

German writer Georg Büchner: 200 years since his birth—Part 1

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11 January 2014

Georg Büchner: Revolutionary with Pen and Scalpel [Georg Büchner. Revolutionär mit Feder und Skalpell], an exhibition from October 13, 2013 to February 16, 2014 at the Darmstadt Conference Centre, Darmstadt. The catalogue of the same title is published by Hatje Cantz, 612 pages, €65 (US \$89).

“An extraordinarily precocious mind, a political free thinker, who towered above his political contemporaries in Germany.” — Franz Mehring writing about Georg Büchner, 1897

Last year witnessed several celebrations of figures born two hundred years ago, including the composers Richard Wagner and Giuseppe Verdi. In 1813 as well, Napoleon’s army was decisively defeated in the Battle of Leipzig (*Völkerschlacht*), the largest European battle prior to World War I.

However, 1813 was also the year in which the revolutionary poet and natural scientist Georg Büchner was born. His life is featured in a major current exhibition showing in Darmstadt, Germany, which is well worth seeing.

Büchner was an artistic genius, whose few works, especially the drama of the French Revolution, *Danton’s Death* (1835), and an important fragment of a play, *Woyzeck* (1837), along with the novella *Lenz* (1835), have had a profound influence on modern literature.

This brilliant man died very young, leaving only this handful of works behind, some biographical facts mostly known through letters to and from him, and no personal effects other than a lock of his hair. Büchner’s poetical works amount to no more than three hundred pages. Nevertheless, the Darmstadt exhibition has aroused great public interest, as well as numerous reviews and considerable discussion in the media, which is certainly due to more than the interesting presentation and rich variety of exhibits. It demonstrates the continuing significance of this author, even though he died, unrecognized, at the age of only twenty-three.

Because there are so few physical “remains,” the curators have gone much further than just displaying his manuscripts and printed editions of his works. They present a lively picture of Büchner’s fascinating and multifaceted personality, as well as the political and social controversies that raged in his day. The scientific, political and cultural context of the times is comprehensively represented, together with the manner in which its leading figures and literature influenced the young author. Büchner’s personality and immediate environment are vividly illustrated through the display of a contemporary dissecting table, medical apparatus, printing machine, guillotine, numerous paintings, political caricatures, erotic prints and much more.

Those who take the time to visit this wide-ranging exhibition in Darmstadt will not only see those pre-revolutionary times brought to life, but also understand why Georg Büchner is still able to captivate people today as he did in the 19th and 20th centuries, despite his short creative life. His works are enormously relevant to our times as well.

Büchner was born in the middle of the reactionary era of the German restoration. Following the Battle of Leipzig of 1813 and the final defeat of

Napoleon, Germany remained divided into countless small states and principalities. The feudal aristocrats were able to reestablish their rule in all its backwardness. Free thinkers and intellectuals were persecuted and, like the “Göttingen Seven” (who included the Grimm brothers), ejected from their university posts. Constitutional rights introduced by Napoleon were revoked and a conservative, narrow-minded, small-state sovereignty protected itself through political repression, censorship and arbitrary police measures. The peasant population suffered from hunger and misery, while the wealthy bourgeoisie and gentry enjoyed their privileges.

The 1830s and 1840s were years of political and intellectual ferment. The ideas of the French Revolution—freedom, equality and brotherhood—had been taken up by increasingly broad layers of the population.

After years of tyranny and the Napoleonic wars, the privileged and wealthy once again openly embraced reactionary ideologies. The German bourgeois-national movement became increasingly influenced by chauvinistic Francophobia, nostalgia for medieval times and a longing for the resurrection of Barbarossa (1122-1190), the Holy Roman Emperor, as satirised by Heinrich Heine in his *Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen* [*Germany: A Winter’s tale*], 1843-44.

The Büchner family

Karl Georg Büchner was born October 17, 1813 in Goddelau, in the former Grand Duchy of Hesse-Darmstadt, the son of army physician Ernst Büchner and his wife Caroline, neé Reuss. In 1816 the family moved into the ducal residence in Darmstadt. Georg was the eldest of six children.

His father was a doctor educated in the natural sciences, an atheist and a supporter of Napoleon—a fact that did not endear him to respectable social circles in Darmstadt. However, he remained loyal to Grand Duke Ludwig and was highly respected as a physician. His wife, Büchner’s mother, was interested in literature and was also religious.

All of Büchner’s siblings embarked on literary careers, apart from his sister Mathilde, who devoted herself to social work. His sister Louise became an author and was active in the early women’s rights movement. In her fragment of a novel, *A Poet*, she depicted numerous episodes from the life of her eldest brother Georg.

His brother Ludwig became a doctor and renowned natural scientist, and took part in the 1848 revolution. As a follower of Charles Darwin and a (vulgar) materialist, he published the well-regarded *Kraft und Stoff: Empirisch-naturphilosophische Studien* (Force and Matter: Empiricophilosophical Studies, 1855).

Because of his openly materialist views, Ludwig would later lose his post as professor at Tübingen and be forced to make his living as a doctor in Darmstadt. In 1850, Ludwig was responsible for publishing the first

collected edition of the neglected works of his brother Georg.

Another brother, Wilhelm, a pharmacist and chemist, was the only one in the family to become wealthy, as the owner of a paint factory. He was also politically active, and published a number of pamphlets as an elected deputy in the Hessian and national parliaments. The youngest brother Alexander was to spend his life in France as an author, after being stripped of his right to practice law by the Hessian courts due to his “anti-state” attitudes.

Georg Büchner’s literary talents were already evident while he was a schoolboy. As a young boy he wrote a story on the occasion of his father’s birthday about the miraculous rescue of some shipwrecked passengers, and also delivered a public speech at school in defence of Julius Caesar’s opponent, Cato of Utica (Cato the Younger). He also set up a literary circle with friends. They were particularly enthusiastic about Shakespeare, but also read philosophical texts by such figures as Voltaire and Rousseau.

In 1831 Georg began to study medicine at the University of Strasbourg, in Alsace in eastern France. He lodged with the priest Johann Jakob Jaeglé, to whose daughter Wilhelmine (Minna) he later became engaged.

France

After the narrow provincialism of the Duchy of Hesse, Büchner enjoyed the more open and liberal atmosphere in France, although this did not prevent him from strongly criticising the new French constitution. It represented no advance whatsoever, he argued, in respect to social equality and reserved voting for parliament only to wealthy citizens. “The whole thing after all is just a comedy. The King and his councils rule, the people applaud and pay.” (Letter to his family, Strasbourg, December 1832—see note)

Büchner attended events organised by the Eugenia student association, and took part in demonstrations and political debates. The current Darmstadt exhibition displays a number of caricatures by the master of political satire, Honoré Daumier, illustrating the social and political situation in France in that time. They could refer just as well to the conditions in the Duchy of Hesse.

Following the Paris uprising of July 1830, the Belgian revolution of 1830-31 and the Polish protest movement, an increasingly insurrectionary mood spread to German intellectual and student circles. The national-democratic Hambach Festival of May 1832 represented the high point of the civic opposition movement against the restoration. Those who took part in the march to Hambach Palace in Pfalz were demanding national unity, freedom and democracy.

Then, in April 1833, the so-called “Frankfurter Wachensturm” [Charge of the Frankfurt guard house] took place. Some fifty insurgents attacked police stations in Frankfurt with the aim of igniting a revolution in all of Germany’s states. The action was a complete failure.

In a letter to his parents dated April 5, 1833, Büchner writes about these events in Frankfurt:

“My opinion is this: if anything can help in this age of ours, it is violence. We know what to expect from our princes. Every concession they have made they were driven to by necessity. And even their concessions were flung down like favours granted to a cringing petitioner, like some miserable toy aimed at making that gawking idiot the people forget how tightly swaddled it is... These young people are condemned for using violence. But are we not constantly subjected to violence? Because we are born and bred in a dungeon we no longer even notice that we are stuck in a hellhole chained hand and foot and with gags in our mouths. What on earth do you mean by ‘lawful state of affairs’? A ‘law’ that

turns the great mass of citizens into beast-like slaves in order to satisfy the unnatural requirements of an insignificant and degenerate minority? And this law, sustained by brute force through the military and by the mindless cunning of its spies—this law is violence, constantly and brutally perpetrated against justice and common sense, and I shall fight it with word and deed wherever I can.”

Nevertheless he distanced himself from the Frankfurter insurrectionists, because he regarded “revolutionary activity of any kind to be a futile undertaking in present circumstances.” (The same letter to his family, April 5, 1833) He added that he did “not share the delusion of those who see in the Germans a people ready to fight for their rights.” Whether this final comment was really his point of view, or whether he just wanted to calm the fears of his parents, is a matter for conjecture. In any case, Büchner very soon involved himself in the developing events.

Later in 1833 he wrote to his family: “Although I shall always act according to my principles, I have recently come to realize that only the imperative needs of the great mass of the people can bring about change, and that all the beavering and bellowing of individuals is futile and foolish. They write: no one reads them; they shout: no one hears them; they act: no one helps them. You can well imagine that I won’t be getting myself involved in Giessen’s back-room politics and childish revolutionary antics.” (Letter to his family, Strasbourg, June 1833)

These “back-room politics and childish revolutionary antics” probably refer to the student activists in Giessen in Hesse, whose anti-French attitudes, German chauvinism and skill at backpedaling were certainly not appealing to him.

In this same year, Büchner transferred his studies to the Faculty of Medicine in the University at Gießen, in order to matriculate in exams recognised in his homeland. Here he made the acquaintance of student theologian August Becker, called “red Becker” because of his red hair. Through the latter, Büchner got to know the rector and theologian Friedrich Ludwig Weidig, the leading figure in the Hessian opposition movement and the initiator of the failed insurrection in Frankfurt.

Together with these individuals, Büchner expressed outrage at the terrible conditions of the poverty-stricken masses in the Grand Duchy, and he began intensively to study the history of the French Revolution. He took part in the founding conference of a conspiratorial organisation, the “Pressverein,” which demanded freedom of the press.

Notes:

All quotes from: Georg Büchner, *Complete Plays, Lenz and Other Writings* (Penguin Classics), Penguin Books (first published 1993).

To be continued



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