



University  
of Glasgow

Büchner and Paine on elitism and equality. In: Gillett, R., Schonfield, E. and Steuer, D. (eds.) Georg Büchner: Contemporary Perspectives. Series: Amsterdamer Beiträge zur neueren Germanistik, 89. Brill: Leiden, pp. 121-147. ISBN 9789004338593.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/122983/>

Deposited on: 18 August 2016

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow\_  
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Ernest Schonfield

## Büchner and Paine on Elitism and Equality

Büchner's belief in equality and in the value of every human life motivate his constant polemics against elitism. Taking the letter of mid-February 1834 on aristocratic elitism as a starting point, this chapter explores Büchner's critique of elitism in the fields of politics, morality, aesthetics and history. Particularly relevant is the relentless unmasking of aristocratic, heroic ideology in *Danton's Tod*. Close affinities between Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791-92) and *Dantons Tod* suggest that Büchner's critique of idealist drama in the letter of 28 July 1835 draws in part on Paine's critique of Edmund Burke. Büchner's programmatic insistence on human suffering is intended to counter ideological distortions of history.

Denn die einen sind im Dunkeln  
Und die andern sind im Licht  
Und man siehet die im Lichte  
Die im Dunkeln sieht man nicht.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. The Letter on 'Aristocratismus' (mid-February 1834)

'Hegemony' is defined by Gramsci as the political control of a social group over national society, as exercised through intermediary organizations and institutions, operating by means of ideological consensus.<sup>2</sup> It implies the control and restriction of cultural representation in the interests of property-owning classes. This contribution will focus on Büchner's efforts to peel back the ideological discourse which grants prestige to a tiny minority and which consigns the majority of humanity to oblivion. The point of departure is Büchner's letter on 'Aristocratismus'. This letter will inform our reflections on equality versus elitism in

---

<sup>1</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Die Beule. Ein Dreigroschenfilm, Schlußverse* [written 1930, published 1932], in *Brecht, Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. by Werner Hecht, Jan Knopf, Werner Mittenzwei and Klaus-Detlef Müller, 30 vols and Registerband (Berlin and Frankfurt/Main: Aufbau and Suhrkamp, 1988-2000) vol. 19, pp. 307-20, here p. 320. Henceforth BFA.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 25-26.

*Danton's Tod*, and on the affinities between Büchner's critique of idealist drama and Thomas Paine's critique of Edmund Burke. The conclusion will argue that Büchner draws attention to human misery, not because he is a pessimist or nihilist but because he wishes to counter idealistic conservative and liberal narratives which whitewash and transfigure history.

Büchner believes that *every* human life is precious for its own sake. In his review of a fellow pupil's essay on suicide he objects strongly to the description of the earth as a 'Prüfungsland' ('a testing ground', *MBA* 1.1, p. 124). He is repelled by this idea because it suggests that life can be considered as a means to an end: 'dießer Gedanke war mir immer sehr anstößig, denn ihm gemäß wird das Leben nur als Mittel betrachtet, ich glaube aber, daß das Leben selbst Zweck sey' (*MBA* 1.1, pp. 124-27).<sup>3</sup> Büchner's view is that each life is its own purpose within itself.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, each individual deserves equal respect and to be judged upon his or her own terms. To view life as a testing ground is misleading because it attempts to judge human beings, to divide them on the basis of *external* criteria, and to find the purpose of a life outside of life. Applying a set of external standards ignores different circumstances and development, in sum the uniqueness of each individual. Büchner hates any hierarchical ideology which would claim that one human being is intrinsically more valuable than another.

Büchner's hatred of elitism is expressed forcefully in a letter to his parents of mid-February 1834, in which he defends himself the accusation that he is scornful towards others less intelligent or educated than himself. This soon develops into the statement of a creed. In the essay on suicide Büchner had attacked the idea that life is a test because it encourages misleading distinctions between people. In this letter, his critique is directed against 'Verstand' (intellect) and 'Bildung' (education) because of their divisive *social* function:

---

<sup>3</sup> 'This thought has always been offensive to me, because it considers life accordingly as a *means*, but I believe that life is its *own purpose*' [Trans. E.S.]. Cf. Albert Meier, *Georg Büchners Ästhetik* (Munich: Fink, 1983), p. 150.

<sup>4</sup> This is linked to the concept of 'Gesetz der Schönheit' in the 'Probevorlesung über Schädelnerven' (*MBA* 8, p. 155). See the contribution by Burks in this volume.

..... Ich verachte Niemanden, am wenigsten wegen seines Verstandes oder seiner Bildung, weil es in Niemandes Gewalt liegt, kein Dummkopf oder kein Verbrecher zu werden, – weil wir durch gleiche Umstände wohl Alle gleich würden, und weil die Umstände außer uns liegen. Der Verstand nun gar ist nur eine sehr geringe Seite unsers geistigen Wesens und die Bildung nur eine sehr zufällige Form desselben. Wer mir eine solche Verachtung vorwirft, behauptet, daß ich einen Menschen mit Füßen träte, weil er einen schlechten Rock an hätte. Es heißt dieß, eine Rohheit, die man Einem im Körperlichen nimmer zutrauen würde, ins Geistige übertragen, wo sie noch gemeiner ist. (*MBA* 10.1, p. 32)<sup>5</sup>

‘Verstand’ and ‘Bildung’ are misused to rank human beings in a hierarchy of importance. Enlightenment authors such as Kant had called for a liberal bourgeois democracy based on the public use of reason. Progressive for its time, this argument is problematic in suggesting that only those with a high level of ‘Verstand’ and ‘Bildung’ are entitled to political representation. Büchner’s critique of ‘Bildung’ draws on Helvetius’s argument in *De l’esprit* (1758) that inequality between human beings derives principally from the different forms of education which they have received (*MBA* 10.2, p. 193). ‘Bildung’ can therefore be seen as a ‘Glücks-Gut’ as defined in Johann Georg Krünitz’s encyclopædia: something which you acquire by luck, which doesn’t depend on you, and for which you cannot be praised (*MBA* 10.2, p. 193). Büchner’s letter explicitly compares ‘Bildung’ to an item of clothing.<sup>6</sup> It would

---

<sup>5</sup> *TMW*, p. 183: ‘I scorn no one, least of all for his intellect or education, for it lies in no one’s power not to become an idiot or a criminal, because in similar circumstances we would all be equal and because the circumstances lie outside of ourselves. *Intellect* is in fact only a very small part of our mental self, and education is only an incidental form of it. Whoever accuses me of such scorn maintains that I would kick a man because he wears a shabby coat. This kind of brutality, which one would never be considered capable of in the physical sense, is here transposed into the sphere of the mind, where it is all the more base.’

<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere Büchner compares *morality* to an item of clothing. In *Leonce und Lena*, Leonce wishes he could put on a coat that would make him moral: ‘Warum kann ich mir nicht wichtig werden und der armen Puppe einen Frack anziehen [...], daß sie [...] sehr moralisch würde?’ (I.1, *MBA* 6, p. 130). In *Woyzeck*, Woyzeck suggests

be cruel to kick a person for wearing a poor coat, but it would be even more absurd to scorn someone because they lack a good (i.e. expensive) education. Here Büchner identifies the conceit implied in the very concept of *Bildungsbürgertum* – the presumptuous idea that the acquisition of a good education makes you a ‘better person’ and so superior to your fellow human beings. This bourgeois ideal went hand in hand with the conservative political affiliation of the German bourgeoisie, as W. Daniel Wilson has shown.<sup>7</sup>

In the letter Büchner goes on to say that he hates people who scorn those who have education and who sacrifice the majority out of self-interest:

Die Leute [...] sind Verächter, Spötter und Hochmüthige, weil sie die Narrheit a u ß e r  
s i c h suchen. Ich habe freilich noch eine Art von Spott, es ist aber nicht der der  
Verachtung, sondern der des Hasses. Der Haß ist so gut erlaubt als die Liebe, und ich  
hege ihn im vollsten Maße gegen die, w e l c h e v e r a c h t e n . Es ist deren eine große  
Zahl, die im Besitze einer lächerlichen Aeußerlichkeit, die man Bildung, oder eines  
todten Krams, den man Gelehrsamkeit heißt, die große Masse ihrer Brüder ihrem  
verachtenden Egoismus opfern. Der Aristocratismus ist die schändlichste Verachtung  
des heiligen Geistes im Menschen; gegen ihn kehre ich seine eigenen Waffen;  
Hochmuth gegen Hochmuth, Spott gegen Spott. (*MBA* 10.1, p. 33)<sup>8</sup>

---

that being virtuous is equivalent to wearing a coat: ‘wenn ich ein Herr wär und hätt ein Hut und eine Uhr und en anglaise und könnt vornehm reden, ich wollt schon tugendhaft seyn’ (H4, 5, *MBA* 7.2, p. 25). [An *anglaise* was a coat worn by minor officials].

<sup>7</sup> W. Daniel Wilson, ‘Enlightenment’s Alliance with Power: The Dialectic of Collusion and Opposition in the Literary Elite’, in *Impure Reason: Dialectic of Enlightenment in Germany*, ed. by W. Daniel Wilson and Robert C. Holub (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), pp. 364-84.

<sup>8</sup> *TMW*, p. 184: ‘People [...] are arrogant scorners and scoffers because they search for folly only *outside themselves*. I have in truth another kind of ridicule, but its origin is not contempt but hatred. Hatred is as acceptable as love, and I direct my hate in fullest measure against those *who scorn others*. There is a great number of them, endowed with an absurd superficiality called education or with that dead stuff, learning, who sacrifice the great masses of their fellow men to their scornful egotism. Aristocratic elitism is the most despicable contempt for the holy spirit in human nature. Against this contempt I turn its own weapons: arrogance against arrogance, ridicule against ridicule.’

It is spiteful, so the argument goes, for human beings to sacrifice their brothers to their scornful egotism. Büchner is not criticising education as such here. His own life and his pamphlet *Der Hessische Landbote* suggest that education is valuable both to himself and for the people of Hesse. But he *is* criticising the misuse of the educational system to erect social barriers. Education becomes problematic when it helps to maintain elite privileges. This claiming of privilege displays the most despicable contempt of humanity. The condemnation of scorn recalls Matthew 18:10: ‘Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones’. Büchner uses a religious term (‘die schändlichste Verachtung des heiligen Geistes im Menschen’), though in an unorthodox way. In this context it is worth recalling a similar phrase from Lenz: ‘Dieser Idealismus ist die schmähhlichste Verachtung der menschlichen Natur’ (*MBA* 5, p. 60).<sup>9</sup> The parallel construction of the two phrases suggests that Büchner is using these concepts interchangeably: there is little difference for Büchner between aristocratic elitism and idealism, nor between ‘des heiligen Geistes im Menschen’ (*MBA* 10.1, p. 33) and ‘der menschlichen Natur’ (*MBA* 5, p. 60).

In the closing lines of the letter, Büchner call on his ‘Stiefelputzer’ (‘shoe-shiner’). The chief witness in Büchner’s defence against the accusation of contempt for the uneducated will be the boot-polisher, someone from the lowest bracket of society. His perspective is just as valuable as that of an educated middle-class person, or perhaps even more so, because he is unencumbered by an education which encourages prejudice and conceit.<sup>10</sup> The letter is significant for insight it implies into the (mis)use of education to construct barriers between social classes and so to sustain a system of social apartheid. Taking this insight as starting

---

<sup>9</sup> *TMW*, p. 91: ‘This idealism is the most disgraceful mockery of human nature.’

<sup>10</sup> Büchner may be thinking of the polemic against private tutoring in Lenz’s *Def Hofmeister*: ‘Wer ist schuld dran als ihr Schurken von Hauslehrern? [...] [Der Junge] muß durchaus nicht aus der Sphäre seiner Schulkameraden ausgehoben und in der Meinung gestärkt werden, er sei eine bessere Kreatur als andere’. Lenz, *Der Hofmeister, oder Vorteile der Privaterziehung* [1774], Act II, Scene 1. J.M.R. Lenz, *Werke und Briefe in drei Bänden*, ed. by Sigrid Damm, 3 vols (Leipzig: Insel, 1987), vol. I, p. 58. ‘Who else is to blame but you private tutors? [...] The boy does not *need* to be lifted from the sphere of his classmates and confirmed in the opinion that he is a superior creature to others.’

point, we can see how Büchner's works develop the argument that aristocratic idealism leads to negative consequences in the fields of politics, aesthetics and historiography.

## 2. Elitism and Equality: Terms and Definitions

The letter of mid-February 1834 can be seen as a polemic against elitism. Büchner does not use the word 'elitism' of course; he uses the word 'Aristocratismus', which Schmidt translates as 'aristocratic elitism' (*TMW*, p. 184). The term refers to the belief that certain privileges should be reserved for a select group of people. Aristocrats claim a greater share of society's resources on the basis of their descent. Büchner calls such claims 'die schändlichste Verachtung des heiligen Geistes im Menschen' which Schmidt translates as 'the most despicable contempt for the holy spirit in human nature' (*TMW*, p. 184). 'Verachtung' is usually translated as 'contempt' or 'scorn' but these translations are inadequate. The verb 'verachten' is the opposite of 'achten' ('to respect'), and so 'Verachtung' means an intense form of disrespect. Büchner implies that for one person to claim precedence over another is to deny the other's human dignity; it is a rejection of their being, their human essence.

Why does Büchner oppose elitism? Because 'in similar circumstances we would all be equal' (*TMW*, p. 183; 'weil wir durch gleiche Umstände wohl Alle gleich würden', *MBA* 10.1, p. 32). The notion of equality ('Gleichheit') is central to Büchner's thought, but he uses the term to mean different things: (1) sometimes 'gleich' refers to the intrinsic value and interest of every individual life; (2) sometimes 'Gleichheit' refers to human nature in general, as when he writes, 'Ich finde in der Menschennatur eine entsetzliche Gleichheit' (*MBA* 10.1, p. 30);<sup>11</sup> (3) sometimes 'Gleichheit' is used in Rousseau's sense to mean the call for political

---

<sup>11</sup> *TMW*, p. 185: 'I find in human nature a horrifying sameness'; this could also be translated as 'a terrible equality'. The Marburg edition dates this letter to mid-January 1834 (*MBA* 10.2, p. 52). The editors interpret this phrase as a reference to the Christian notion that all humans are sinful by nature; they reject the possibility that this could be a reference to the first article of the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* of 1789,

equality. St. Just uses it in this sense in *Danton's Tod* (Act II, Scene 7) but the play makes it clear that St. Just and his colleagues are elitists themselves. We must therefore differentiate between 'equality' in the sense of 'sameness of human nature' and 'equality' in the sense of 'all humans are equally unique' (a kind of equality *qua* difference). When Büchner asserts that given similar circumstances humans would be equal, he is *not* saying they are all the same. He is saying that every human being is equally unique. Büchner is well aware of 'das eigenthümliche Wesen jedes' (*MBA* 5, p. 61) ('the unique essence of each individual', *TMW*, p. 91), as he puts it in *Lenz*.

So: Büchner's 'Aristocratismus' letter does not claim that people are identical. But it does assert that each person has unique merits and is worthy of unique consideration. Büchner raises the question of privileges (*Vorrechte*) versus merit (*Vorzüge*) again in *Danton's Tod* when St. Just says: 'Es darf daher jeder Vorzüge und daher Keiner Vorrechte haben, weder ein Einzelner, noch ein geringere oder größere Klasse von Individuen' (II.7, *MBA* 3.2, p. 123).<sup>12</sup> As the Marburg edition points out, this alludes to Rousseau: 'qu'il y a dans le mérite des hommes des raisons de préférence plus importantes que la richesse' (*MBA* 3.4, p. 156).<sup>13</sup> It also alludes to Article 6 of the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* (1789): 'La Loi [...] doit être la même pour tous [...] Tous les Citoyens étant égaux à ses yeux sont également admissibles à toutes dignités, places et emplois publics, selon leur capacité, et sans autre distinction que celle de leurs vertus et de leurs talents.'<sup>14</sup> Büchner

---

which states the principle of equality (*MBA* 10.2, p. 182). I think this misses the point. Surely, in the context of a discussion of the history of the French Revolution, when Büchner uses the term 'Gleichheit' he *does* wish to allude, at least on one level, to the revolutionary principle of 'égalité'.

<sup>12</sup> *TMW*, p. 56: 'Therefore everyone may enjoy advantages, yet no one may enjoy privileges, neither an individual nor a smaller nor a greater class of individuals.'

<sup>13</sup> Rousseau, *Le Contrat social*, Book 3, Chapter 5, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 408. 'the deserts of men offer claims to pre-eminence more important than those of riches.' (trans. by G. D. H. Cole, 1782).

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/conseil-constitutionnel/francais/la-constitution/la-constitution-du-4-octobre-1958/declaration-des-droits-de-l-homme-et-du-citoyen-de-1789.5076.html> (accessed 15 December 2014). 'The law must be the same for all [...] All citizens, being equal in its eyes are equally eligible to all dignities, places and employments, according to their capacity and without distinction except that of their virtues and talents'.



supports social equality *and* respect for differences. He does not want to make everyone the same, but to create conditions that give them the same *chances*.<sup>15</sup>

But what if elitism is inevitable, and even merited, as Nietzsche insisted?<sup>16</sup> The German sociologist Robert Michels argued in 1911 that elites are inevitable, even in modern democracies; he termed this ‘das eiserne Gesetz der Oligarchie’ (‘the iron law of oligarchy’).<sup>17</sup> Of course, rankings can be defensible if they are based on real achievement. But this raises the problem of the ‘Matthew principle’ described by Robert K. Merton, based on Matthew 25:29: ‘For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath.’<sup>18</sup> In other words: the more resources people have, the more resources they get. This form of ‘cumulative advantage’ means that elites tend to be composed of unrepresentative minorities. Elitism is therefore a problem because it favours those with existing advantages. Today it is a global problem. As a UK government report, *Elitist Britain* (2014), states: ‘The sheer scale of the dominance of certain backgrounds raises questions about the degree to which the composition of the elite is based on merit. Are top jobs about what you know, or who you know?’<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> As Brecht puts it in his *Buch der Wendungen* (*Book of Changes*): ‘Erst wenn die Gleichheit der Bedingungen geschaffen ist, kann von Ungleichheit gesprochen werden. Erst wenn die Füße aller gleich hoch stehen, kann entschieden werden, wer höher ragt als andere.’ Brecht, *Buch der Wendungen*, BFA, vol. 18, p. 137 (as in note 1). ‘Only when equal conditions have been established can we discuss inequality. Only when everyone is standing on the same footing can differences become apparent.’ On this point see Manfred Wekwerth, *Daring to Play: A Brecht Companion*, trans. by Rebecca Braun (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 6-7.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969ff.), vol. VII.1, *Nachgelassene Fragmente Juli 1882-Winter 1883-1884*, p. 411: “‘Die Menschen sind nicht gleich!’ – So spricht die Gerechtigkeit.’ (‘Human beings are *not* equal – thus speaks justice’).

<sup>17</sup> Robert Michels, *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie. Untersuchungen über die oligarchischen Tendenzen des Gruppenlebens* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt, 1911). For a discussion of elite theory, see Geraint Parry, *Political Elites* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1977).

<sup>18</sup> Robert K. Merton, ‘The Matthew Effect in Science’, *Science*, vol. 159, no. 3810 (1968), 56-63.

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/347915/Elitist\\_Britain\\_-\\_Final.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/347915/Elitist_Britain_-_Final.pdf) (accessed 11 September 2014) (p. 16).

### 3. Elitism versus Equality in *Danton's Tod*

‘Gleichheit’ is a key term in *Danton's Tod*. It is most forcefully expressed in two different scenes, firstly in Act II, Scene 7 by St. Just:

Wir schließen schnell und einfach: da Alle unter gleichen Verhältnissen [von der Natur]<sup>20</sup> geschaffen werden, so sind Alle gleich, die Unterschiede abgerechnet, welche die Natur selbst gemacht hat.

Es darf daher jeder Vorzüge und daher Keiner Vorrechte haben, weder ein Einzelner, noch ein geringere oder größere Klasse von Individuen. Jedes Glied dießes in der Wirklichkeit angewandten Satzes hat seine Menschen getödtet. (II.7, *MBA* 3.2, p. 123)<sup>21</sup>

Jan-Christoph Hauschild points out that this wording echoes the pledge of allegiance which members of the *Gesellschaft der Menschenrechte* in Darmstadt were required to make.<sup>22</sup>

Because of this, Hauschild argues that Büchner here puts his own opinion into the mouth of St. Just.<sup>23</sup> St. Just's words also echo Büchner's letter of mid-February 1834 discussed above:

‘weil wir durch gleiche Umstände wohl Alle gleich würden’ (*MBA* 10.1, p. 32).<sup>24</sup> However, the Marburg edition differentiates between the letter of February 1834 (which states that

---

<sup>20</sup> The words in square brackets ‘von der Natur’ were deleted by Büchner. This formulation does not come from French tradition of human rights but from the American declaration of independence of 1776: ‘We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal.’ The Marburg edition comments that Büchner's connection between natural right (‘all men are born equal’) and right by divine creation is also made by Thomas Paine in *Rights of Man* (*MBA* 3.4, p. 156). This suggests that Büchner may have had *Rights of Man* in mind when writing *Danton's Tod* (see section 5 below).

<sup>21</sup> *TMW*, p. 56: ‘We will conclude quickly and simply: since everyone was created under the same conditions, all are therefore equal, aside from the differences caused by nature itself. Therefore everyone may enjoy advantages, yet no one may enjoy privileges, neither an individual nor a smaller nor a greater class of individuals. Every portion of our proposition, applied in reality, has killed its human beings.’

<sup>22</sup> Jan-Christoph Hauschild, *Georg Büchner. Verschwörung für die Gleichheit* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2013), p. 28. Cf. also Jan-Christoph Hauschild, *Georg Büchner. Biographie* (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 1993), pp. 334-37.

<sup>23</sup> Hauschild, *Georg Büchner. Verschwörung für die Gleichheit*, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> *TMW*, p. 183: ‘because in similar circumstances we would all be equal’.

individual development depends on external circumstances) and St. Just's speech, which expresses a radical political demand (*MBA* 3.4, p. 156). St. Just does not mind if implementing these principles entails murder, but Büchner does.

The other key reference to 'Gleichheit' is by Camille in Act IV, Scene 5 in the *Conciergerie*. Camille's remarks are directed against the performance of superiority. This is something that academics are accustomed to do in their role as gatekeepers of cultural tradition. Camille's comments, particularly his reference to 'speaking properly' and putting on make-up, anticipate contemporary theories of culture as a performance of cultural capital (Bourdieu) and gender norms (Butler):

Das verlohnt sich auch der Mühe Mäulchen zu machen und Roth aufzulegen und mit einem guten Accent zu sprechen; wir sollten einmal die Masken abnehmen, wir sähen dann wie in einem Zimmer mit Spiegeln überall nur den einen uralten, zahllosen, unverwüstlichen Schaafskopf, nichts mehr, nichts weniger. Die Unterschiede sind so groß nicht, wir Alle sind Schurken und Engel, Dummköpfe und Genie's und zwar das Alles in Einem, die 4 Dinge finden Platz genug in dem nämlichen Körper, sie sind nicht so breit, als man sich einbildet. (IV.5, *MBA* 3.2, p. 149)<sup>25</sup>

The suggestion that we are all rogues and angels, geniuses and idiots simultaneously is compelling.<sup>26</sup> Camille tells us that all four categories are not as large as is commonly imagined, especially the phenomenon of 'genius' with its titanic connotations. The paragraph concludes with the verb 'sich einbilden' (to imagine, to have illusions about): people get

---

<sup>25</sup> *TMW*, p. 77: 'Is it worth the trouble to put on false smiles and rouge and speak with a good accent? We ought to take the masks off for once: as in a room with mirrors we would see everywhere only the same age-old, numberless, indestructible muttonhead, no more, no less. The differences aren't so great; we're all villains and angels, fools and geniuses – and all that in one. These four things find enough space in the same body, they aren't as large as one thinks.'

<sup>26</sup> It finds expression for example in Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* [*The Good Person of Szechwan*], where Shen Te/Shui Ta is simultaneously a paragon of virtue and a ruthless capitalist.

ideas about themselves and become attached to certain roles. Everyone is different but if people think they are 'special' then they will claim special privileges. Imagined hierarchies are converted into political claims. Camille's speech counters such claims with the assertion that we are all essentially the same. Walter Höllerer points out that this speech dispenses utterly with the idealist heroic pathos of classical tragedy, and moves towards a new pathos based on a recognition that humans suffer inevitably, much as goldfish do.<sup>27</sup> As Camille's concluding speech in this scene has it:

Ist denn der Aether mit seinen Goldaugen eine Schüssel mit Goldkarpfen, die am Tisch der seeligen Götter steht und die seeligen Götter lachen ewig und die Fische sterben ewig und die Götter erfreuen sich ewig am Farbenspiel des Todeskampfes?  
(IV.5, *MBA* 3.2, p. 150)<sup>28</sup>

The revolutionary leaders in *Danton's Tod* are committed to a heroic ideology which elevates them above the common run of humanity. This is particularly true of Robespierre.

Robespierre may oppose the principle of monarchy, but in practice he introduces a new form of absolutism based on his ideology of virtue. He grounds his claim to authority in his own incorruptibility, hence his epithet 'der Unbestechliche' ('the Incorruptible'; I.3, I.6, *MBA* 3.2, pp. 95, 105; *TMW*, p. 31, p. 40). His rigid morality permits him to condemn his opponents on moral grounds. But Robespierre's claim to rule based on absolute moral virtue is only a short step away from the monarch's claim to rule based on divine right. Danton's assertion that 'Das Gewissen ist ein Spiegel vor dem ein Affe sich quält; jeder puzt [sic] sich wie er kann'

---

<sup>27</sup> Walter Höllerer, *Zwischen Klassik und Moderne. Lachen und Weinen in der Dichtung einer Übergangszeit* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1958), pp. 104-08.

<sup>28</sup> *TMW*, p. 78: 'Is the ether with its golden eyes a bowl of golden carp, which stands at the table of the blessed gods, and the blessed gods laugh eternally and the fish die eternally and the gods eternally enjoy the iridescence of the death battle?'

(I.6, *MBA* 3.2, p. 104)<sup>29</sup> implies that Robespierre is guilty of pride, and goes even further in suggesting that Robespierre ‘puts on’ his moral incorruptibility as one might ‘put on’ a wig or a crown. Even more telling is Danton's comparison of Robespierre’s virtue to the heels (‘Absätze’) of his shoes (I.6, *MBA* 3.2, p. 105). The French monarchs wore white shoes with red high heels: this can be seen in the portraits of Louis XIV by Hyacinthe Rigaud (1701), of Louis XV by Louis-Michel van Loo (1760) and of Louis XVI by France Antoine-François Callet (1781). In continuity with the *ancien régime*, Robespierre’s virtue is the ceremonial heel he uses to crush his opponents. Robespierre performs his virtue, just as the monarchs perform their divine right to rule. Danton exposes Robespierre as a radical snob.

Danton too is a snob, however. He subscribes to the ideology of heroism. Before the revolutionary tribunal, Danton claims: ‘Männer meines Schlages sind in Revolutionen unschätzbar, auf ihrer Stirne schwebt das Genie der Freiheit’ (III.4, *MBA* 3.2, p. 131).<sup>30</sup> His proud sense of superiority is clear. Little wonder that, two scenes later, Billaud comments on Danton's claimed aura of genius shining upon his brow and remarks that Danton has an aristocratic scorn of humanity:

Solche Stirnen sind ärger als ein adliges Wappen, die feine Aristokratie der Menschenverachtung sitzt auf ihnen. Es sollte sie jeder einschlagen helfen, den es verdrießt einen Blick von oben herunter zu erhalten. (III.6, *MBA* 3.2, pp. 134-35)<sup>31</sup>

Billaud’s murderous resentment against Danton is chilling, but is founded on a grain of truth. Danton’s brow is like a coat of arms; he has become an elitist and so his proud forehead must be defaced. Billaud alludes here to the practice of defacing the aristocratic emblems from

---

<sup>29</sup> *TMW*, p. 39: ‘Conscience is a mirror before which an ape torments itself; we preen ourselves as best we can’.

<sup>30</sup> *TMW*, p. 62: ‘Men of my sort are invaluable in revolutions, on our brows hovers the spirit of liberty.’

<sup>31</sup> *TMW*, p. 65: ‘Such brows are worse than a noble coat of arms. The refined aristocratic scorn of humanity sits upon them. Everyone who resents being looked down on should help smash them in.’

buildings during the French Revolution.<sup>32</sup> The conservative historian and politician Adolphe Thiers later claimed that Danton had ‘quelque chose de menaçant et de méprisant à la fois’ (‘something about him that was both menacing and scornful’; *MBA* 3.4, p. 195). It is not only Danton’s enemies who think he is an egoist, however: his friends do too. In the Conciergerie, Danton’s heroic posturing is dismissed by Hérault as ‘Phrasen für die Nachwelt’ (IV.5, *MBA* 3.2, p. 149).<sup>33</sup> As Walter Höllerer has shown, in this scene Danton’s own ideology of heroism is revealed as an empty mask.<sup>34</sup> Crucial here is Camille’s speech comparing heroism to standing on tiptoe pulling stupid faces: ‘Da braucht man sich auf die Zehen zu stellen und Gesichter zu schneiden’ (IV.5, *MBA* 3.2, p. 149).<sup>35</sup> Danton and friends standing on tiptoe is a counterpoint Robespierre’s virtuous high heels. Much as Danton indicted Robespierre, Camille’s speech is an indictment of his comrades’ pride: ‘Schneidet nur keine so tugendhafte und so witzige und so heroische und so geniale Grimassen, wir kennen uns ja einander, spart Euch die Mühe’ (IV/5, *MBA* 3.2, p. 149).<sup>36</sup>

The *ancien régime* and its successors in the mould of Robespierre and Danton draw on hierarchical ideologies (whether based on religion, morality or heroism) in order to justify their claims to authority. This is why Payne’s famous critique of religion and morality in Act III, Scene 1, in which he emphasises the brute fact of human suffering,<sup>37</sup> also implies a critique of heroism: ‘Ich handle meiner Natur gemäß’ (III.1, *MBA* 3.2, p. 126).<sup>38</sup> And that is why Payne concludes, crucially, with a critique of *moral superiority* and *scorn*. The most important target of Payne’s speech is, arguably, *not* religion, morality or heroism *per se*, but rather those who use religion, morality and heroism as pretexts to *scorn* their opponents.

---

<sup>32</sup> See Richard Clay, *The Transformation of Signs: Iconoclasm in Paris, 1789-1795* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> *TMW*, p. 77: ‘rhetoric for posterity’.

<sup>34</sup> Höllerer, *Zwischen Klassik und Moderne*, p. 105.

<sup>35</sup> *TMW*, p. 78: ‘Is that why we stand on tiptoe and make faces [...]?’.

<sup>36</sup> *TMW*, p. 78: ‘Just don’t make such virtuous and witty and heroic and intelligent faces – we all know each other, after all; save yourselves the trouble.’

<sup>37</sup> Rodney Taylor, ‘Payne’s Spinozan “Theodicy” in Georg Büchner’s *Dantons Tod*’, *Seminar* 47.5 (2011), 539-58 (p. 557)

<sup>38</sup> *TMW*, p. 58: ‘I act according to my nature’.

Suffering is a problem for religion because a twitch of pain opens a fissure across all creation; nature is a problem for morality and heroism because we act according to our own nature; but the final point of Payne's argument is that it is important not to *scorn* your opponents, because contempt is a miserable emotion:

Sie können, wie man so sagt, tugendhaft bleiben und sich gegen das sogenannte Laster wehren, ohne daßwegen ihre Gegner verachten zu müssen, was ein gar trauriges Gefühl ist. (III.1, *MBA* 3.2, p. 126)<sup>39</sup>

The phrasing recalls Büchner's letter of mid-February 1834. If contempt is a 'sad feeling' then what follows, for Büchner, is the need to respect others, except those who despise. If people act according to their nature(s) then hierarchical systems of virtue such as Robespierre's are an imposition.<sup>40</sup> These are disarming insights particularly when superiority and scorn are used to demolish political opponents. As Büchner points out in a letter of 1 January 1836, accusing one's opponents of immorality is one of the oldest tricks in the book: 'Es ist der gewöhnlichste Kunstgriff, den großen Haufen auf seine Seite zu bekommen, wenn man mit recht vollen Backen: "unmoralisch!" schreit.' (*MBA* 10.1, p. 78).<sup>41</sup> Claiming a moral position implies either a claim for privileged treatment or a form of Epicureanism. In this way, Danton's insight that all human beings are Epicureans (I/6; IV/5) has a levelling effect which militates against pretensions of grandeur.

---

<sup>39</sup> *TMW*, p. 58: 'One can remain virtuous, as they say, and resist so-called vice without having to despise one's opponents – which is really a sad feeling.'

<sup>40</sup> See Daniel Steuer, "[...] aber das Mühlrad dreht sich als fort ohne Rast und Ruh". Büchners Gegenwartskunst und der Satz von der Erhaltung der Schönheit', in *Das schwierige neunzehnte Jahrhundert. Germanistische Tagung zum 65. Geburtstag von Eda Sagarra im August 1998*, ed. by Jürgen Barkhoff, Gilbert Carr and Roger Paulin (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000), pp. 365-76, here pp. 372-73.

<sup>41</sup> *TMW*, p. 190: 'The most common trick to get the masses on one's side is to scream "Immoral!" with a mouth full of food.'

*Danton's Tod* warns against the elitism of those who profess equality, such as Robespierre, St. Just and Danton. As George Orwell shows in *Animal Farm*, equality has a tendency to shade into the elitism of 'some are more equal than others'. Arguably this is why Lucille's song at the very end of *Danton's Tod* does not refer to any one individual. Her song is 'Erndtelied' ('Harvest Song') from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, and the couplet is from the third strophe:

Viel hunderttausend ungezählt,

Was nur unter die Sichel fällt. (IV.8, *MBA* 3.2, p. 154)<sup>42</sup>

This is certainly a protest against the Terror. Around 17,000 people were guillotined during the Terror and many tens of thousands more murdered. Lucille sings of hundreds of thousands of deaths, so suggesting a vision of never-ending bloodshed. The word 'ungezählt' ('uncounted') is particularly poignant. That most of the victims do not get counted is the final insult: social hierarchy persists even amongst the victims. The 'important' people are remembered and the 'unimportant' are forgotten.

#### 4. Paine contra Burke; Büchner contra Schiller

Büchner scholars have tended to assume that the character of Thomas Payne in *Danton's Tod* serves solely as Büchner's mouthpiece. Büchner's reception of Paine (1737-1809) has, however, received little attention. In 1959 Hans Arnold remarked that this question required further research.<sup>43</sup> In 2007 Raphael Hörmann looked at Paine's *The Age of Reason* as a

---

<sup>42</sup> *TMW*, p. 82: 'A hundred thousand, big and small, / His sickle always makes them fall'. For commentary see *MBA* 3.4, p. 236.

<sup>43</sup> Hans Arnold, 'Die Aufnahme von Thomas Paines Schriften in Deutschland', *PMLA* 74.4 (1959), 365-86 (p. 384). For a recent survey of Paine reception in Europe, see Thomas Munck, 'The Troubled Reception of



possible influence on the debate between Payne, Mercier and Chaumette in *Danton's Tod*, III.1.<sup>44</sup> Hörmann's article reveals significant affinities between Büchner's thought and the ideas of the historical Paine, particularly their critique of religion used for political purposes. In this section I will try a different tack and consider how Paine's famous defence of the French Revolution, *Rights of Man* (1791-92) might be relevant for the development of Büchner's thought. It is possible that Büchner read *Rights of Man*: it had been translated into German in 1791-93,<sup>45</sup> and the appearance of 'Payne' in *Danton's Tod* suggests that Büchner had at least a passing acquaintance with Paine's thought. Although we cannot know for sure whether Büchner read *Rights of Man*, I suggest that he did, or at least that he was aware of the central arguments of this famous book. The following discussion will seek to show that Büchner's critique of idealist drama draws in part on Paine's critique of Edmund Burke.

*Rights of Man* was written in response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), arguably the most influential conservative account of the French Revolution. Both books were published in German translation in 1793. Edmund Burke (1729-1797), a Dubliner by birth and an Anglican, became a Member of Parliament in England in 1765 and built his career through loyal service to the Whig oligarchy. When the French Revolution began in 1789, it was welcomed by many in England, for example by the nonconformist preacher Dr Richard Price, as a similar phenomenon to the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in which James II was deposed and replaced by William III. As an Irishman whose mother was a Roman Catholic, Burke distrusted this interpretation. He regarded 1688 as 'a revolution not made but prevented', and saw that 1789 was an event of a different order. Burke first expressed his concerns in a letter of 9 August 1789, suggesting

---

Thomas Paine in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia', in *Paine and Jefferson in the Age of Revolutions*, ed. by Simon P. Newman and Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2013), pp. 161-82.

<sup>44</sup> Raphael Hörmann, 'Religionskritik als Herrschaftskritik. Überlegungen zur Bedeutung von Thomas Paines *The Age of Reason* für Georg Büchner', *Internationales Jahrbuch der Bettina-von-Arnim Gesellschaft* 19 (2007), 83-99.

<sup>45</sup> Paine's text was translated into German by Meta Forkel-Liebeskind, a friend of Georg Forster.

that the French might need ‘a Strong [sic] hand like that of their former masters to coerce them. Men must have a certain fund of moderation to qualify them for Freedom or else it becomes noxious to themselves and a perfect nuisance to every body [sic] else.’<sup>46</sup> Burke’s first public speech against the Revolution was on 9 February 1790 and his *Reflections* were published on 1 November 1790. Burke’s condemnation of the French Revolution defends hierarchy and established tradition against French egalitarianism. He warns against considering ‘a low education [...] as a preferable title to command’, and advises that ‘the road to eminence and power, from obscure conditions, ought not to be made too easy’.<sup>47</sup> Burke claims that the landed gentry have a stabilising effect on society, arguing that property should be protected against the ability of those who would usurp it, adding that: ‘Some decent regulated pre-eminence, some preference [...] given to birth, is neither unnatural, nor unjust, nor impolitic.’<sup>48</sup> Burke also challenges the notion of human rights, stating that ‘Government is not made in virtue of natural rights [...] Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human *wants*.’<sup>49</sup> Burke sees ‘equality’ solely in terms of shared moral obligations and uses the term ‘the moral equality of mankind’ to signal that all should have equal *respect* for the legal institutions of English society. All are *equally bound* to respect the existing order: ‘all men have equal rights but not to equal things’.<sup>50</sup> Burke is particularly wary philosophy, arguing that political science ‘is not to be taught *a priori*’.<sup>51</sup> Burke’s reasoned defence of conservatism and his correct diagnosis that the French Revolution would lead to bloodshed – he anticipated the Terror by three years – confirmed the status of his *Reflections* as a classic of modern political theory.

---

<sup>46</sup> Cited in the introduction to Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [1790], ed. by Conor Cruise O’Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp. 13-14.

<sup>47</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 139-40. This is ironic since Burke himself had risen from a humble background.

<sup>48</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, p. 141.

<sup>49</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 150-51.

<sup>50</sup> Edmund Burke, *The Works of Edmund Burke* (London: Henry G. Bone, 1855) vol. II, p. 332. Cf. Werner Plehn, ‘Bezeichnungswahl und Ideologie im Kontext der Französischen Revolution bei Edmund Burke und Thomas Paine’, in *Entwicklungslinien. 120 Jahre Anglistik in Halle*, ed. by Wolf Kindermann (Münster: LIT, 1997), pp. 174-86 (here p. 182).

<sup>51</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, p. 152.

The first volume of Paine's *Rights of Man* appeared the next year in 1791; it was subtitled *Being an Answer to Mr Burke's Attack on the French Revolution*. The debate between Burke and Paine soon became a template for discourse on the French Revolution, and for modern political theory.<sup>52</sup> In the preface to the English edition, Paine accuses Burke of sowing violent discord between England and France for his own personal profit. Paine asserts that by defending tradition against revolution, Burke is 'contending for the authority of the dead over the rights and freedom of the living'.<sup>53</sup> Paine had already expressed his dislike of hereditary succession in *Common Sense* (1776), pointing out: 'Men who look upon themselves born to reign, and others to obey, soon grow insolent; selected from the rest of mankind their minds are early poisoned by importance.'<sup>54</sup> Much of Burke's argument rested on his claim to be a political realist. Paine's critique of Burke therefore begins with a concerted effort to undermine this claim. In Burke's essay, 'facts are manufactured for the sake of show [...] Mr Burke should recall that he is writing History, and not *Plays*'.<sup>55</sup> Paine cites egregious examples of Burke's rhetoric such as the idealised picture of the Queen of France ('surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision'[!]) followed by Burke's claim that 'the age of chivalry is gone [...] the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever'.<sup>56</sup> Burke's style shows the influence of his old opponent Bolingbroke, whose style Burke himself had described as 'that rapid torrent of an impetuous and overbearing eloquence'.<sup>57</sup> Burke lavishes pathos on Marie Antoinette, but he barely mentions the Bastille. Paine comments: 'Throughout the whole of Mr Burke's book I do not observe that the Bastille is mentioned more than once, and that with a kind of implication as

---

<sup>52</sup> See Marilyn Butler (ed.), *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Yuval Levin, *The Great Debate: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of Right and Left* (New York: Basic, 2014).

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings*, ed. by Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 92.

<sup>54</sup> Paine, 'Common Sense', in *Rights of Man*, pp. 1-59, here p. 17.

<sup>55</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 100.

<sup>56</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 169-70; Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 100.

<sup>57</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, p. 391 (note 106). For an analysis of the rhetoric used in the *Reflections*, see Paddy Bullard, *Edmund Burke and the Art of Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 140-73.

if he were sorry it was pulled down, and wished it were built up again.’<sup>58</sup> For Paine Burke’s lack of comoassion is the key issue: ‘Not one glance of compassion [...] has he bestowed on those who lingered [...] in the most miserable of prisons.’<sup>59</sup> In this emphasis on compassion, we sense Büchner’s affinity with Paine.

However, there is an even closer intellectual and emotional affinity with Büchner in Paine’s critique of Burke’s idealistic aesthetics:

Nature has been kinder to Mr Burke than he is to her. He is not affected by the reality of distress touching his heart, but by the showy resemblance of it striking his imagination. He pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird. Accustomed to kiss the aristocratical [sic] hand that hath purloined him from himself, he degenerates into a composition of art, and the genuine soul of nature forsakes him. His hero or heroine must be a tragedy-victim expiring in show, and not the real prisoner of misery, sliding into death in the silence of a dungeon.<sup>60</sup>

This is not so far from Lenz’s critique of ‘die Wirklichkeit verklären’ (*MBA* 5, p. 60),<sup>61</sup> or from Camille’s attack on idealist drama in *Danton’s Tod*: ‘Setzt [sic] die Leute aus dem Theater auf die Gasse: ach, die erbärmliche Wirklichkeit! – Sie vergessen ihren Herrgott über seinen schlechten Copisten.’ (II.3, *MBA* 3.2, pp. 114-15)<sup>62</sup> Making the connection between Büchner and Paine highlights the political aspect of Büchner’s critique of Schillerian drama as in *Danton’s Tod* II.3 and in the letter of 28 July 1835. Any art which transfigures human reality distorts its essential misery. Burke and Schiller ignore the misery of the many,

---

<sup>58</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 101.

<sup>59</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 102.

<sup>60</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 102.

<sup>61</sup> *TMW*, p. 90: ‘to transfigure it [reality]’.

<sup>62</sup> *TMW*, p. 48: ‘Take people out of the theater and put them in the street: oh, miserable reality! They forget their Creator because of His poor imitators.’

choosing to represent the sufferings of a select few.<sup>63</sup> Burke in particular is guilty of distortion because his account of the French Revolution is stage-managed so as to omit all reference to the sufferings of the people under the *ancien régime*. The key fact – that those who challenged royal authority were sent to the Bastille – is barely acknowledged. Burke shines his spotlight on the sufferings of the elite but wilfully ignores the sufferings of the people.

Paine asserts that Burke's preferential treatment of the aristocracy distorts our view of humanity by dividing humanity into two different camps, one superior to the other:

It is by distortedly exalting some men, that others are distortedly debased, till the whole is out of nature. A vast mass of mankind are degradedly thrown into the background of the human picture, to bring forward with greater glare, the puppet-show of state and aristocracy.<sup>64</sup>

The vocabulary here is remarkably close to Büchner's. Did Büchner ever read these words during his research on the French Revolution? He may well have. Perhaps Büchner even had these precise words at the back of his mind when he wrote 'die Herrschaft des Genies ein Puppenspiel' (*MBA* 10.1, p. 30).<sup>65</sup> We cannot know. But the affinity between Paine and Büchner is striking: 'the puppet-show of state and aristocracy' would serve well as a description for *Leonce und Lena*. The point here is that the politics of dramatic representation and of revolutionary politics are closely connected. Burke's idealised picture is designed to present revolution as the worst possible crime; the political consciousness that Paine

---

<sup>63</sup> Sometimes, though, Schiller does represent the suffering of common people in his work: see especially *Kabale und Liebe* (1784), *Der Verbrecher aus verlorener Ehre* (1786/1792), and *Wallensteins Lager* (1798).

<sup>64</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 109-10.

<sup>65</sup> *TMW*, p. 186: 'the mastery of genius a puppet play.'

advocates perceives conservative representations of history such as Burke's as a carefully constructed puppet-show:

I cannot consider Mr Burke's book in scarcely any other light than a dramatic performance; and he must, I think, have considered it in the same light himself, by the poetical liberties he has taken of omitting some facts, distorting others, and making the whole machinery bend to produce a stage effect.<sup>66</sup>

Paine presents the historian here as a dramatist; he objects to Burke's reductive view of events which paints the aristocrats as passive victims and the revolutionaries as violent aggressors:

It is to be observed throughout Mr Burke's book, that he never speaks of plots *against* the Revolution; and it is from those plots that all the mischiefs have arisen. It suits his purpose to exhibit the consequences without their causes. It is one of the arts of the drama to do so. If the crimes of men were exhibited with their sufferings, stage effect would sometimes be lost, and the audience would be inclined to approve where it was intended that they should commiserate.<sup>67</sup>

Paine's charge is that Burke has created pantomime villains. Note that – elsewhere – Paine concedes that his prose too is sometimes staged-managed in order to serve a distinct purpose.<sup>68</sup> Paine, like Burke uses rhetorical devices to make his arguments more persuasive.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 110.

<sup>67</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 110-11.

<sup>68</sup> Paine, 'Common Sense', in *Rights of Man*, p. 26: 'I mean not to exhibit horror for the purpose of provoking revenge, but to awaken us from fatal and unmanly slumbers, that we may pursue determinately some fixed object.'

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Plehn, 'Bezeichnungswahl und Ideologie' (as in fn. 53).

It is not the use of dramatic techniques *per se* which Paine objects to, rather it is Burke's reduction of his opponents to mere caricatures. Burke first denies his opponents a voice, then he accuses them of immorality. The procedure is similar to how the Captain and the Doctor treat Woyzeck. First they abuse and exploit Woyzeck, and then they accuse him of immorality.

It should be remembered that Burke's idealised view of history was not an academic exercise. It was an argument in favour of British intervention into French affairs, in support of the hereditary rights of the aristocracy. Büchner would have been immune to arguments of that kind. Büchner, after all, had studied the life of the Roman republican Cato, who once declared that 'Kings should be classed as predatory animals'.<sup>70</sup> If Burke is on the side of Hobbes and state authority, Büchner and Paine are on the side of Rousseau and egalitarianism. Büchner's work opposes the idea of elitism in the fields of aesthetics, politics and historiography. Camille's critique of idealist drama in *Danton's Tod* is not only directed against idealist aesthetics, but also against the ideology behind it which reserves respect for a select few.

##### 5. The Politics of Representation: The letter of 28 July 1835

In the previous section we have seen striking parallels between Paine's critique of Burke and Büchner's critique of Schillerian drama. It would, of course, be misleading to equate Büchner and Paine, just as it would be misleading to equate Schiller and Burke. They were born at different times, and belonged to different generations. Paine had confidence in reason and liberalism; Büchner had very little; Paine was a deist and Büchner was (probably) an atheist. Burke was a conservative adherent of the *ancien régime*; Schiller was politically progressive and his initial response to the French Revolution was positive. What Büchner objects to is the

---

<sup>70</sup> Cato, cited in Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. and trans. by Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 3. This idea (which may derive from Cato) that the ruling classes prey on the flesh of the people is central to *Der Hessische Landbote*.

way that Schiller's idealism had, by the 1830s, been reduced to a form of moral pedantry.

Büchner's letter of 28 July 1835 is worth considering here because it gives a clear statement of Büchner's position:

Wenn man mir übrigens noch sagen wollte, der Dichter müsse die Welt nicht zeigen wie sie ist, sondern wie sie sein solle, so antworte ich, daß ich es nicht besser machen will, als der liebe Gott, der die Welt gewiß gemacht hat, wie sie sein soll. Was noch die sogenannten Idealdichter anbetrifft, so finde ich, daß sie fast nichts als Marionetten mit himmelblauen Nasen und affectirtem Pathos, aber nicht Menschen von Fleisch und Blut gegeben haben, deren Leid und Freude mich mitempfinden macht, und deren Thun und Handeln mir Abscheu oder Bewunderung einflößt. Mit einem Wort, ich halte viel auf Goethe und Shakspeare, aber sehr wenig auf Schiller. (MBA 10.1, p. 367)<sup>71</sup>

Büchner criticises Schiller for idealising his characters by endowing them with moral greatness and nobility of spirit. His critique of idealism is similar to that of J.M.R. Lenz and Heinrich Heine. In *Anmerkungen übers Theater (Remarks about the Theatre, 1774)*, Lenz asserts that truth and precision are more important than ideal beauty:

nach meiner Empfindung schätz ich den Charakteristischen, selbst den Carrikaturmahler zehnmal höher als den Idealischen, hyperbolisch gesprochen, denn es gehört zehnmal mehr dazu, eine Figur mit eben der Genauigkeit und Wahrheit

---

<sup>71</sup> *TMW*, p. 189: 'If someone were to tell me that the poet shouldn't depict the world as it is but as it should be, then I answer that I don't want to make it better than God, who certainly made the world as it should be. As far as the so-called idealistic poets are concerned, I find that they have produced hardly anything besides marionettes with sky-blue noses and affected pathos, but not human beings of flesh and blood, whose sorrow and joy I share and whose actions fill me with loathing or admiration. In a word, I think much of Goethe or Shakespeare, but very little of Schiller.'



darzustellen, mit der das Genie sie erkennt, als zehn Jahre an einem Ideal der Schönheit zu zirkeln, das endlich doch nur in dem Hirn des Künstlers, der es hervorgebracht, ein solches ist.<sup>72</sup>

In *Zur Geschichte der neueren schönen Literatur in Deutschland* (*On the History of new literature in Germany*, 1833), Heine defends Goethe against the accusation that his characters are vulgar compared to Schiller's noble ones. Heine responds that art should be independent of morality:

die Beförderung der Moral [sey] keineswegs der Zweck der Kunst: denn in der Kunst gäbe es keine Zwecke, wie in dem Weltbau selbst, wo nur der Mensch die Begriffe "Zweck und Mittel" hineinge grubelt; die Kunst, wie die Welt, sey ihrer selbst willen da [...]; die Kunst müsse daher besonders unabhängig bleiben von der Moral<sup>73</sup>

Heine's argument, that art, like the world, exists as an end in itself, has close affinity with Büchner's statement 'daß das Leben selbst Zweck sei' (*MBA* 1.1, p. 127).<sup>74</sup>

Schiller's attempt to instil art with Kantian moral purpose contrasts with the view taken by Heine and Büchner: that art should be guided by its own autonomous principles, in analogy to the natural world. This aesthetic debate has consequences for representation.

Should art express ideals? Should it focus mainly on individuals of exceptional moral stature?

---

<sup>72</sup> J.M.R. Lenz, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. by Sigrid Damm, 3 vols (Leipzig: Insel, 1987), vol. 2, p. 653. 'My sensibility leads me to value the characteristic painter, even the caricaturist ten times higher (speaking hyperbolically) than the idealistic painter, because it is ten times harder to depict a figure with the precision and truth with which genius recognises it, than to labour with a compass, for ten years, on an ideal of beauty which ultimately only exists as such in the brain of the artist who produced it.' Cf. *MBA* 10.2, p. 270.

<sup>73</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Zur Geschichte der neueren schönen Literatur in Deutschland* (Paris and Leipzig: Heidehoff and Campe, 1833), pp. 99-100. 'The purpose of art is by no means promotion of morality; for in art there are no purposes, just as there are none in the world, it is only human beings who invent concepts such as 'purpose and means' and put them into the world; art, like the world, exists for its own purpose [...]; art in particular must therefore remain independent of morality.' Cf. *MBA* 10.2, p. 269.

<sup>74</sup> 'that life is its *own purpose*' [Trans. E.S.].

Any art which foregrounds such ideal figures as Schiller's runs the risk of implicitly affirming the aristocratic morality of the *ancien régime* which separates humanity into superiors and inferiors, the great and the not so great. As an artist, Schiller takes common people seriously: *Kabale und Liebe* and *Der Verbrecher aus verlorener Ehre* are certainly realistic.<sup>75</sup> Büchner's criticism is, arguably, not directed at Schiller the artist, but at the aesthetic policy which Schiller came to represent. By the 1830s, Schiller was invoked to advocate a form of moral pedantry in art while his politically radical side was ignored.<sup>76</sup> Not a problem in themselves, moral ideals become problematic if they are used to affirm an elitist social hierarchy.

Büchner suggests that Schiller's liberal, humanist emphasis on moral ideals has played into the hands of the ruling elite in Germany, enabling elites to claim the moral high ground and dismiss their opponents as an ignorant 'mob' or 'rabble'. Ruling elites propagate a positive image of themselves via institutions and media. In the letter of 28 July 1835, Büchner comments: 'denn die Regierungen müssen doch durch ihre bezahlten Schreiber beweisen lassen, daß ihre Gegner Dummköpfe oder unsittliche Menschen sind' (*MBA* 10.1, p. 367).<sup>77</sup> In the light of the preceding critique of idealist drama, this suggests that Büchner's actual target is not ideals (in general), or Schiller (in particular), but rather ideologues and paid hacks who repeat moral clichés in order to justify the status quo. This is why Büchner rejects idealised characters in dramatic representation. Human beings are made of flesh and blood, and idealism is false if it disrespects human needs.

The letter of 28 July 1835 also has political implications. Büchner recognised that his own society was deeply divided along class lines. His belief in equal rights did not blind him

---

<sup>75</sup> However, in *Kabale und Liebe* the common people are eclipsed by the court intrigues; in *Wallensteins Lager* the representation of the army camp functions mainly to shed light on the gargantuan figure of Wallenstein himself. Even so, the intense psychology of Schiller's *Der Verbrecher aus verlorener Ehre* certainly anticipates *Woyzeck*.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Heine, *Zur Geschichte der neueren schönen Literatur*, pp. 97-99.

<sup>77</sup> *TMW*, p. 189: 'for the governments must have their paid writers prove that their opponents are either idiots or immoral people.'

to opposing class interests. Many bourgeois liberals wanted greater political freedoms for themselves, but their calls for equality sounded hollow because they were opposed to social revolution. Büchner's critique of idealist drama implies that political discourse too is false if it is insufficiently grounded in social reality. This recalls Paine's charge that Burke ignored social realities, and reserved his spotlight for a select few. Büchner's art and his politics alike are informed by concern for – and fidelity to – social realities. He wants justice and representation for working people in both culture *and* politics.

## 6. Conclusion: Büchner's critique of hegemony

It seems clear that – on one level at least – Büchner's work is a critique of the public sphere of his time which marginalised the vast majority of the population.<sup>78</sup> The main thrust of Büchner's attack on elitism in the letter of mid-February 1834 to his parents and in *Danton's Tod* is that the dominant classes use ideology and education to bolster their preferential status and to deny political rights to those who lack property. *Leonce und Lena* can be read as a persiflage of the enlightened absolutism of the property-owning classes in Germany.

In *Danton's Tod* and *Lenz* Büchner is still developing his aesthetics in mainly theoretical terms to differentiate himself from his predecessors. *Danton's Tod* owes much to *Egmont* and *Maria Stuart*. A class bias is evident in *Danton's Tod*: proletarians are represented but the primary concern is with the bourgeois revolutionaries. And *Lenz* is a suffering artist, a leading exponent of the *Sturm und Drang*. Yet the *Kunstgespräch* in *Lenz* clearly calls for a social levelling in art:

---

<sup>78</sup> Jürgen Habermas defines the public sphere (*die Öffentlichkeit*) as a largely bourgeois institution. And today, when politicians invoke 'the public', they tend to mean an imaginary public produced by media technologies. One response to Habermas has posited the idea of 'counter-public spheres': Mike Hill and Warren Montag (eds.), *Masses, Classes and the Public Sphere* (London and New York: Verso, 2000). Recent examples of counter-public spheres might include Occupy and the Arab Spring. For a recent study of the European public sphere, see Armando Salvatore, Oliver Schmidtke and Hans-Jörg Trenz (eds.), *Rethinking the Public Sphere Through Transnationalizing Processes: Europe and Beyond* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2013).

Man muß die Menschheit lieben,<sup>79</sup> um in das eigenthümliche Wesen jedes einzudringen, es darf einem keiner zu gering, keiner zu häßlich seyn, erst dann kann man sie verstehen; das unbedeutendste Gesicht macht einen tiefern Eindruck als die bloße Empfindung des Schönen, und man kann die Gestalten aus sich heraustreten lassen [...] (*MBA* 5, p. 61)<sup>80</sup>

*Nobody* is to be considered too mean or too ugly by the artist. The most insignificant human face is more important than the perception of beauty. This is a programmatic call for equality in artistic representation. Only the artist who loves even the poorest members of the species can hope to do justice to human beings. Büchner is becoming determined to do justice in his art to proletarians – to those who have nothing. In mid-March 1835 he writes to Gutzkow that the people are his muse, a slumbering giant: ‘meine Muse ein verkleideter Samson’ (*MBA* 10.1, p. 54).<sup>81</sup> Around 1 June 1836 he writes, again to Gutzkow: ‘man muß [...] die Bildung eines neuen geistigen Lebens im Volk suchen und die abgelebte moderne Gesellschaft zum Teufel gehen lassen’ (*MBA* 10.1, p. 93).<sup>82</sup> This new artistic project, to seek ‘a new cultural life in the people’, finds its realisation in *Woyzeck*.

As Michael Perraudin has demonstrated, *Woyzeck* goes beyond the representation of the people from the point of view of the educated classes. It shows the people on their own

---

<sup>79</sup> On the theme of love, see also *Leonce und Lena*: ‘Weißt Du auch, Valerio, daß selbst der Geringste unter den Menschen so groß ist, daß das Leben noch viel zu kurz ist, um ihn lieben zu können?’ (III.1, *MBA* 6, p. 117). *TMW*, p. 123: ‘Do you know, Valerio, that even the most insignificant human being is so great that life is far too short to love him?’

<sup>80</sup> *TMW*, p. 91: ‘One must love humanity in order to penetrate into the unique essence of each individual, no one can be too low or too ugly, only then can one understand them; the most insignificant face makes a deeper impression than the mere sensation of beauty, and one can let the figures emerge [...]’.

<sup>81</sup> ‘my muse is a disguised Samson’ [not in *TMW*].

<sup>82</sup> *TMW*, p. 191: ‘one must [...] [strive] for a new mentality among the *people* and [let] effete modern society go to the devil.’

terms and speaking their own language.<sup>83</sup> *Woyzeck* is not just an avant-garde experiment, it is a profound engagement with folk culture. However, while Perraudin interprets Büchner's search for 'a new cultural life in the people' as an extension of J.G. Herder's folk revival, Raphael Hörmann argues more convincingly that Büchner's reappraisal of folk culture is linked to his political project, the promotion of social revolution.<sup>84</sup> The re-evaluation of folk culture in *Woyzeck* is therefore politically motivated. As Büchner put it in a letter of 1 June 1836 to Gutzkow, then in prison in Mannheim:

Die Gesellschaft mittelst der Idee, von der gebildeten Klasse aus reformiren?

Unmöglich! [...] Sie werden nie über den Riß zwischen der gebildeten und ungebildeten Gesellschaft hinauskommen.

Ich habe mich überzeugt, die gebildete und wohlhabende Minorität, so viel

Concessionen sie auch von der Gewalt für sich begehrt, wird nie ihr spitzes Verhältniß zur großen Klasse aufgeben wollen. (*MBA* 10.1, p. 93)<sup>85</sup>

Here Büchner highlights the fact that cultural hegemony in restoration Germany was shared between the German aristocracy *and* the bourgeoisie. Both groups benefited from a privileged position in relation to the great majority of people who did not own property. The key word once again is 'Bildung'. *Education* is the factor which divides the *educated* minority from the *uneducated* majority (the highlighting is Büchner's). Here, and in *Der*

---

<sup>83</sup> Michael Perraudin, 'Towards a new cultural life: Büchner and the "Volk"', *Modern Language Review* 86:3 (1991), 627-44; revised version in Michael Perraudin, *Literature, the Volk and Revolution in mid nineteenth-century Germany* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2001), Chapter 2, pp. 37-63.

<sup>84</sup> Raphael Hörmann, "'Zum sogenannten, so gescholtenen Pöbel'". Die radikale Aufwertung der sozialen Unterschichten bei Börne und Büchner', *Georg Büchner Jahrbuch* 12 (2009-2012), pp. 143-63.

<sup>85</sup> *TMW*, pp. 190-91: 'Reform society through *ideas*, through the *educated* classes? Impossible! [...] You will never bridge the chasm between the educated and uneducated classes.

I'm convinced that the educated and prosperous minority, as many concessions as it might desire for itself from the authorities, will never want to give up its antagonistic attitude toward the masses.'

*Hessische Landbote*, Büchner delivers a penetrating analysis of class struggle in Germany.<sup>86</sup>

The educated bourgeoisie wanted more political freedoms, but *not* if this would require the sacrifice of their privileges over those without property. Faced with a choice of allegiance between the ruling elite and the unpropertied classes, most of the middle classes would side with the elite. Büchner's insight anticipates Marx's diagnosis, in *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte* (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852), that the Revolution of 1848 was sabotaged by the bourgeoisie. As Hörmann has shown, Büchner's support for social revolution went against the hegemonic privileges of his own social class.<sup>87</sup> In this sense, the proletarian focus in *Woyzeck* can be seen as an attempt to counterbalance the elitist narratives which enjoyed cultural hegemony at the time.

Büchner's belief that every life is valuable for its own sake and that all human beings should have the right to develop their capacities freely anticipates Marx. Elaine Scarry has written that 'Marx understands men's and women's fundamental human identity to reside in their existence as "creators," "imagers," and "makers"'.<sup>88</sup> Marx opposes capitalism not simply because it robs people of the fruits of their labours, but because it does violence to their essential subjectivity. For the pre-capitalist agricultural worker, according to Marx, the land becomes 'der verlängerte Leib des Individuums' ('the individual's extended body').<sup>89</sup> This claim is confirmed by research on perception, for example, that a person can 'feel' the

---

<sup>86</sup> The indictment of the ruling classes in *Der Hessische Landbote* demonstrates an understanding of political hegemony that anticipates Gramsci by a century. It includes not only the aristocracy but also the educated functionaries who enforce their authority: 'Ihre Anzahl ist Legion: Staatsräthe und Regierungsräthe, Landräthe und Kreisräthe, Geistliche Räthe und Schulräthe, Finanzräthe und Forsträthe u. s. w. mit allem ihrem Heer von Secretären u. s. w. Das Volk ist ihre Heerde, sie sind seine Hirten, Melker und Schinder [...]' (*MBA* 2.1, p. 6). *TMW*, p. 6: 'Their number is legion: state and government officials, country and district officials, church and school officials, treasury and forestry officials, etc., with all their armies of secretaries, etc. The people are their flock, they are its shepherds, milkers, and fleecers [...]'.

<sup>87</sup> Hörmann, "'Zum sogennanten, so gescholtenen Pöbel'" (as in note 92), p. 163.

<sup>88</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* [1985] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 258.

<sup>89</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. (Rohentwurf) 1857-1858. Anhang, 1850-1859* (Frankfurt/Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt; Vienna: Europa, 1967), p. 393; *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. by Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 493.

ground at the end of a walking stick, or ‘feel’ the cutting action of scissors on paper.<sup>90</sup> In this sense, private property severs the worker from his or her own extended body.<sup>91</sup> Capitalist production does violence to human subjects, stifling their creativity and limiting opportunities for self-extension to a select few.<sup>92</sup>

Such perspectives help in understanding Büchner’s focus on human suffering. Indeed, Büchner depicts the violence done by capitalism to humanity even more graphically than Marx does. In *Der Hessische Landbote*, the state revenue is ‘der Blutzehnte, der von dem Leib des Volkes genommen wird’ (*MBA* 2.1, p. 6); ‘the blood-tithe taken from the body of the people’ (*TMW*, p. 6). The princes and their officials are ‘Schinder’; the word can be translated as ‘butcher’, ‘knacker’ or ‘slave-driver’: ‘sie haben die Häute der Bauern an, der Raub der Armen ist in ihrem Hause; die Thränen der Wittwen und Waisen sind das Schmalz auf ihren Gesichtern’ (*MBA* 2.1, p. 6).<sup>93</sup> Büchner draws here not only on the Bible but on Blanqui and other early proletarian discourse on labour.<sup>94</sup>

In *Common Sense*, Paine writes: ‘I mean not to exhibit horror for the purpose of provoking revenge, but to awaken us from fatal and unmanly slumbers, that we may pursue determinately some fixed object.’<sup>95</sup> Similarly, Büchner’s depiction of pain is politically motivated. His persistent coupling of pain and inequality counters elitist discourse which claims privileges for a minority. Büchner knows that official hegemonic discourse seeks to mask the violence of economic exploitation. That is why he combines direct political agitation with agitation in the cultural sphere, intended to reinstate the proletarian (non-property owning) subject within wider cultural discourse. In this way, his aesthetic campaign

---

<sup>90</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 248.

<sup>91</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 250.

<sup>92</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 254.

<sup>93</sup> *TMW*, p. 6: ‘they wear the peasants’ skins, the spoil of the poor is in their houses, the tears of widows and orphans are the grease on their faces’.

<sup>94</sup> Raphael Hörmann, *Writing the Revolution: German and English Radical Literature, 1819-1848/49* (Münster: LIT, 2011), pp. 173-74.

<sup>95</sup> Paine, ‘Common Sense’, in *Rights of Man*, p. 26.

against ideological distortion and his political campaigning for a fairer and more just society are mutually reinforcing.

This is relevant today. Two centuries after Büchner's birth we still live in an elitist world. Western consumers enjoy privileges that are denied to the majority of human beings. The euphemism 'developing countries' masks continuing exploitation and neo-imperialism. Thomas Pogge argues that the interests of the global poor are ignored in international decision-making.<sup>96</sup> The suffering and deprivation of third-world citizens and the global underclass is, for the most part, screened from view. The pain of others is kept at a distance through geographical segregation (in cities, in countries), and by using the media as a buffer.<sup>97</sup> Global media are largely owned by a tiny oligarchy. Large sections of humanity are vilified, stigmatised, or simply ignored, their lives considered by politicians and the media to be less valuable. Büchner's letter of mid-February 1834 on aristocratic elitism is an essential human document because it reminds us not to look down on *any* of our fellow human beings. Büchner asks us not to sacrifice our sisters and brothers to our own scorn-filled egotism. He urges us to respect the miraculous creative spirit in every single human being.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> Thomas Pogge, *Politics as Usual: What Lies Behind the Pro-Poor Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p. 35.

<sup>97</sup> Pogge points out that GDP analysis by *The Economist* magazine 'sets aside what is morally most important: poverty and equity amongst human persons.' Pogge, *Politics as Usual*, p. 97.

<sup>98</sup> 'Der Aristocratismus ist die schändlichste Verachtung des heiligen Geistes im Menschen' (*MBA* 10.1, p. 33). 'Aristocratic elitism is the most despicable contempt for the holy spirit in human nature.' (*TMW*, p. 184). I would like to thank Elizabeth Boa (Nottingham) and my co-editors for their useful critical comments on the manuscript.