

German writer Georg Büchner: 200 years since his birth—Part 4

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15 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).

This is the fourth part of a series on the great German writer Georg Büchner (1813-1837). Part one was published on January 11, Part two on January 13, Part three on January 14.

Although Georg Büchner refrained from any practical revolutionary interventions after 1835, he continued to reject the peaceful reconciliation of the social classes. Nor was he convinced by the abstract appeals of fellow writers associated with the “Young Germany” [*Junges Deutschland*] movement. On January 1, 1836, he wrote his family from Strasbourg, in eastern France:

“As for me, by the way, I don’t by any means belong to Young Germany, the literary party led by [Karl] Gutzkow and [Heinrich] Heine. Only a total misunderstanding of our social conditions could make people believe that a total restructuring of our religious and social ideas could be achieved through the medium of topical literature. (Georg Büchner, *Complete Plays, Lenz and Other Writings*, Penguin Books, 1993, p. 204.)

“Lenz”

In Strasbourg, Büchner devoted himself to his scientific studies, at the same time beginning work on a novella about the remarkable *Sturm und Drang* (“*Storm and Stress*”) poet Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz (1751-1792), which was printed as a fragment in a German newspaper in 1839. To earn some income, he also translated Victor Hugo’s new dramas *Lucretia Borgia* and *Marie Tudor* (both 1833), which, like his *Danton’s Death*, were published by Sauerland. Additionally, he studied the philosophical writings of René Descartes and Baruch Spinoza.

Büchner derived the material for “Lenz” from friends who had access to the records of the Alsatian pastor and reformer Johann Friedrich Oberlin (1740-1826, after whom the college in the US is named). Lenz had shown strong signs of psychosis and found refuge with Oberlin. In his story, Büchner remains close to Oberlin’s descriptions, often taking them over literally. Drawing on his medical knowledge, among other things, Büchner is able to depict vividly the poet’s harrowing mental state, which hovers between delusion and reality. At the same time, he pioneered a new narrative technique in this piece, shifting artfully between the first- and third-person narrative.

Particularly impressive are his descriptions of nature as Lenz wanders, tormented by visions, through the Vosges Mountains, also in eastern France, during a storm. The natural environment speaks to and reflects the condition of a man losing his mind. Büchner loved the Vosges and hiked

there with his friends from Strasbourg. This is an excerpt from the fascinating, lengthy passage with which the story begins:

“On 20th January Lenz crossed the mountains. Snow on the peaks and upper slopes, down into the valleys gray stone, green patches, rocks and pine-trees. It was cold and wet, the water trickled down the rocks and leapt across the path. The boughs of the pine-trees sagged in the damp air. Grey clouds marched across the sky, but everything so close, and then the mist came swirling up and drifted dank and heavy through the bushes, so leaden, so sluggish. He carried on, indifferent, the way meant nothing to him, now up, now down. He felt no tiredness, just occasional regret that he couldn’t walk on his head. A surge swept through his breast.... [H]e stood there panting, his body bent forward, his eyes and mouth wide open, he thought he should draw the storm right into himself, embrace all things within his being, he spread and lay over the entire earth, he burrowed his way into the All, it was an ecstasy that hurt; or else he stopped and laid his head in the moss and half closed his eyes, then everything receded far away, the earth beneath him shrank, grew small like a wandering star and dipped into a roaring stream whose limpid depths stretched out beneath him.” (Ibid., 141-142)

One of the most enduring and scintillating sequences in “Lenz” is an exchange on the role of art between the poet Lenz, in one of his healthier phases, and his friend, Christoph Kaufmann. Büchner uses Lenz to propound his own view of art, which was clearly opposed to idealist and idealising conceptions:

“At table Lenz was back in good spirits, the topic was literature, he was in his element; the [German] idealist period was beginning at the time, Kaufmann was a keen supporter, Lenz was vehement in opposing it. Those writers, he argued, of whom it was said that they reflected reality in fact knew nothing whatever about it, but even they were a good deal more bearable than those who sought to *transfigure* reality. The dear Lord, he said, has surely made the world as it is meant to be, and I doubt if we can cobble up anything better, our one aspiration should be to create much as he did. What I demand in all things is—life, full scope for existence, nothing else really matters; we then have no need to ask whether something is ugly or beautiful, both are overridden by the conviction that ‘Everything created possesses life’, which is the sole criterion in matters of art. All the same, we meet it only rarely; we find it in Shakespeare, it speaks to us full-throated in folksongs, fitfully in Goethe.” (Ibid., 148-149) (See: In praise of George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* on its 150th anniversary)

Although Büchner’s “Lenz” remained a fragment, it is one of the most extraordinary examples of German narrative prose. The young Gerhart Hauptmann was captivated by the text, as was the prominent German-Polish literary critic, Marcel Reich-Ranicki.

Strasbourg: Medicine, poetry and philosophy

While in Strasbourg, Büchner intensified his studies of philosophy and the natural sciences. The current Darmstadt exhibition includes an impressive display of scientific equipment and specimens from numerous contemporary experiments—experiments that led to major medical and general scientific breakthroughs in which Büchner was himself involved.

Toward the end of 1835, Büchner began an investigation into the nervous system of the barbel, a carp-like, freshwater fish. The following year, he was invited by the Strasbourg natural sciences association to deliver a series of three talks, in French, regarding the nervous system of the river barbel. As a result, he was nominated for membership in this association.

In July 1836, at the age of 23, he submitted his dissertation, entitled “Mémoire sur le système nerveux du barbeau (Cyprinus Barbus L.) [Dissertation on the Nervous System of the Barbel]”, to the Philosophy Faculty of Zurich University, which awarded him (in absentia) the title Doctor of Philosophy on September 3 of that year. The following November, after delivering a “trial lecture” on the subject of cranial nervous systems (“On Cranial Nerves”), Zurich University gave him the position of associate professor.

Georg Büchner’s research into the central nervous system was path-breaking in its time, and its results remain valid today, even though it has been expanded upon, of course, in the light of further scientific discoveries. The Darmstadt exhibition includes a video illustrating the discoveries made by Büchner.

Alongside his successful academic activities, Büchner continued to write for publication. He had already begun a new project—the drama *Woyzeck*, a play he was never able to complete. A fragment was first published in 1877, in the Berlin magazine *Mehr Licht (More Light)*.

Although only pieces survive, *Woyzeck* is unquestionably one of the most important plays in German and world theatre. Despite its not being published until long after Büchner’s death, and then only in part, it is today one of the most frequently performed German dramas.

The numerous original drafts of the play are nearly illegible. Even Büchner’s brother Ludwig was unable to decipher the handwriting and decided to leave *Woyzeck* out of the posthumous collection he made of Büchner’s works.

Not until the late 1870s did Austrian-born writer and publisher Karl Emil Franzos manage to make sense of the manuscripts and include his version of them in his edition of Büchner’s collected works. However, the play would not be performed on stage until 1913 in a production by a Munich theatre timed to commemorate Büchner’s hundredth birthday.

The drama consists of a number of separate scenes, whose sequence has been variously interpreted by different directors and theatres. Any division into acts is lacking.

Büchner was clearly attempting to express concretely in *Woyzeck* the theoretical ideas he had developed in the dialogues in “Lenz.” He was also driven by descriptions of contemporary crime reports, especially those concerning the case of Johann Christian Woyzeck, son of a wigmaker, who had stabbed a 46-year-old widow, Christiane Woost, to death in June 1821. The case attracted particular attention due to the controversy over whether the murderer had diminished criminal responsibility due to his disturbed mental state. The latter had reported hearing voices before stabbing the woman to death. Woyzeck was convicted of murder in August 1824.

What is it about *Woyzeck* that continues to fascinate us? The play is performed again and again, and also inspires film and television versions—for better or worse. For one thing, the play’s subject matter and themes are as meaningful today as they were in Büchner’s day. The media today carry accounts of such tragic crimes on a nearly daily basis, crimes in which social deprivation and misery are always implicated.

The soldier and barber Woyzeck is an oppressed, exploited creature, eventually driven by his circumstances to commit murder. The characters

are ordinary people, who express themselves authentically, often in incomplete sentences. They frequently slip into Hessian dialect; they sing local folk songs, which are still sung today. And Woyzeck’s loneliness and despair are expressed in part by the story a “Grandmother” tells a group of children, in an especially gloomy tone, recalling the tales of the Brothers Grimm. (“Once upon a time there was a poor child, had no father and no mother, everyone was dead and there was nobody left in all the world. Everyone dead, and the child went and cried both day and night....”)

In contrast, those standing above the poor express themselves bombastically, not showing the slightest understanding of or sympathy for the suffering of the lower classes. The Doctor, who spouts Latin and “philosophical” phrases, is depicted as especially cynical. Büchner exposes him as a cold-blooded idiot underneath his cloak of erudition. (“Nature! Woyzeck, mankind is free, in man individuality attains its most perfect expression as freedom. Can’t hold his water!... Have you eaten your peas, Woyzeck?”)

At the same time, the play is loaded with black humour and slapstick comedy, although the laughter often freezes in one’s throat.

Woyzeck is worried sick about how to support himself and his girl friend Marie, who has a child by him. He has to serve an army officer and this includes shaving the latter. The Officer makes fun of Woyzeck and reprimands him for having a child out of wedlock, “without the blessing of the church.” Woyzeck defends himself by pleading poverty. But this is not the only source of his unsettled mental condition. His beloved Marie, for whom and whose child Woyzeck would endure everything, allows herself to be seduced by a dashing Drum-Major. Woyzeck’s unhappiness drives him out of his mind, he loses control and stabs Marie in the breast with a knife.

Unhappily, Woyzeck has also been selected as guinea-pig for the reckless experimental testing of a “diet of peas” by a medical professor. In reality, an experiment just like that was conducted in Giessen by the chemist Justus von Liebig (1803-1873), to determine whether military costs could be reduced by replacing expensive meat with protein-rich vegetables. This actually led to some side effects such as hallucinations, loss of sphincter muscle control and the increased need to urinate, exactly the symptoms suffered by Büchner’s wretched Woyzeck.

Woyzeck’s murderous state thus arises from different factors. One is jealousy, which clearly triggers his psychotic breakdown. At the same time, that sensation is compounded by his experience of social oppression and humiliation, and, on top of all that, comes the inhuman imposition of the ridiculous “diet of peas.” Like Danton, Woyzeck cannot escape his destiny, but every scene makes clear his fate is entirely manmade. The final brief, tragic scenes of Marie’s murder and Woyzeck’s efforts to rid himself of the fatal knife are terrifying, unforgettable. (“Here it goes! [*He throws knife in the water.*] It’s sinking in the dark water like a stone! The moon’s like a bloody knife! Is the whole world going to give me away?”)

The most significant and enduring adaptation of *Woyzeck* is the opera composed by Alban Berg (1885-1935), written in 1922 and first performed in 1925. That the modernist Berg—who attended one of the first productions of the play in Vienna in May 1914 and immediately determined to base a work on it—entitled his opera *Wozzeck*, because Karl Emil Franzos had misread the play’s title in a virtually undecipherable 38-year-old manuscript, tells us something about the tortured fate of Büchner’s works.

The latest film adaptation of *Woyzeck* (there are at least 10), broadcast by Arte (the German-French television channel) in October, falls far short from many points of view. The television film is set in Berlin’s Wedding district. Director Nuran David Calis uses only portions of Büchner’s text. He depicts Woyzeck as a man who fails at everything he sets out to do, no matter how he tries.

As described in the *Berliner Zeitung*, this Woyzeck lives in a society “in which conditions are changing slowly: the Berlin underclass represents the

so-called ethnic majority, like Woyzeck. Above them are the Turkish migrants like the tambourine major and the captain, the former a local tout with his black Maserati, the latter taking over Woyzeck's pub and turning it into a Turkish restaurant, letting Woyzeck only work there as a kitchen help."

The television production fails miserably and is nowhere near a genuinely contemporary adaptation of Büchner's *Woyzeck* fragments. Instead, it dilutes them into a post-modern mish-mash, minimising all trace of Büchner's unmistakable and thoroughly worked-out portrayal of class conflict and the damage the latter inflicts upon humanity in general.

To be continued



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