

# German writer Georg Büchner: 200 years since his birth—Part 5

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*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 fifth and final 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 and Part four on January 15.*

## *Leonce and Lena*

*Woyzeck* was by no means the first example of Georg Büchner's remarkable talent for irony and biting satire. In the summer of 1836, he wrote a pointed send-up of court life, *Leonce and Lena*, for a competition sponsored by the Stuttgart book publishing firm of J.G. Cotta. Sadly, the piece was refused due to its late submission, and the manuscript was returned to Büchner unopened.

In his complex and somewhat dark comedy, Büchner leads his characters into an quasi-romantic dream world, letting them taste the pangs of world-weariness, melancholy, boredom and loneliness, before allowing them to be enticed back to earth using Shakespearean humour. Much of the latter is expressed through the ironic reasoning and amusing commentary (with a deeper, social-critical meaning) of a clown. Büchner, in this fashion, launches an assault on the oppressive and pathetic German aristocracy and its fawning courtiers and officials.

This is Valerio, the clown-attendant to Prince Leonce, in Act I, Scene 3 of *Leonce and Lena*: “So you’re to be king: what a laugh that’ll be! You’ll be able to swan around the countryside all day in your carriage ruining folks’ hats with the constant doffing; you’ll be able to reduce proper people into proper little soldiers as if that was the most natural thing in the world; you’ll be able to convert black frock-coats and white neckties into public servants; and then when you die all the mirror-bright buttons will go blue in the face and the bells will be tolled so much their ropes will part like rotten string. Won’t that be fun?!” (Georg Büchner, *Complete Plays, Lenz and Other Writings*, Penguin Books, 1993, p. 90)

The play makes a number of mocking references to the absurdity of the countless tiny German statelets, as well as the hollowness of official life. Valerio comments at one point (Act II, Scene 1), “We’ve already passed through a dozen principalities, half-a-dozen grand

duchies and a couple of kingdoms, at breakneck speed in half a day.” And a little later, he adds, “Can you beat it, we’re back at the border! This country’s like an onion: skin within skin within skin. Or like Chinese boxes: in the bigger boxes smaller boxes, in the smallest box—nothing.” (Ibid., 93)

This satire was neither published nor performed during Büchner's lifetime. *Leonce and Lena* was only published in 1842 and first performed in Munich in 1895, almost six decades after its author's death.

Tragically, Georg Büchner contracted typhus in January 1837 and died on February 19, while in exile in Zurich, at the age of only 23. It is impossible to determine what he could have accomplished as a writer, a scientist or even a political activist if he had lived longer. But what he did manage to achieve in his short, productive life was truly magnificent.

## Büchner's legacy

In his *Georg Büchner* (1985), critic Jan-Christoph Hauschild established, contrary perhaps to popular belief, that following his untimely death Büchner was never *entirely* forgotten or neglected, even though his work did not reach a wide audience for much of the nineteenth century.

Wider recognition of Büchner's importance began with the publication of his collected works by Karl Emil Franzos at the end of the 1870s. Intriguingly, the great Marxist Franz Mehring (1846-1919) in *The History of German Social Democracy* (1897) featured a comprehensive description of the uprising in Hesse, including the role played by Büchner and his pamphlet, *The Hessian Messenger*.

Mehring wrote: “Büchner was possessed of an extraordinarily precocious mind; not only was he a freethinker in terms of religion, but, which is actually far more significant, also possessed greater clarity of political understanding than any of his political contemporaries.... In contrast to the utopians of the time, he had a superior understanding of the French Revolution; from this he developed his conviction that despotism could only be overturned through violent means, but also that any attempt at political revolution without the corresponding material foundations, without the necessary support of the broad masses, was bound to fail.”

Mehring, a brilliantly insightful critic, described Büchner's *Danton's Death* as a “mighty poetic piece...which, in a kaleidoscope of scenes, reveals the full extent of the horrific rule of the ruling class.”

[1]

Reviewing a new compilation of Büchner's work edited by Paul Landau in 1909, he wrote in the socialist magazine *Die Neue Zeit* (*The New Times*): "Büchner's poetic fragments can only be justly compared with Shakespeare and Byron, Goethe and Schiller; Büchner had more genius than [Christian Friedrich] Hebbel, and already embodied the essence of [Gerhart] Hauptmann, [Arno] Holz and [Johannes] Schlaf [German writers of the time]."

The founders of Berlin's famed *Freie Volksbühne* (the "Free People's Theatre," established in 1890) frequently proposed staging *Danton's Death*, but never succeeded in doing it. Playwright Frank Wedekind (*Spring Awakening*, 1890-1891) and, above all, naturalists like Hauptmann owed an immense debt to Büchner. Hauptmann was enthralled with "Lenz." His novel *Bahnwärter Thiel* (*Signalman Thiel*, 1888), and many of his theatrical works are scarcely thinkable without Büchner's influence. As Hauptmann writes in his memoirs, Franzos's edition of Büchner's collected works were widely discussed in literary circles in Berlin.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Büchner's plays began to conquer the theatrical world and have deservedly never left it since.

The literature critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki writes bluntly in the foreword to his *Mein Büchner* (*My Büchner*): "Modern German literature begins with Büchner. His works pioneered...epic theatre, surrealist theatre and the theatre of realism. Büchner leads to Gerhart Hauptmann, Frank Wedekind, Ödon von Horváth and ultimately to Franz Kafka and Bertolt Brecht."

One of the surest indicators that Büchner's works have lost none of their relevance and power is their still disputed presence in history and literary history. Some portray the writer as a pessimistic and disillusioned opponent of revolution; others celebrate Büchner as a precursor of the German revolution of 1848 and the *Communist Manifesto*.

One of the most recent (and most frequently media-acclaimed) of his biographers, critic Hermann Kurzke, depicts Büchner as a sort of devout Christian and his entire work the expression of the Christian principle of love-thy-neighbour. The profound impression made upon Büchner by his political experiences, according to this view, did nothing but plunge him into deep disappointment. Kurzke considers Büchner's revolutionary pamphlet, *The Hessian Messenger*, to be devoid of serious political analysis or even rationality, and writes that Büchner was "more of a social romantic than a social revolutionary." (2)

However, whoever reads *The Hessian Messenger* and studies the events of the time seriously and objectively will be obliged to draw a different conclusion.

In 1836, for example, only a year before his death, Büchner wrote to Karl Gutzkow, at the time of the latter's release from jail, that he had "become convinced that the educated and prosperous minority, whilst keen to wrest concessions for itself from those holding power, will never be willing to give up its own barbed relationship to the great mass of the people.... I believe that in social matters one must start from an absolute principle of justice, seek the development of a new life and spirit in the people, and let the decrepit society of today go to the devil." (Georg Büchner, *Complete Plays, Lenz and Other Writings*, Penguin Books, 1993, pp. 204-205)

This is *more than a decade* before Karl Marx's renowned "Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League" (1850), in which Marx noted that "The democratic petty bourgeois, far from wanting to transform the whole society in the interests of the revolutionary

proletarians, only aspire to a change in social conditions which will make the existing society as tolerable and comfortable for themselves as possible."

In the end, as we have already noted, one can only speculate as to how Büchner would have developed had he not died so young. He certainly had not reached the heights of his intellectual and political potential. He died in times when German cultural life was undergoing a period of rapid revolutionary change.

Four years after Büchner's death, Ludwig Feuerbach's first major materialist work, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841, translated into English by George Eliot), was published, the liberating impact of which was described by numerous commentators, including Friedrich Engels. In his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Engels wrote about the publication of Feuerbach's work, "Enthusiasm was general; we all became at once Feuerbachians."

And 11 years after Büchner's death—he would then have been only 34—Marx and Engels published their *Communist Manifesto*, after breaking conclusively with the Young Hegelians and Feuerbach himself.

Büchner was an innovative and immortal artist, who demonstrated *in practice* that the most vexing problems of modern society, including the conditions of the broad mass of the people, were entirely legitimate subjects for drama and poetry—in fact, were the most appropriate *and inescapable* subjects for modern drama and poetry.

Büchner also helped instigate and participated in the social-revolutionary process that resulted in raising human thinking and social analysis to new heights and ultimately laying the foundations for the modern socialist workers' movement.

A new historical-critical edition of Büchner's collected works by a team of literary historians from the University of Marburg, despite the apparently limited material, takes up 18 substantial volumes. This edition ensures that many of Büchner's fragmentary writings, original material and letters written by him and to him, as well as his scientific efforts, will be available for future study. The Marburg collected works offer insight not only into the significance of Büchner for his own times, but also his immense relevance for ours. (3)

Notes:

[1] Translated from Franz Mehring, *Geschichte der deutschen Sozialdemokratie*, (*The History of German Social Democracy*), Vol. I, Berlin 1980.

[2] Hermann Kurzke: *Georg Büchner. Geschichte eines Genies*, München 2013.

[3]

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*Concluded*



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