literary nature. From the start Dürrenmatt humorously calls attention to the fictionality of his characters when, in the presence of the writer, they become mindful of his

observation of them, fearing they will end up in one of his books. And the ensuing conversation about Gastmann is really about art. Gastmann, we learn, is a culinary artist. Bärlach too is addicted to this art, and the discussion about it stimulates writer and detective in an extraordinary way: they are literally carried away by it. This idea of the *Gericht* as art anticipates Tschanz's gallows meal, mentioned earlier, and establishes a connection between culinary art and esthetics, which Dürrenmatt will exploit even further in *Traps*. The conversation then turns to Gastmann as nihilist, a theme the writer finds even more fascinating: «One could give one's life to study this man and his freedom.» (p. 101) He tells Bärlach that he can «picture» (sich ein Bild machen) the criminal, a statement that in this context refers to the creative act the artist (but not the fictitious Bärlach) can understand. When the latter inquires whether the picture is that of Gastmann or that of the writer's dreams, he receives the reply: «Of our dreams.» (p. 100) The writer then uses his picture of Gastmann, whose evil nature he attributes to his ability to do good or evil on impulse, to construct his antithesis, a criminal who does evil because it is his moral philosophy: «One can construct his opposite in evil as one constructs a geometric figure, a mirror image of another, and I am certain that there is such a person-- somewhere-- perhaps you will meet this one too. If you meet one, you meet the other» (p. 99). The reader will indeed meet this new figure, the result of the writer's mathematical speculations, in Dürrenmatt's second detective story, *The Quarry*. (26)

But Dürrenmatt's concern with esthetic questions and the idea of game playing is nowhere more elaborately developed than in *Traps*. This story is an adaptation of a popular variety of detective fiction, the courtroom novel, and it unfolds as a detection process concerning the guilt of a modern everyman. The bizarre trial is held not to convict Alfredo Traps (play on the English word 'trap') of a specific crime he has committed, but to make him aware of his existential guilt and force him to assume responsibility for it. The crime which constitutes the basis of his guilt is invented in a parlor game. Traps, an executive in textiles, is forced, as a result of a car breakdown, to spend the night in the company of a grotesque group of retired lawyers. These gentlemen regularly gather at a former judge's villa for sumptuous dinners and play extravagant parlor games in memory of their old profession. In their playful world every man is considered

guilty of a crime, and any visitor to the villa must stand a trial. The guilt here is universal guilt. Dürrenmatt is concerned with the fact that twentieth century man rejects such notions as guilt and responsibility.(27) In this story the protagonist accidentally falls into the playful trap set up by the lawyers that will bring him to recognition of his guilt. As in the case of Tschanz, the trial is a kind of self-judgment that ultimately leads to suicide.

The dinner trial (*Gericht*) in *Traps* becomes the central metaphor and also serves as a framing device for the story. Traps has not committed a real crime, the kind for which worldly justice would hold him accountable. His boss had died of a heart attack. Traps, it is true, had coveted his boss's position, had had an affair with his wife, had wished him dead, and had perchance provoked the heart attack by tipping his boss off to his wife's unfaithfulness. The exquisite dinner and the case brilliantly constructed by the prosecutor against Traps are in a literal sense works of art, and a source of infinite pleasure for Traps. In return for his banal life story he receives a highly poetic version that declares him to be the murderer. When the defense lawyer attempts to portray the events of his life in their former ordinariness, Traps refuses to accept his version. He has undergone a transformation through art. Having gained insight into his life and assumed responsibility for his behavior, he hangs himself—appropriately in a window, the borderline between play and reality.

For Dürrenmatt, justice is no longer possible in «a world after the fall.» In an imperfect world chance subverts Bärlach's role as a detective, making him an accomplice in crime. In *Traps* the idea of justice receives a more complete esthetic treatment. The grotesque criminologists, like grotesque divinities, establish their own perverse justice in their playful domain. For Bärlach, dying of cancer, no cure is possible. The old gentlemen in *Traps* who had previously been ailing, however, discover «a fountain of health» in their game. The *Gericht* for them does not have the fatal consequences it had had for Bärlach. Their world is «an esthetic image inside a fiction, a play within a play.»(28)

Borges' «Emma Zunz» plays on the well-known variant of crime fiction, the inverted detective story, in which «the element of surprise regarding the murderer's identity has been replaced by the question: will the murderer carry out his plan and will he get away with it?»(29) Borges poses this two-part question and

resolves it, but not without giving the story his own special twist. The detection that takes place is the reading of the criminal plot as it unfolds through the step by step preparations, the motivations-- apparent and misleading-- and the execution of a perfect crime. The reading is as suspenseful as only a murder mystery can be.

Like *Traps*, «Emma Zunz» deals with questions of guilt and justice, only here the concern is with archetypal patterns rather than with modern problems concerning universal guilt. Emma's carrying out the Old Testament justice of an eye for an eye comes close to the question Dürrenmatt asks in *The Judge and His Executioner*. Emma is the judge and the executioner in her own plan to avenge her father's death. His suicide is her apparent motive for the murder of Aaron Loewenthal, her father's former partner and owner of a textile factory where she is employed. Her father had been unjustly accused of embezzlement, the real thief however having been Loewenthal. In order to convince the judicial authorities that she killed Loewenthal because he had raped her, she has herself «raped» by an unknown sailor prior to the murder. But this rational plan works only apparently. Her adventure with the sailor is a labyrinthian experience in which she loses sight of her original motivation: «She did think once, and in that moment she endangered her desperate undertaking. She thought that her father had done to her mother the hideous thing that was being done to her now.»(30) Similarly, the encounter with Loewenthal is quite the opposite of her expectations. In his presence her urgency «to become the instrument of Justice» by avenging her father is replaced with «the need for inflicting punishment for the outrage she had suffered.» (p. 136) She kills Loewenthal and is able to convince the world with her story. However, the real motivation behind her deed is not expressed in her initial rational plan but must be attributed to an obscure irrational force, which points to a fatalistic world-order obeying inscrutable laws.

Borges' story abounds with ambiguities that corroborate the uncertainty of individual identity and action. Each character has within himself another. Manuel Maier, as the father is called in the letter, was in happier days Emmanuel Zunz. The double name of the textile company, Tarbuch and Loewenthal, suggests that Loewenthal may also be another. A certain Fein or Fain signed the letter. Loewenthal insults Emma in Spanish and in

Yiddish. The sailor is a Swede or a Finn. Furthermore, Borges expands the father image to include the sailor, Loewenthal, and God, all of them guilty of the abominable act of (pro) creation. The father's name Emmanuel could also allude to a divine identity and contains the daughter's name as evidence of the original closeness of their relationship. The murder of Loewenthal, the father image of which she is a reflection is thus a particide-suicide. Emma's taking justice into her own hands in order «to permit the justice of God,» is also imbued with ambiguity. Worldly justice cannot discern the true motive behind her act; divine justice remains inscrutable.

In «Emma Zunz,» as in most of his stories, Borges plays an artful game with the reader. He contrives for us elaborate evidence toward a plausible solution only to let us know in the end that he had designed the evidence deliberately to lead us astray. The story does not provide us with a satisfactory solution. If we can speak of any satisfaction at all, it is that which the reading of the text provides. This procedure of tricking the reader with all sorts of evidence is also used by Dürrenmatt in *Traps*, where the evidence, invented in a playful way, is designed as a trap for both *Traps* and the reader.

Since the 1950's there has been a growing interest in detective fiction on the part of critics and «serious» writers. At the same time this period has witnessed a decline of the genre, a slackening of standards. The deterioration in quality and the lack of originality have given rise to prophecies of the genre's eclipse. Whether the detective story has a future or not may not now be clear. What is certain, however, is that it has shown a tendency to become a hybrid and that its special attributes have induced writers of literary caliber to exploit its vitality and capacity for surprise. Borges and Dürrenmatt are two such writers who, independently, have brought a thoroughly modern world view to bear and applied a radical esthetic to the genre. While it is important to note that Borges is more the artificer than is Dürrenmatt, both writers have exploited the detective story in a way that has yielded similar results. A good detective story is a triumph of fantasy and a highly finished product of the story teller's craft. It must be devised as a game of skill, and Borges and Dürrenmatt have accepted the challenge of the game with zest. Their stories are equally challenging as puzzles and as elaborate metaphors of game-playing. The traditional detective story was a rational

construct in which all the pieces fell together to form a logical pattern. Borges and Dürrenmatt, on the other hand, posit an irrational universe. The characters are the chess pieces in the design of the fiction whose every move is determined by catastrophic chance. Their stories are filled with philosophical ideas which, when abstracted from the work, yield some startlingly similar-- though perhaps not startling-- propositions about the human condition. Both authors emphasize man's finiteness vis-à-vis an infinite and infinitely perplexing universe. Creation is infinite, inscrutable, monstrous. Under such conditions human justice cannot restore world order disrupted by crime. Bärlach and Emma Zunz by resorting to Old Testament justice transgress against worldly justice. An insurmountable paradox interposes itself at every step. In order to think clearly it is necessary to be in possession of all the evidence, but man has only a few tantalizing clues that leads him down labyrinthian paths to ever greater uncertainty about the reaches of his reason, the divine spark that sets him apart in creation. However, despite these odds against him, he remains undefatigable in his quest to know and explain the world. And it is the task of literature «to show» this ongoing enterprise of the human intellect. In their stories Borges and Dürrenmatt not only show us their very similar picture-- of their dreams-- of the world, but also meditate and comment on the detective genre and the literary undertaking in general. Literature may be as vain and as futile as the quest to decipher the universe, but both authors succeed in turning this hypothesis into a paradox. Their transformation of the detective story, their «improvement» on the conventional scheme, points to the possibility of literary purpose and of literary continuity.

NOTES

1. See John Stark, *The Literature of Exhaustion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1974).
2. For a more detailed discussion of Borges' involvement with detective fiction see Ronald Christ, *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), especially the chapter «The Approach to Almotasim.»

3. When speaking of detective fiction, 'novel' and 'story' may be used interchangeably, «for the length is immaterial.» A. E. Murch, *The Development of the Detective Novel* (1958; New York: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1968), p. 9.
4. Murch notes that «From the 1920s onward, a great new growth of detective fiction began to appear and has continued to the present day. Writers have succeeded in creating their own special type of story, designed to appeal to a particular group of readers, and as a consequence new varieties of the genre have come into being.» (p. 10) See also Jochen Vogt, editor, *Der Kriminalroman* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1973), 2 vols.; Francis Laccasin, *Mythologie du roman policier* (Paris: Union Générale D'Éditions, 1974), 2 vols.; Victor Zmegac, editor, *Der wohltemporierte Mord* (Frankfurt a. M.: Athenäum, 1971); César E. Díaz, *La novela políciaca* (Barcelona: Ediciones Acervo, 1973).
5. *Best Detective Fiction* (London: Clive Bingley, 1975), p. 8.
6. Poe, although not the originator of crime fiction, is considered the father of the modern detective story: «Though the conventional elements are available as far back as classical times in the form of identifiable motifs, many plots and aspects of character, including the detective, Poe was able to gather these together in a series of stories which gave them a new and larger meaning.... Poe's contribution, however, was no less than the narrative paradigm for what we now recognize as the detective genre.» Larry M. Landrum, Pat Brown, Ray B. Browne, *Dimensions of Detective Fiction* (New York: Popular Press, 1976), p. 1.
7. Murch, p. 167.
8. Edgar Marsch, *Die Kriminalerzählung: Theorie, Geschichte, Analyse* (Munich: Winkler Verlag, 1972), p. 264. This as well as all other translations from the German are mine.
9. *Ibid.*
10. The courtroom drama is also a form of detective fiction. A famous example is the series of books (and television shows) by Erle Stanley Gardner that has the lawyer Perry Mason as a central character.
11. Austin Freeman is credited with the creation of the inverted detective story in 1912, but «It was not until later that Freeman's idea was to bear fruit in the works of other writers who succeeded in establishing the 'inverted' detective story as something far more than an intriguing experiment.» Barnes, p. 83.
12. Murch, p. 11.
13. In *Four Plays by Friedrich Dürrenmatt*, translated by Gerhard Nellhaus and others (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 39.
14. Christ, p. 122.
15. Christ, pp. 115-116 and pp. 129-130.
16. For a more detailed discussion of Dürrenmatt's theories see Marsch, pp. 221-224 as well as Dürrenmatt's own views in *Theaterschriften und Reden* (Zurich: Arche Verlag, 1966), pp. 192-210.
17. Peter Demetz, *Postwar German Literature* (New York: Western Publishing Co., 1970), p. 161.
18. Jorge Luis Borges, «Death and the Compass» is from the collection *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1956). This quotation is from *Labyrinths*, edited by Donald E. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions Publishing Co., 1962), p. 78. Subsequent references are in the text.

19. D. P. Gallagher, *Modern Latin American Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 103.
20. «The killer and the slain, whose minds work in the same way, may be the same man. Lönnrot is not an unbelievable fool walking into his own death trap but, in a symbolic way, a man committing suicide. This is hinted at by the similarity of their of their names.» Quoted by Gallagher, p. 105.
21. «While the criminologist constructs a hypothetical figure of the murderer from the drawing, the doctor points out that all this is only a mental game without scientific worth. Mätthai should return from fiction to reality.» Marsch, p. 249.
22. *Der Richter und sein Hender* (1952; Zurich: Benziger Verlag, 1962), p. 121. Subsequent references are in the text.
23. In *Four Plays*, p. 198.
24. Gallagher, p. 121.
25. *Theaterschriften*, p. 81.
26. Dürrenmatt's second detective novel is closely related to *The Judge and His Executioner*. It is not discussed here in order to avoid repetition. Bärlach in his confrontation with the evil Emmenberger appears even more helpless than before. «The detective in this story is rationally in the position to reconstruct the world of crime, to identify the criminal and to penetrate into this world. But at the same time he is impotent in this world. He can neither destroy Emmenberger, nor can he cross his criminal plans. He is condemned to death.» Marsch, pp. 238-239.
27. *Theaterschriften*, p. 122.
28. Marsch, p. 243.
29. Barnes, pp. 181-182.
30. «Emma Zunz» is from the collection *El Aleph* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1957). This quotation is from *Labyrinths*, p. 138. Subsequent references are in the text.