

# German writer Georg Büchner: 200 years since his birth—Part 3

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## Danton's Death

"The revolution is like Saturn, it devours its own children." (*Danton's Death*, Act 1, Scene 5)

Shortly before his flight from Germany—out of fear of arrest for his revolutionary activities—to Strasbourg in eastern France, Georg Büchner wrote his first play, *Danton's Death*, in just five weeks in Darmstadt in January 1835. This lacerating, exhilarating play, with some of the most insightful and gorgeous dialogue ever written, remains one of the irreplaceable dramas of the modern era.

Its plot and themes had obviously dominated the young writer-revolutionary's thinking for some time. After his own attempt to create a revolutionary movement had failed, Büchner determined to write on the subject of the French Revolution and, in particular, on the period shortly before the victory of the Thermidorian reaction in July 1794.

Büchner's *Danton's Death* is nowadays referred to again and again in classrooms or in connection with its performance as evidence of the writer's thorough rejection and renunciation of revolution. It is interpreted as an anti-revolutionary drama and performed accordingly. But such a view is far too limited, and, in the most profound sense, deeply mistaken.

Büchner was undoubtedly dealing with his own frustrated political experiences in this drama. He was convinced for the moment, he told his brother Wilhelm in a letter from Strasbourg in 1835, that "nothing can be done, and ... anyone who sacrifices himself in present circumstances is throwing himself away like an idiot." (Georg Büchner, *Complete Plays, Lenz and Other Writings*, Penguin Books, 1993, 200.)

Büchner was undoubtedly discouraged, but at the same time trying to fathom the objective causes of the defeat. He was not merely concerned to understand why any individual revolutionary effort failed; he wanted to know why the lofty goals of the French Revolution had apparently come to grief. He had already written what has become a famous passage to his bride in March 1834:

"I've been studying the history of the French Revolution. I felt as though utterly crushed by the hideous fatalism of history. I find in human nature a terrible sameness, in human circumstances an ineluctable

violence vouchsafed to all and to none. Individuals but froth on the waves, greatness a mere coincidence, the mastery of geniuses a dance of puppets, a ridiculous struggle against an iron law that can at best be recognised, but never mastered. I wouldn't dream any more of bowing down before the prancing show-offs and hangers-on of history. My eye has grown accustomed to blood. But I'm no guillotine blade. 'Must' is one of those words by which mankind was damned from the very beginning. The saying, 'It must needs be that offences come, but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh', is horrifying. What is it in man that lies, murders, steals? I can't bear to take the thought any further." (Ibid., 195-196)

The sentences "It must needs be that offences come, but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh", is horrifying. What is it in man that lies, murders, steals?" are reproduced almost verbatim in *Danton's Death*. They express Danton's mood of resignation as he is confronted with the pointlessness of the Reign of Terror. Danton himself had initiated the revolutionary violence, when he ordered the assault on the Tuileries Palace and the arrest of Louis XVI to defend the revolution in August 1792.

Only a shallow interpretation of the play would see this phase of Büchner's despondency regarding revolution as the core of the drama and sole statement of the author. Büchner made a thorough study of history, rooting his understanding in numerous sources. It is as though he subjects his depression and scepticism to scientific discipline in order to tackle the problem of future revolutions. He attempts to cognize the "circumstances (that) lie beyond our control" (Letter to his family in February 1834, *ibid.*, 192).

In a real sense, Büchner's treatment of the French Revolution as a subject for the stage anticipates the materialist conception of the history of class struggle. This distinguishes him from the utopian socialists of the Saint-Simonist variety, whom in his letters he discusses with benevolent mockery, even though he shared their fundamental conception of equality for all people.

Büchner had little confidence that their reason and will would induce the property owners to give up peacefully their wealth and privileges. Abstract ideals were not his trade. He understood that material interests lay at the heart of social reality.

He quite deliberately set the action of his drama at a particular stage of the momentous French events when it has become clear the Revolution cannot meet the expectations of the revolutionaries who had been fighting for egalitarian ideals. This layer represents the "third estate," which had fought for the Revolution and made the greatest sacrifices.

Büchner was well aware that a revolution could only be successful if it created a society capable of satisfying the needs of the common people and the poorest of the poor. He recognised that the French Revolution was unable to do this and fell short as a result. A Shakespearean crowd scene near the beginning of the play depicts the state of mind of those whom the Revolution has cheated, as well as their wrath against those *who have*

profited from the social transformation:

1st Citizen: ... "They told us: 'Kill the aristocrats, they're a pack of wolves!' So we strung them up on every streetlamp. They told us: 'The King with his veto is scoffing your bread!' So we killed the King. They told us: 'The Girondists are starving you to death!' So we guillotined the Girondists. But *they* stripped all the clothes off the corpses, and *we're* still freezing with nothing to wear. Let's tear the skin from their thighs and turn it into trousers, let's melt the fat of their bellies to lard our soup with. Come on! Death to all them with no holes in their coats!" ( *Danton's Death*, Act 1, Scene 2, *ibid.*, 10)

Büchner's Georges Danton is contradictory and tormented. On the one hand, his defence before the Revolutionary tribunal reproduces the great speech of the actual historical revolutionary, who justified himself by recalling his crucial role and presenting his opponents with an alternative political programme for the stabilisation of the Revolution and the republic. On the other hand, Danton's fatalism and epicureanism, his despair and paralysis, throughout the entire drama render him the embodiment of the Revolution's historic failure. Büchner's Danton knows from the start that his fate is sealed. Replying to his friends who urge him to resist, he says: "I'm a relic, and relics get thrown in the gutter." (Act 2, Scene 1, *ibid.*, 28)

In contrast stands Robespierre, who desperately tries to prevent defeat by launching the Reign of Terror. In a pivotal scene, he responds to Danton's objection, "Where self-defence ends, murder begins. I see no reason why we have to go on killing people," by urging: "The social revolution is not yet finished, and to try to end a revolution in the middle is to dig your own grave. The world of the idle rich is not yet dead, the healthy vigour of the people must replace this utterly effete and played-out class. Vice must be punished, virtue must rule through terror." (Act 1, Scene 6, *ibid.*, 23). But neither can he offer the people bread. Büchner's Danton characterizes Robespierre as a bombastic ideologue and dealer in abstract phrases.

The goal of the historical Danton, the stabilisation of the Revolution, was actually achieved. The wealthy urban bourgeoisie were ultimately able to strengthen their economic and political power at the expense of the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Danton's utopian vision of a republic capable of reconciling social contradictions could not be realised. In Büchner's play, Danton's death confirms the impossibility of class compromise, as literary scholar Hans Mayer has observed.

Büchner made clear that both protagonists, Danton as well as Robespierre, were bound to fail. This constitutes the theme of his drama and the tragedy of the history of the French Revolution, based on his own experience. Büchner dramatises the disappointment and bitterness of the masses, but also reveals they are unaware of any way out of their predicament. He was not yet able to comprehend the class logic behind this failure.

The revolutionary class in modern society, the working class, the force that provides the answer to the historical situation and Büchner's own intellectual dilemma, was only in the process of emerging in late 18th century France and even in Germany of the 1830s. Büchner in his brilliance and prescience can see the contradiction between the recently empowered bourgeoisie and the emerging proletariat, but for historical reasons he is unable to envisage any solution to the conflict.

Büchner has the Jacobin and ally of Robespierre, St. Just (who once uttered the immortal words, "No one can reign innocently"), give the following speech to the National Convention:

"There appear to be some sensitive ears in this assembly that cannot bear to hear the word 'blood'. A few general reflections may serve to convince them that we are no more cruel than nature, or the age we live in. Nature follows her own laws, calmly, irresistibly; man is destroyed wherever he comes into conflict with them. A change in the composition of the air, a burst of subterranean fire, a shift in the equilibrium of a mass

of water--and an epidemic, a volcanic eruption, a flood kills thousands. And what is the outcome? An insignificant, scarcely perceptible ripple on the surface of the physical world that would almost have disappeared without trace were it not for the jetsam of corpses. I ask you now: should *moral* nature be any more considerate in her cataclysmic revolutions than *physical* nature? Does an *idea* not have just as much right as a law of physics to destroy whatever stands in its way? An event that transforms the whole of moral nature, in other words mankind: does it not have the right to come about through blood? The world-spirit acts through us in the realm of ideas just as, in the physical realm, he acts through floods or volcanoes. What difference does it make whether people die of an epidemic or the revolution?" (Act 2 Scene 7, *ibid.*, 42)

Danton has to be sacrificed because he stands in the way of the Revolution. But St. Just and Robespierre also fail (they were both executed on July 28, 1794). Büchner suspects that the reasons for their failures, as for his own as a revolutionary, lie beyond personal will. He tends to seek the explanation in human nature and the course of nature in general. As he put it in the letter to his bride, no more than his heroes can he escape the "fatalism of history," its "iron law." It seems to him that any attempt to alter social conditions miscarries due to human nature and has to end in victory for the plutocracy. Here, as Mayer writes, the "historical limit to his vision of history [becomes] evident."

## The escape

Büchner sent the manuscript of *Danton's Death* to the Sauerländer publishing firm in Frankfurt on Main. Following its recommendation by *Vorm ä rz* (pro-revolutionary) literary figure and publishing colleague Karl Gutzkow, the play was accepted, although quite extensively revised out of fear of the censorship. Also with the censor in mind, a somewhat politically defanged version of the drama appeared in the magazine, *Phoenix*. It was later available as a privately printed text, entitled *Dramatic Images from France's Reign of Terror*, a title Büchner considered "vulgar."

Regarding the changes made by Gutzkow, Büchner wrote to his family on July 28, 1835:

"I must say a few words about my drama. First, I must mention that the permission I gave for some changes to be made was gravely abused. Omissions and additions on almost every page, and almost always extremely detrimental to the overall effect. Sometimes the meaning is seriously distorted or even completely lost, with sheer nonsense in its place." (*Ibid.*, 201)

He registered no fewer than 111 changes made by Gutzkow. Wary of censorship, Gutzkow eliminated or weakened not only Büchner's political, but also and primarily all of his erotic expressions and allusions. The author was justifiably outraged, given the--for his time--extremely uninhibited attitude he held towards sexuality and eroticism. He wanted "to remain true to history and show the men of the Revolution as they actually were: bloody, dissolute, energetic and cynical. I regard my drama as a historical portrait that must correspond exactly to its original." (Letter to his family, May 5, 1835, *ibid.*, 199-200)

In his July 28, 1835 letter Büchner wrote that "the dramatist is in my view nothing other than a historian ... His supreme task is to get as close as possible to history as it actually happened. His play must be neither more *moral* nor more *immoral* than history *itself*, but history was not created by the good Lord to serve as reading material for young ladies, so no one should take it amiss if my drama is just as ill suited for such a purpose. I can't possibly turn Danton and the bandits of the Revolution into heroes of virtue! ... The writer is no preacher of morality, he invents

and creates characters, he makes past ages live again, and people can learn just as well from that as from the study of history and from their observation of what happens around them in real life. If *that* [the moralizing view] was one's view, then one would have to forego the study of history because of the very many immoral things recounted in it, go blindfold down the street because of all the vulgarities one might see there, and scream blue murder against God for having created a world so full of obscenities." (Ibid., 202)

This defense of realism and the study of history is a resounding and unanswerable slap in the face of virtually all current "left" academic studies and criticism!

Büchner, sensing the noose tightening around his neck in view of his looming arrest, fled from Darmstadt to Strasbourg, where he re-enrolled at the university. A warrant for his arrest was posted in Darmstadt and Frankfurt newspapers.

What he could have expected, had he not fled and been arrested, could be discerned from his colleague Friedrich Ludwig Weidig's fate. Weidig was held prisoner under the most atrocious conditions and abused by the authorities for more than two years. Four days after Büchner's death, he killed himself in despair by cutting his throat.

*To be continued*



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