

MAURICE B. BENN

The Drama of **REVOLT**

A Critical Study of
Georg Büchner



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A CRITICAL STUDY OF GEORG BÜCHNER

MAURICE B. BENN

*Formerly Associate Professor of German in the
University of Western Australia*



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M.B.B.

1975

The editors and publishers of *Anglica Germanica* record with regret that Maurice Benn died while this book was in the press, on 31 May 1975. This book is therefore the memorial of a distinguished Germanist.

NOTE

Throughout this book Büchner's writings have been quoted from the edition by Werner R. Lehmann, *Georg Büchner, Sämtliche Werke und Briefe* (Christian Wegner Verlag, Hamburg; vol. 1, 1967, vol. 2, 1971).

PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

I was delighted to learn that this book will be appearing in a paperback edition. This means that it will now be easier for students of literature and drama to own a book which will, I hope, become a valuable companion in their studies.

I also hope that its readers will come to share the author's great admiration and enthusiasm for Georg Büchner. I could think of no better response to Maurice Benn's last work.

February 1978

Irene Benn

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- I *Christ at Emmaus*, by Carel von Savoy (Reproduced by permission of the Director of the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt)
- II Rolf Boysen as Danton, Louise Martini as Marion (Reproduced by permission of the photographer, Rosemarie Clausen)
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- IV Wolfgang Reinbacher as Woyzeck, Elisabeth Endriss as Marie (Reproduced by permission of Elisabeth Endriss and the photographer, Daisy Steinbeck)

1. INTRODUCTION

Many of the world's finest artists, including even some of the great tragic dramatists – Sophocles, Shakespeare, Racine – seem to set out from a position of acquiescence in the spirit of their times, from an acceptance of the institutions, customs and beliefs of their society. They are content at first to express themselves in the established artistic forms of their age, and the innovations they effect, whether in ideas or in artistic techniques, emerge gradually in the course of an organic development. But there are others who are rebels from the beginning, who are antagonized from the very outset by what they feel to be false, cruel or absurd in society, art, religion, the whole condition of mankind. Georg Büchner is one of the most distinguished of these artists in revolt. He is a rebel, first of all, in a political sense, for a brief but significant period deeply and dangerously involved in a conspiracy to overthrow the government of his country. But he is equally a rebel in all the other spheres of his activity, in his philosophical speculations, in his aesthetic theories, in his practice as a dramatist.¹

This does not mean that his work is purely negative and destructive. Revolt implies positive values which the rebel seeks to vindicate even if he is not fully conscious of them, even if he only becomes aware of them in the moment of their violation. And Büchner's many-sided activity will accordingly be found to have its positive as well as its negative aspects. In each of its spheres that activity conforms broadly to the same pattern: falsehood is rejected for the sake of truth, evil for the sake of good. But the truth and good upheld are not independent of the falsehood and evil combated but are to some extent conditioned by these. And the initial movement of thought and action is negative rather than positive: there is a much more immediate awareness of what must be rejected than of what might possibly be accepted.

A brief comparison with Hölderlin may help to clarify Büchner's attitude. In a sense Hölderlin too was a rebel. We know how strongly he sympathized with the French Revolution; and two

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of his major works, *Hyperion* and *Empedokles*, are centrally concerned with revolution and revolt, the former with the revolt of the Greeks against the Turks, the latter with the revolutionary renewal of the city-state of Agrigentum. But Hölderlin, as befits a hymnic poet, is essentially a poet of praise ('Beruf ist mirs, zu rühmen Höhers').² His whole life and thought are governed by a vision of ideal beauty, and his poetry dwells long and lovingly on that vision. In his elegiac poetry he is concerned to keep alive the memory of it, in his hymnic poetry to prophesy its recurrence. If he can fall into despair it is because he sometimes loses sight of it. If he is moved to revolt it is because the reality of his time negates it. But always that highly positive vision remains the beginning and end of his aspirations. With Büchner it is quite otherwise. Büchner never lets his thoughts dwell on an ideal vision. It is characteristic of him to set out from a repellent reality and only with difficulty, fitfully and imperfectly, to descry the beauty that may possibly emerge from it. His deepest experience is not the enthusiasm for beauty but the pitying insight into suffering. He is not a poet of praise but a poet of revolt.

Evidently both attitudes have their positive and negative aspects; but in the one the positive give rise to the negative, in the other the negative to the positive. And this difference involves characteristic differences of emphasis, of approach, of style and tone.

Of the two attitudes it is no doubt Büchner's rather than Hölderlin's that is most in accordance with twentieth-century habits of thought; and this may well be one of the reasons for the intense interest which Büchner continues to excite and the immense influence he has had upon contemporary drama. It is true that Albert Camus, the writer of the twentieth century who has most earnestly and methodically studied the phenomenon of metaphysical, political and aesthetic revolt, begins his *L'Homme révolté* with a quotation from Hölderlin and makes no mention whatever of Büchner. Camus had indeed much in common with Hölderlin: the striving for measure and moderation, the sense of loyalty to the earth, the enthusiasm for Greece, 'la pensée

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solaire'. But Camus's thought is nevertheless more deeply akin to Büchner's than to Hölderlin's. Both in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and in *L'Homme révolté* Camus sets out from the experience of the absurdity, cruelty and injustice of the world and seeks to arrive at positive values by an analysis of the revolt which that experience may excite or imply.³ His analysis will provide us with a number of useful insights in the following study of Büchner's revolt. But there will be no need to accept all of Camus's theses nor to make Büchner conform to any preconceived pattern. It must be our task simply to investigate the phenomenon of revolt as we find it in Büchner's life and work, to pursue the investigation freely wherever it may lead, and to see how far it will take us in the interpretation of his plays.

2. POLITICAL REVOLT

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BÜCHNER'S POLITICAL PRINCIPLES

Büchner was a scientist, and his scientific habit of thought largely determined his views even in matters which are not usually regarded as scientific. A tendency to revolt is inherent in modern science in so far as it depends on scepticism, the questioning of authority, the determination to rely entirely on exact observation and demonstration; and it is not surprising that Büchner, with his early and thorough training in medicine and biology, should have been imbued with this scientific scepticism and should have evinced it persistently in every field of his intellectual activity. This was well expressed by Karl Gutzkow on hearing of Büchner's later decision to abandon medicine:

It appears you want to forsake medicine, and I am told your father will not be pleased. Don't be unjust to this discipline, for I believe you owe to it your greatest strength, I mean your extraordinary freedom from prejudices and prepossessions, I might almost say: your autopsy, which is evident in everything you write. If you approach the German philosophers so unceremoniously the effect will certainly be novel.¹

This 'autopsy', this scientific insistence on seeing and thinking for oneself, might well have been sufficient, when applied to politics in the Germany of the 1830s, to incline Büchner to radicalism. It might well have disposed him to question the justifiability, the endurability of the established political order in Hesse, even if the general atmosphere of the time had been less favourable to revolutionary tendencies. In fact these tendencies were very strong in a Germany politically dominated by the policies of Metternich and economically depressed by agricultural failures and oppressive taxation. The tradition of the French Revolution was still influential, especially in the Grand-Duchy of Hesse which in 1813 had fought on the side of Napoleon. Büchner's father had been a physician with the Dutch troops in

Napoleon's army, and though of a cautious disposition and in later life increasingly conservative, still took a lively interest in the Revolution during Georg's boyhood. According to Georg's brother Wilhelm, his father

had the greatest sympathy with the progressive movement, and among the reading he most enjoyed was the periodical *Unsere Zeit* by which he could repeat and supplement the events he had earlier witnessed and lived through. It was often read in the evenings and we all followed it with the liveliest interest. A very free spirit prevailed in our family, and it is quite possible that these readings had a particular influence on Georg and may well have been the origin of *Dantons Tod*.²

These early political interests were of course intensified by the insurrection in Paris of July 1830, which spread waves of revolutionary excitement throughout Europe.

It was about this time, towards the end of his attendance at the Darmstadt *Gymnasium*, that Büchner wrote the school essays and orations which are the earliest expressions we have of his political sentiments. They show him to be already an enthusiastic champion of the principles of the French Revolution, which he glorifies with a romantic idealism akin to that of Fichte or the youthful Schiller. In a speech delivered in the *Gymnasium* on 29 September 1830 he undertakes to justify the suicide of Cato and seizes the opportunity to express an enthusiasm for freedom worthy of Schiller's Marquis Posa:

Den Fall seines Vaterlandes hätte *Kato* überleben können, wenn er ein Asyl für die andre Göttin seines Lebens, für die *Freiheit*, gefunden hätte. *Er fand es nicht*. Der Weltball lag in Roms Banden, alle Völker waren Sklaven, frei allein der Römer. Doch als auch dieser endlich seinem Geschicke erlag, als das Heiligthum der Gesetze zerrissen, als der Altar der Freiheit zerstört war, da war *Kato* der *einzigste* unter Millionen, der *einzigste* unter den Bewohnern einer Welt, der sich das Schwert in die Brust stieß, um unter Sklaven nicht leben zu müssen; denn Sklaven waren die Römer, sie mochten in goldnen oder ehernen Fesseln liegen – sie waren *gefesselt* . . . *Und war auch Rom der Freiheit nicht werth, so war doch die Freiheit selbst werth, daß Kato für sie lebte und starb.* (2, 29)

Together with the zeal for liberty, there is the idealistic hero-worship to which Cato appears as 'the representative of Roman greatness, the last of a bygone race of heroes, the greatest man of his time', his name a synonym for stoical Roman virtue, his

suicide a monument in the hearts of men, triumphing over death and corruption, standing immovable amidst the weltering stream of eternity. The rather high-flown eloquence of the young Büchner's style is still far removed from his later sardonic curt-ness, yet there is already a sincerity and resonance in it which make the speech something more than a mere academic exercise.

In another product of this early period, the essay 'Heldentod der vierhundert Pforzheimer', Büchner for the first time refers directly to the great French Revolution, and he makes no secret of his sympathy with it. He sees it as the bloody but just war of extermination which avenged the centuries of atrocities that shameful tyrants had inflicted on their subjects, and in words that anticipate Marx's dictum 'revolutions are the locomotives of history' asserts that the French 'war of liberation' had advanced the development of mankind by more than a century.

The chief claim to glory that he can concede to Germany, the only consideration that enables him to say with pride 'I am a German', is the fact that the German Reformation had made possible the French Revolution, that in the great struggle of mankind against its oppressors the Reformation had been the first Act, just as the Revolution was the second:

sowie einmal der Gedanke in keine Fesseln mehr geschlagen war, erkannte die Menschheit ihre Rechte und ihren Werth und alle Verbesserungen, die wir jetzt genießen sind die Folgen der Reformation, ohne welche die Welt eine ganz andre Gestalt würde erhalten haben, ohne welche, wo jetzt das Licht der Aufklärung strahlt, ewiges Dunkel herrschen würde, ohne welche das Menschengeschlecht, das sich jetzt zu immer freieren, zu immer erhabneren Gedanken erhebt, dem Thiere gleich, seiner Menschen-Würde verlustig seyn würde. (2, 9)

Fichte, in his *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (VII), had maintained that it was the distinguishing mark of a German to believe in an 'infinite capability of improvement, an eternal progress of our race'.³ It is evident that the young Büchner fully shares this 'German' conviction. No less than Fichte, Hegel and so many other Germans in the period of romanticism and idealism he thinks of history as a grand development towards an ever greater degree of enlightenment, an ever higher state of spiritual and

intellectual freedom. And as he shares Fichte's and the idealists' belief in progress, so the expressions *Franken* for 'French', *teutsch* for 'German' suggest that he is also influenced by the inflamed nationalism of Fichte, Arndt, Jahn and other romantic patriots.

There is clearly an element of conformity in Büchner's early political views. He has not yet attained an independent position, but is being carried along by the great tide of revolutionary sentiment that was sweeping through the Europe and Germany of his time. As he approaches maturity his revolutionary spirit becomes much more critical and corrosive, and the idealistic form of political opposition to which he himself had formerly adhered becomes a prime object of his attack. The change becomes evident during his first period in Strasbourg, where he was studying medicine. We hear of his being a regular visitor to the students' club 'Eugenia' and of his speaking at the session of 24 May 1832 'in rather too glaring colours about the corruption of the German governments and the brutality of the students at many Universities, especially Giessen and Heidelberg'.⁴ We also know that in the course of 1833 he must have had occasion to observe the activities of the Strasbourg branch of the conspiratorial revolutionary organization *Société des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*.⁵ But the revision of his political views and the rejection of his earlier idealistic assumptions seem to have been induced above all by his observations and reflections on the Frankfort putsch of 3 April 1833. On that day some fifty conspirators, including a number of students, attempted to storm the military guardhouses in Frankfort, hoping thereby to start a revolution that would spread over all Germany. A few of the insurrectionists and of the soldiers were killed, there followed many arrests and intensified measures of repression against the universities. But the population as a whole remained completely unmoved. The hoped-for revolution did not occur. Replying to his anxious parents, who suspected him of complicity in the Frankfort plot, Büchner sought to allay their fears, but expressed full approval in principle of the use of force in the struggle against absolutism:

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Meine Meinung ist die: Wenn in unserer Zeit etwas helfen soll, so ist es *Gewalt*. Wir wissen, was wir von unseren Fürsten zu erwarten haben. Alles, was sie bewilligten, wurde ihnen durch die Nothwendigkeit abgezwungen . . . Man wirft den jungen Leuten den Gebrauch der Gewalt vor. Sind wir denn aber nicht in einem ewigen Gewaltzustand? Weil wir im Kerker geboren und großgezogen sind, merken wir nicht mehr, daß wir im Loch stecken mit angeschmiedeten Händen und Füßen und einem Knebel im Munde. Was nennt Ihr denn *gesetzlichen Zustand*? Ein Gesetz, das die große Masse der Staatsbürger zum frohnenden Vieh macht, um die unnatürlichen Bedürfnisse einer unbedeutenden und verdorbenen Minderzahl zu befriedigen? Und dies Gesetz, unterstützt durch eine rohe Militärgewalt und durch die dumme Pffiffigkeit seiner Agenten, dies Gesetz ist eine ewige, rohe Gewalt, angethan dem Recht und der gesunden Vernunft, und ich werde mit *Mund* und *Hand* dagegen kämpfen, wo ich kann. Wenn ich an dem, was geschehen, keinen Theil genommen und an dem, was vielleicht geschieht, *keinen Theil* nehmen werde, so geschieht es weder aus Mißbilligung, noch aus Furcht, sondern nur weil ich im gegewärtigen Zeitpunkt jede revolutionäre Bewegung als eine vergebliche Unternehmung betrachte und nicht die Verblendung Derer theile, welche in den Deutschen ein zum Kampf für sein Recht bereites Volk sehen.

(*An die Familie*, Straßburg, den 5. April 1833, 2, 416)

Almost the whole of Büchner's mature political creed is contained explicitly or implicitly in this letter. There is already the anticipation of the Marxist view that the State, the law, the armed forces, are merely the instruments by which a corrupt ruling class secures its supremacy and reduces the masses of the people to the condition of beasts of burden; and to Büchner, with his strongly developed sense of pity and justice, this state of affairs is intolerable. He can see no possibility of peaceful reform. The constitutions which had been granted in some of the German states, including Hesse-Darmstadt, constitutions carefully insulated against democracy by a complex system of indirect voting and a narrowly limited franchise, seem to him simply absurd; and the path of legal reform being thus closed, he can only advocate the resort to force. A few years before Ludwig Börne had argued similarly:

Moderation is only regarded as weakness, which provokes arrogance, and respect for the law as stupidity, which provokes trickery . . . Sword against sword . . . force must decide. You may conquer us, but you will no longer deceive us.⁶

And Theodor Schuster was soon to exclaim: 'You won't hear of social reform. Then bow to social revolution!'⁷

Büchner was evidently not alone in feeling that nothing would

avail in his time except force. But in adopting this view he was abandoning the tradition of German idealism to which he had adhered in his boyhood. To the classical Goethe and Schiller, with their concern for culture, their trust in the gradual education and refinement of society, their hope for political reforms voluntarily conceded by the ruling élite, nothing could be more abhorrent than violent insurrection. And to Hegel, with his mystical view of the State as 'the realization of freedom', as 'the progress of God in the world',⁸ Büchner's view of it as a vast instrument of oppression hypocritically condemning violence while actually subjecting the people to perpetual coercion, would have been equally unacceptable.

So far Büchner agrees in principle with the Frankfort insurrectionists; and he is prepared, like them, to struggle against despotism with all the means at his disposal. But in one respect he differs from them: he cannot share the view they had held that the German people was ripe for revolution. And it is on this question—the question of the role of the people in a possible revolution, the degree of their preparedness and the means by which their active participation might be ensured—that his reflections are now evidently concentrated. For he returns to this problem in a letter written some two months after the Frankfort affair:

Ich werde zwar immer meinen Grundsätzen gemäß handeln, habe aber in *neuerer* Zeit gelernt, daß nur das nothwendige Bedürfniß der großen Masse Umänderungen herbeiführen kann, daß alles Bewegen und Schreien der *Einzelnen* vergebliches Thorenwerk ist. Sie schreiben, man liest sie nicht; sie schreien, man hört sie nicht; sie handeln, man hilft ihnen nicht.—Ihr könnt voraussehen, daß ich mich in die Gießener Winkelpolitik und revolutionären Kinderstreiche nicht einlassen werde. (*An die Familie*, Straßburg, im Juni 1833, 2, 418)

The Frankfort putsch having miscarried owing to its failure to gain the support of the people, Büchner draws the obvious conclusion that any future rising will be equally unsuccessful unless the involvement of the people can be secured. It was useless, as he later explained to August Becker, to pit a handful of undisciplined liberals against the well-equipped armies of the

German governments. A revolution can only be carried out by the masses of the people, who by sheer weight of numbers must overwhelm and crush the military.⁹ But – and this is the new insight which Büchner had gained and to which he henceforth steadfastly adhered – it was only ‘the essential needs’ of the masses that could possibly move them to revolutionary action. They were concerned only about their material interests, and indeed could not afford to be concerned about anything else. ‘With all our prejudice in their favour’, Becker reports Büchner as saying, ‘we must admit that they have acquired a rather ignoble outlook and are accessible to almost nothing but what concerns their pocket.’¹⁰ Ignoble or not, it was a very intelligible attitude, and Büchner could not refuse it his sympathy: ‘the material pressure’, he told Becker, ‘under which a great part of Germany was suffering, was just as sad and disgraceful as the intellectual pressure; and the fact that this or that liberal was not free to publish his thoughts wasn’t nearly so deplorable in his eyes as the fact that many thousands of families didn’t have the wherewithal to grease their potatoes.’¹¹

The revolution which Büchner envisaged was therefore primarily a social revolution and only secondarily a political one. And he was led by the logic of his position to adopt a revolutionary strategy which, if not entirely new for France, was certainly new for Germany. Recognizing the exclusive preoccupation of the people with their economic needs, Büchner perceived the futility of a revolutionary propaganda which canvassed political and constitutional questions – freedom of the press, the ordinances of the Federal Diet, the Vienna Congress, etc. – which could be of no immediate concern to the masses, least of all to the peasantry which constituted the overwhelming majority of Hesse’s population. For the same reason he later commented derisively on the writers of Young Germany, who imagined they could decisively influence the course of events by means of journalism and *belles lettres* addressed to the educated classes of society:

Die Gesellschaft mittelst der *Idee*, von der *gebildeten* Klasse aus reformieren?
Unmöglich! Unsere Zeit ist rein *materiell*, wären Sie je directer politisch zu Werk