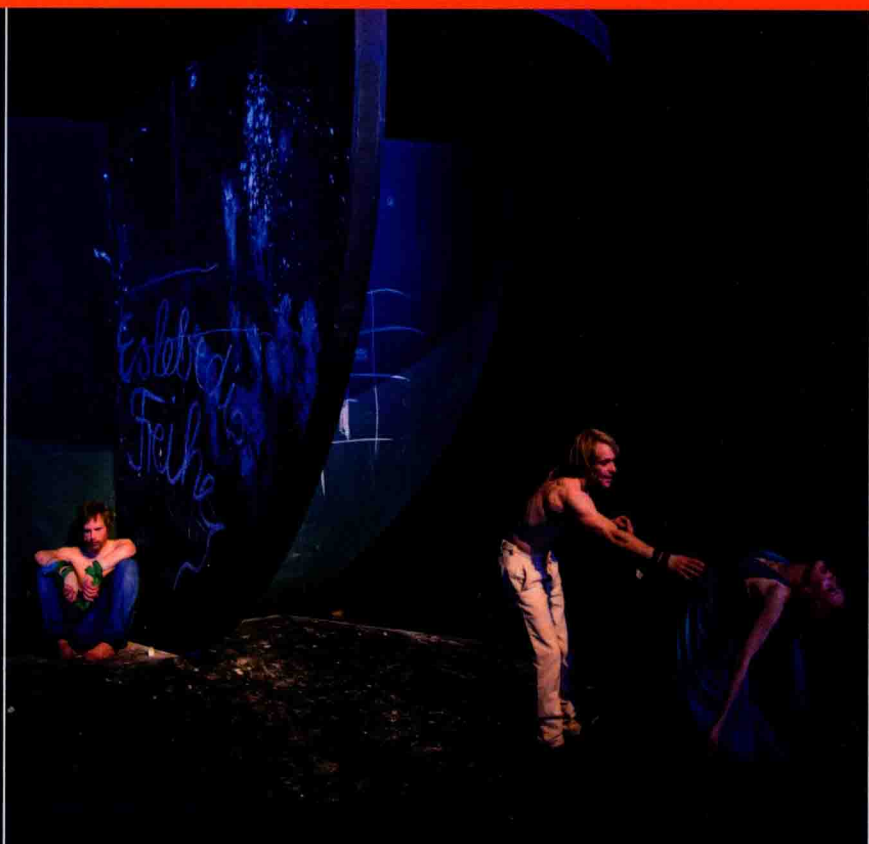




Georg Büchner

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

Edited by

Robert Gillett

Ernest Schonfield

Daniel Steuer

BRILL | RODOP

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Georg Büchner

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Auf Büchners Schneide

Den Weltrand als Schleifstein: dort, W. beim Schärfen
von Messer und Zunge ertappt. Maries Schrei erfror.
Schmal: Mund und Gelenke; Steckbriefe als Fächer.
Dem Wort ein Tribunal; Guillotinen als Spielzeug.
Kirchweih ist's, Kirchweih ist's, trällert ein Gnom.

Stunden holpern durch die Nacht, ein Engel lacht;
singt in den Vogesen einer. Sie haben, schreit er dann,
die Liebe hingerichtet, die Schatten gehenkt,
auf Gespenster angelegt. Ein Schimmel scheut.
Ein Pfarrer segnet Gewehre; im Brunnen ertrinkt seine Bibel.

Samiel hält die Zecher frei mit Kopfgeld und geigt dazu
auf Nervensträngen. Die Fürstin bietet auf dem Markt sich feil.
Harlekin sagt einen Ball an, erfindet Gäste, stellt sie vor:
Andres und Rosetta, Lucile und Julie: die Orgie beginnt.
Und einer singt: Wenn mán ihn fände, den Garten der Nymphe.

Im Münster opfern sie Glocken auf dem Altar. Zu spät,
ruft eine aus dem Dunkel, zu spät: wir sind nicht mehr.
Brückenköpfe werden rollen, Schanzen sinken, Deiche bersten.
Wer ist wem noch Bruder? Mein lieb' Kind, werd' babylonisch,
gewähr mir Einblick in dich, damit ich nicht nur Fisch' und Frösch'

präparier'. Spür' für mich auf, was drüben in den Schatten gärt.
Du weißt, auf Stammbuchmoral in Himmelblau versteh ich
mich nicht; sei einfach mein lieb' Kind und küß deine Knie von mir;
maskieren wir uns jetzt
und lassen die Herzen nackt sein.

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List of Abbreviations

- GB I/II* *Georg Büchner I/II*, ed. by Heinz Ludwig Arnold (Munich: text + kritik, 1979) (Sonderband aus der Reihe text + kritik)
- GBJb* *Georg Büchner Jahrbuch*
- MA* *Georg Büchner, Werke und Briefe. Münchner Ausgabe*, ed. by Karl Pörnbacher, Gerhard Schaub, Hans-Joachim Simm and Edda Ziegler (Munich: Carl Hanser / Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988)
- MBA* *Georg Büchner, Sämtliche Werke und Schriften. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe mit Quellendokumentation und Kommentar*, 18 vols. (Marburger Ausgabe), ed. by Burghard Dedner and Thomas Michael Mayer (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001–2013)
- P I, P II* *Georg Büchner, Sämtliche Werke, Briefe und Dokumente*, 2 vols., ed. by Henri Poschmann with Rosemarie Poschmann. Vol. 1: *Dichtungen*. Vol. 2: *Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente* (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1992) (Bibliothek deutscher Klassiker 84 and 169)
- SBA* *Georg Büchner, Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. by Ariane Martin (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2012)
- TMW* *Georg Büchner: The Major Works*, ed. by Matthew Wilson Smith, trans. by Henry J. Schmidt (New York: Norton, 2012)

List of Figures

- 9.1 'Gebustetes' Wahlplakat aus dem Jahr 2013 (http://urbanshit.de/bilder_urbanshit/2013/08/via-Regina.jpg, 30. September 2016) 155
- 9.2 Protestaktion der NGO Oxfam anlässlich des G-8-Gipfels 2013 am Lough Erne (oxfam.de, © Andrew Aitchison / IF, 18. August 2016) 171
- 10.1 Screenshot from Andrzej Wajda's film *Danton* (1983). The executioner shows Danton's cut-off head. 176
- 17.1 Der einundzwanzigjährige Georg Büchner, gezeichnet von August Hoffmann, vermutlich Anfang 1834 (Foto: Heinrich-Heine-Institut Düsseldorf) 298
- 17.2 Der zwanzigjährige Georg Büchner in einer Skizze von Alexis Muston, 1833 (Foto: Heinrich-Heine-Institut Düsseldorf) 300
- 17.3 Der zwanzigjährige Georg Büchner in einer Bleistiftzeichnung von Alexis Muston, 1833 (Foto: Heinrich-Heine-Institut Düsseldorf) 301
- 17.4 Junger Sänger im Kostüm: Ist er ein Bruder des Künstlers? Zeichnung von August Hoffmann, 1833 (Foto: Institut Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt) 312
- 18.1 Walter Gramatté, *Lenz* I (Radierung, 1925); Georg Büchner, *Lenz. Ein Fragment*, mit zwölf Radierungen von Walter Gramatté (Hamburg: Werkstatt Lerchenfeld, 1925); im Besitz des Verfassers 324
- 18.2 Toyen, *Básník Lenz* (Zeichnung, 1942); Georg Buechner [sic], *Básník Lenz*, přeložil z němčiny Miroslav Drápal, illustre: Toyen (Praha: J. Podroužek, 1942), S. 27; im Besitz des Verfassers. © Bildrecht, Wien, 2016 326
- 18.3 Gunter Böhmer, *Lenz* (Zeichnung, 1942); Georg Büchner, *Lenz. Ein Fragment*, Zeichnungen von Gunter Böhmer (St. Gallen: Tschudy, 1942), S. 9; im Besitz des Verfassers. Abdruck mit freundlicher Genehmigung der Stiftung Ursula und Gunter Böhmer 327
- 18.4 Hubertus von Pilgrim, *Zu Büchners Lenz* (Kupferstich, 1974); im Besitz des Verfassers. Abdruck mit freundlicher Genehmigung des Künstlers 328
- 18.5 Susanne Theumer, *Lenz* I (Radierung, 2002); Georg Büchner, *Lenz*, Textauszüge mit Originalradierungen von Susanne Theumer (Halle/Saale, Hohnstedt: Druckgrafische Werkstätten der Hochschule für Kunst und Design Burg Giebichenstein, 2004); im Besitz der Künstlerin. © Bildrecht, Wien, 2016 329
- 18.6 Bruce Waldman, *Lenz* (Zeichnung, 1984); Georg Büchner, *Werke*, illustriert von Bruce Waldman (Ottobrunn bei München: Franklin Bibliothek, 1984), S. 97; im Besitz des Verfassers. Abdruck mit freundlicher Genehmigung des Künstlers 330
- 18.7 Anton Watzl, *Lenz* (Holzschnitt, 1982); Georg Büchner, *Lenz*, mit dreizehn Original-Holzschnitten von Anton Watzl (Neu-Isenburg: Edition Tiessen,

- 1982), S. 2; im Besitz des Verfassers. Abdruck mit freundlicher Genehmigung von Wolfgang Tiessen 331
- 18.8 Walter Gramatté, *Großer Kopf Wozzecks, restlos verzweifelt* (Radierung, 1925); Museum Folkwang, Essen, Inv. A 89/68. © Museum Folkwang, Essen 335
- 18.9 Rafaello Busoni, *Woyzeck* (Federzeichnung, 1925); Georg Büchner, *Woyzeck. Eine Tragödie*, mit 9 farbigen Steinzeichnungen und 17 Federzeichnungen von Rafaello Busoni (München: Georg Müller, 1923), zwischen S. 40 und 41 eingebunden; im Besitz des Verfassers 336
- 18.10 Paul Weißkopf, *Woyzeck v* (Radierung, 1921); Paul Weißkopf, *10 Lithographien zu Wozzeck von Georg Büchner*, mit Vorwort von Heinar Schilling (Dresden: Dresdner Verlag, 1921), Bl. 5; Deutsche Nationalbibliothek – Buch- und Schriftmuseum, Signatur: SC 210–10 337
- 18.11 Alfred Hrdlicka, *Woyzeck* (Pastellzeichnung, 1988); Georg Büchner, *Lenz. Erzählung*, mit Bildern von Alfred Hrdlicka und einem Essay von Theodor Scheufele (München: C.H. Beck, 1989), S. 41; im Besitz des Verfassers 337
- 18.12 Walo von May, *Danton's Tod* (Lithographie, 1914); Georg Büchner, *Dantons Tod*, mit Ur-Steindrucken von Walo von May (München: Hans v. Weber, 1916), S. 97; im Besitz des Verfassers 340
- 18.13 Ernst Stern, *Danton's Tod* (Federzeichnung, 1917); Georg Büchner, *Dantons Tod. Ein Drama*, mit 18 kolorierten Federzeichnungen nach der Aufführung des Deutschen Theaters zu Berlin von Ernst Stern (Berlin: Ernst Reiß, 1917), zwischen S. 90 und 91 eingebunden; im Besitz des Verfassers 341
- 18.14 Erich Wünsche, *Dantons Tod* xvi (Radierung, 1921); Erich Wünsche, *Zwanzig Radierungen zu Dantons Tod von Georg Büchner* (Dresden: Dresdner Verlag, 1921); Deutsche Nationalbibliothek – Buch- und Schriftmuseum, Signatur: SC 210–6 342
- 18.15 Leo Leonhard, *Danton's Tod* vi (Radierung, 1988); Leo Leonhard, *Künstlertagebuch zu Danton's Tod. Zeichnungen, Radierungen, Tagebuch*, mit einem Vorwort von Albrecht Dexler (Darmstadt: Roetherdruck, 1995), S. 44–46; im Besitz des Verfassers 343

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Introduction

Georg Büchner: In Our Time

17 October 1813

On the second day of the Battle of Leipzig, Georg Büchner is born in Goddelau. His first years see the final defeat of revolutionary France and the beginning of the restoration following the Vienna Congress in 1815. As a schoolboy, we are told, Büchner would use the greeting 'Bonjour Citoyen'.¹ But by the time he was an 18-year-old student and witnessed the arrival of the revolutionary general Girolamo Ramorino in Strasbourg on 4 December 1831, Büchner experienced the jubilant welcome by the people shouting 'Vivat!' as a comedy: 'die Comödie ist fertig...' (Letter, after 4 December 1831, *MBA* 10.1, p. 10). Five years later, in *Leonce und Lena*, the 'vivat' will become a conflation of 'vi' and 'vat', which the peasants are conditioned to repeat upon the arrival of Prince Popo and Princess Pipi.² Even within this short sequence, we have a transition from 'real' historical, autobiographical life into dramatic art. The arena of world history has become a stage on which automatons are played by flesh and blood characters, and flesh and blood characters behave like automatons: 'Diese Menschen sind so vollkommen gearbeitet, daß man sie von anderen Menschen gar nicht unterscheiden könnte, wenn man nicht wüßte, daß sie bloße Pappdeckel sind; man könnte sie eigentlich zu Mitgliedern der

1 See interview with Burghard Dedner, 'Büchner würde heute sicherlich vom Verfassungsschutz verfolgt werden', *Deutschlandradio Kultur*, 17 October 2013: http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/buechner-wuerde-heute-sicherlich-vom-verfassungsschutz.954.de.html?dram:article_id=265386 (accessed 18 October 2016).

2 Given that, earlier, Leonce had called Valerio 'ein schlechtes Wortspiel' ('a bad pun', *TMW*, p. 114), and Valerio retorted by calling Leonce 'ein Buch ohne Buchstaben, mit nichts als Gedankenstrichen' (I.3, *MBA* 6, p. 67) ('a book without letters, with nothing but dashes', *TMW*, p. 114), we may safely assume that the play on the phonetic consonance between the Latin syllables and the vernacular 'Wie' and 'Wat' was intended to point to linguistic form as an ideological emperor's new clothes. – 'So Herr Landrath, Sie sehen wie die Intelligenz im Steigen ist. Bedenken Sie, es ist Latein' (III.2, *MBA* 6, p. 85). ('There, Mr. Magistrate. You see how intelligence is on the upswing. Just think, it's *Latin*!', *TMW*, p. 124). Büchner, surely, would have been the last person to approve of empty rhetorical sophistication.

menschlichen Gesellschaft machen' (III.3, *MBA* 6, p. 91).³ – Is this a comedy? Is it a tragedy?

Having studied the French Revolution, Büchner will confide to his fiancée that he could not manage to write a single word:

Schon seit einigen Tagen nehme ich jeden Tag die Feder in die Hand, aber es war mir unmöglich, nur ein Wort zu schreiben. Ich studierte die Geschichte der Revolution. [...] Seit ich über die Rheinbrücke ging, bin ich wie in mir vernichtet, ein einzelnes Gefühl taucht nicht in mir auf. Ich bin ein Automat; die Seele ist mir genommen. (*MBA* 10.1, pp. 30–31)⁴

Left speechless and numb inside by history: no wonder Büchner appears a contemporary to us.

There can be no doubt that Büchner's sympathies are with the oppressed, exploited, and disadvantaged – those who in the 'Occupy' slogan are referred to as the 99%. Yet his relationship with Napoleon and the French Revolution is anything but unambiguous. The great paradox of political progress and the lives it cost – the freedom promised and the deaths caused – may also be at the heart of Büchner's active nihilism: 'Ich finde [...] in den menschlichen Verhältnissen eine unabwendbare Gewalt, Allen und Keinem verliehen. Der Einzelne nur Schaum auf der Welle' (*MBA* 10.1, p. 30).

The individual, he says here, is nothing but 'froth on the waves' of a human history whose 'ineluctable violence'⁵ is carried out by those whom the fatalism of the process happens to single out as agents of 'Das muß' (the 'must'): 'es muß ja Aergerniß kommen' (*MBA* 10.1, pp. 30–31).⁶ And yet act we must, knowing that even inaction is a form of action. Is the best we can do, then, to hope

3 *TMW*, p. 126: 'These persons are so perfectly constructed that one couldn't distinguish them from other people if one didn't know that they're simply cardboard; you could actually make them members of human society.'

4 *TMW*, pp. 185–86: 'Every moment for the last few days I pick up my pen, but I couldn't possibly write a single word. I studied the history of the Revolution. I felt as if I were crushed under the terrible fatalism of history. [...] Since I crossed the Rhine, I seem to be dead inside, not a single feeling comes to the surface. I'm an automaton; my soul has been removed.'

5 Georg Büchner, *Complete Plays, Lenz and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 195. In this case the Reddick translation is preferable to *TMW*.

6 Büchner, *Complete Plays, Lenz and Other Writings*, p. 196: 'it must needs be that offences come'. The reference, of course, is to Matthew 18:7, which Büchner quotes from Luther and Reddick from the King James version.

that it is not going to be our (in)action through which the 'offences' come, but rather that our words, our pamphlets, our gestures and decisions might help to counteract them? And hasn't any reference to morality become suspicious in itself? Büchner's figure Danton compares Robespierre's 'Tugend' ('virtue') to his shoe heels, implying that his morality is self-serving.⁷ In much the same spirit, contemporary audiences are increasingly suspicious of moral agendas and claims to moral superiority. To what degree is it possible to become used to blood without actually becoming a guillotine blade?⁸ What would we find if we followed today's 'Phrasen', the slogans and the rhetoric, 'bis zu dem Punkt wo sie verkörpert werden'? (*Danton's Tod*, 111.3; *MBA* 3.2, p. 53).⁹

If Georg Büchner had been born 150 years later, his work would more or less have coincided with the *Dokumentarliteratur* of the 1960s, of which Alexander Kluge's work may be considered a variant. In his speech upon receiving the Büchner Prize, Kluge speaks of the networks of books across the ages, and ends by mentioning the possibility that such connections – books, written and read – may be the key to a public sphere which we may all be working on without knowing it. Books, he says, are a godsend – not necessarily as 'literature', something that, in the strict sense, did not exist before Büchner's time, but as the communication of experience over space and time, as 'narration'. Büchner was a narrator who had an almost uncanny knack for reading the experience off written evidence and preserving it for a next stage of transmission, as well as for reading the sub-text off reality as it presents itself.

In his speech Kluge distinguishes two forms of radicality: that of Büchner's Lenz and that of Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas:

[Kohlhaas'] Eigensinn geht ganz nach Außen bis an den Galgen. Und er würde lieber (wie ein Terrorist) die Welt zerstören, als aufzugeben. Die Energie von Lenz bei Büchner geht nach Innen, bis der Mensch äußerlich still aussieht. Das ist die inwendige Zerstörung, zugleich die stärkste Ballung von Subjektivität. / Radikaler als diese Erzählungen können wir auch heute nicht schreiben. Büchners und Kleists Radikalität brauchen

7 1.6, *MBA* 3.2, p. 25: 'Nicht wahr Unbestechlicher, es ist grausam dir die Absätze so von den Schuhen zu treten?' The English translation by Henry J. Schmidt uses 'rug' instead of 'shoe heels'. Cf. *TMW*, p. 40: 'Isn't it cruel, Mr. Incorruptible, to pull the rug out from under you like this?'

8 Cf. *MBA* 10.1, p. 30: 'Aber ich bin kein Guillotinenmesser.' *TMW*, p. 186: 'But I am no guillotine blade.'

9 *TMW*, p. 61: 'Try following your rhetoric to the point where it becomes flesh and blood.'

wir aber, wenn wir versuchen, die veränderte (inflationierte) Wirklichkeit im Erzählraum unseres Jahrhunderts abzubilden.¹⁰

Kluge's speech was given on 25 October 2003.

17 October 2013

In the aftermath of the attack on the twin towers in New York, the Western world is embroiled in a 'war on terror'. The term 'security' magically legitimates practices that otherwise would have been deemed unconstitutional. The world wonders who is spying on whom, and for what purposes. The aftermath of the so-called 'Arab Spring' includes an internecine civil war in Syria, in which a plethora of other powers become involved, directly or vicariously, and which leads to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. The official recognition by the US congress of 'Gulf War Syndrome' draws attention to the physical and psychological damage done to ordinary soldiers in these and other conflicts. Not just marriages, but social relations in general are to a substantial degree performed by electronic proxy. Banks, which have been bailed out to the tune of billions in 2008, continue to operate without major changes, and the asymmetrical distribution of wealth accelerates due to a symbiotic relationship between governments and businesses, as state functions are re-defined as enterprises and increasingly outsourced to private corporations.¹¹

10 Kluge's speech can be found at <http://www.deutscheakademie.de/de/auszeichnungen/georg-buechner-preis/alexander-kluge/dankrede> (accessed 2 September 2016). 'Kohlhaas's stubbornness extends outwards until it reaches the gallows. He would rather destroy the world like a terrorist than give up. The energy of Büchner's Lenz extends inwards, so that this human being appears calm on the surface. That is internal violence, and at the same time the greatest concentration of subjectivity. Even today we cannot write any stories more radical than these. However, Büchner's and Kleist's radicalism are required if we are going to attempt to depict the transformed (inflated) reality within the narrative space of our century.' (trans. D.S.) The Georg Büchner Prize is arguably Germany's most prestigious literary prize, awarded annually by the federal state of Hessen (from 1923–32 and from 1945–50) and since 1951 by the *Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung*. For a sociological analysis of the Georg Büchner Prize, see Judith S. Ulmer, *Geschichte des Georg-Büchner-Preises: Soziologie eines Rituals* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006). Büchner is also commemorated in the Leonce and Lena Prize for poetry, awarded since 1968 by the city of Darmstadt.

11 See Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), who speaks of a 'comfortable accommodation' (Introduction, p. x) between state, market, and corporations. On the relationship between the public and private sectors, see pp. 71–96.

Little of what we witness today, we may assume, would have surprised Büchner, the author of *Danton's Tod*, *Woyzeck*, *Leonce und Lena* and *Der Hessische Landbote*. He lived on the eve of the great age of ideologies, but his critique of the social and political conditions of his times was not itself based on an ideology. His portrayal of the bedlam created by mankind was decidedly non-Manichaeian. His diagnostic eye did not see evil on one side, and good on the other.

During the Cold War the reception of Büchner was divided between East German critics such as Hans Mayer, who emphasized Büchner's political engagement,¹² and the depoliticized view of West German critics such as Carl Viëtor, who emphasised the metaphysical aspects of Büchner's œuvre, arguing that his 'political disillusionment' was a precondition for his artistic work: 'Als der Verschwörer ablassen muß, beginnt der Poet zu reden.'¹³ The official culture of the early Federal Republic always tended to celebrate Büchner the artist, not the activist, most notably through the Georg Büchner Prize. This divided reception is reflected in the fact that the GDR issued Büchner stamps as early as 1963 (to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Büchner's birth); whereas this did not occur in the Federal Republic until fifty years later in 2013.¹⁴

By then, the intellectual and political landscapes had changed almost beyond recognition. Patrick Eiden-Offe has commented that in the discipline of German Studies from the 1990s onwards, post-structuralism, media theory, cultural studies, gender studies and discourse analysis, etc. created their own literary canons, and the nineteenth-century authors who benefited most from these developments were Kleist, Hölderlin, and Büchner.¹⁵ The 1990s in particular saw new interpretations of Büchner drawing on deconstruction (Schwann),¹⁶

12 For Büchner reception in the GDR see Ulrich Kaufmann, *Dichter in 'stehender Zeit': Studien zur Georg-Büchner-Rezeption in der DDR* (Erlangen: Palm & Enke, 1992).

13 Carl Viëtor, *Georg Büchner. Politik, Dichtung, Wissenschaft* (Bern: Francke, 1949). 'As the conspirator leaves off, the poet begins to speak.'

14 Jan-Christoph Hauschild, *Georg Büchner. Verschwörung für die Gleichheit* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2013), p. 336.

15 Patrick Eiden-Offe, 'Where is Heine? A European Perspective', in *North American Heine Society Newsletter* (2011–2012), pp. 4–5 (here p. 4).

www.fhsu.edu/mlng/Newsletter2011 (accessed 2 September 2016).

16 Jürgen Schwann, *Georg Büchners implizite Ästhetik. Rekonstruktion und Situierung im ästhetischen Diskurs* (Tübingen: Narr, 1997).