

## Notes from Underground: Tunnel Resonance in Friedrich Dürrenmatt

Friedrich Dürrenmatt (1921–1990) developed a species of fable which works through distillation, distancing, and disruption. All of this, together with the fable's peculiar potential for plurisignification, is illustrated in his 1952 short story "Der Tunnel." "Der Tunnel" is set on a Swiss train which according to the railway timetables is bound for Zürich. The story, however, has it entering a tunnel and finding itself on a track to the underworld instead. No official explanation can be given to the passenger through whose escalating panic the narrative is focalised, and nor is any authorial explanation forthcoming for the reader. After its 1978 revision, indeed, the last word in the text is "Nichts."

The story therefore ends with "nothing" ruled either in or out, and all rules of both logic and verisimilitude abrogated. Two necessarily tentative conclusions can be drawn. First, in the multiple possibilities of interpretation with which the reader is invited to fill that void are pointers to the cultural resonance of the railway, which by now had for the space of a century been absorbed into various forms of fable as thoroughly as the Zürich train is swallowed by Dürrenmatt's tunnel. Secondly, in the encounter which this story sets up between, on the one hand, what is gauged and timetabled and, on the other, "das Schreckliche" is contained the essence of the twentieth-century fable's efforts to define itself against—and disrupt—the set sequences, the predictable regularity, and the penchant for measurement, of the realist novel.