

On the Marburg edition of Büchner's *Dantons Tod*

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Allow me some notes on Georg Büchner and the reception of his work. They may help us to understand the importance of the edition we are talking about and the polemical that it has provoked.

When Georg Büchner died, in 1837 at the age of 23, he was known as a writer only in a small circle of readers as the author of *Dantons Tod* (*Danton's Death*). In fact, the three plays written by Büchner reached the stage only at the turn of the 20th century. Around the end of the 19th century the work of the young author was re-evaluated and sometimes with enthusiasm. Especially after the Second World War, more and more essays and books, in a variety of languages, were written and published on Büchner; simultaneously more and more translations of his works appeared.

All three of Büchner's dramatic texts have been set to music, and made into operatic works. In a monograph titled *Georg Büchner and the Birth of Modern Drama*, David Richards stated programmatically in 1977: "Büchner is one of those few seminal figures whose works constitute a turning point in the development of the art: his three plays anticipate and have influenced almost every form of theatre our century has created." Against Professor Dedners' pessimistic point of view, I think that the literary history has already changed the meteor Georg Büchner into a fixed star of the German literature (Dedner 1999, 257). Currently Büchner is considered the "first modern playwright" (K. Guthke 1995, 70) and his drama *Woyzeck* "the most powerful drama of German literature", by the theatre director Max Reinhart. According to Christa Wolf's judgement, for example, the modern prose begins and reaches its zenith with the novella *Lenz*.

In fact, Büchner is acclaimed by nearly all literary tendencies: romantic, naturalist, and expressionist writers, among others, became vociferous supporters of Georg Büchner. The same enthusiastic and sometimes creative reception can also be found in the performing arts: the political and psychological theatre, realistic and surrealistic drama, the theatre of cruelty or the theatre of the absurd, - they are all grateful to Büchner's drama, and state enthusiastically that they have drawn inspiration from his writings.

This pattern of literary reception goes on in the present day, not only in the German-speaking countries. Georg Büchner is at once prized by the left-wing politicians as well as by the pessimists and melancholic minds. According to this puzzled reception Georg Büchner is at once a revolutionary spirit, a romantic soul and a raving pietist.¹

Due to Büchner's untimely death, most of his work has remained incomplete, or at least it is supposed to be. The fragmentary character of Büchner's work makes it a real study case study and a challenge for more than a century, both for editors and textual critics. Otherwise, the intense activity and productivity in the areas of literature, natural science, and politics accentuate the complexity of Büchner's oeuvre. The eclecticism of Büchner's work is probably one of the reasons why Büchner scholarship is, in the words of germanist Thomas Witz (FAZ, 2000), a "battlefield".

The drama *Dantons Tod* came out in 1835, before the author fled to Strasbourg, because of his revolutionary activities. It is probably Büchner's best known drama and, according to some works on Literary History, "the first modern drama in Europe". The author took apparently only five days to write it down, but as we can see in this historical-critical edition prepared by Professor Dedner there is a lot of work behind the poetic text. This Marburg historical-critical edition of Georg Büchner's works is a long standing and ambitious project which provides access to the writing process, to the conditions of production and to the multiple sources used by the author. A complete autograph is preserved, on which two publications in Büchner's lifetime were based but the text was badly affected by censorship. Professor Dedner and his research team have therefore taken the decision to treat the autograph as the centre of the edition,

represented in four different ways: a facsimile, a topographic transcription, a genetic presentation, and at last the edited text, which can more easily satisfy readers and stage-directors. The topographic transcription is a well succeeded approach to the work in process because it unveils its temporal dimension: overlay additions of a later date are typographically different from the typographical representation of the first layer of the manuscript. In his positive evaluation of the Marburg edition, Bodo Plachta (*Variants I*, 2002) underlines the editorial focus on the dynamic character of the work, owing to the innovative strategies in the first three modes of presentation, by contrast to the “old”, static way of editing.

The typographic differentiation of variants is also pertinent, mainly regarding the intrusions of censorship, which in the case of *Dantons Tod* may be of special interest to literary history and cultural studies. As documents socially and culturally conditioned, they are reservoirs and testimonies of the cultural memory and therefore constitute an eventual stimulating research field.

Despite the restrict target group of readers, we must, from this point of view, recognize the social and cultural relevance of historical-critical editions such as this. The most remarkable, and probably the most polemical aspect of this edition, is its treatment of source texts. According to the editors’ research many dialogues in *Dantons Tod* are almost literal quotations taken from historical documents. The third volume (“Historische Quelle”) provides the reader with all the source texts, in which the passages coming from other authors whom Büchner has used in *Dantons Tod* are marked typographically. In the margin of the sources texts, the reader can find the references to the exact place where Büchner incorporated the passage in his text. The references indicate the line numbers of the so-called “Quellenbezogener Text” (source-related text), that means *is*, a text in which every incorporation of source material is indicated (by means of the same typographical system). This way, the source dependence of *Dantons Tod* can be studied from two directions: from Büchner’s text to the sources, or vice versa.

In the edition of *Dantons Tod*, the editors make a distinction between two kinds of source dependence: “Übernahme” (that means the integral incorporation of the

passages) and “Anregung” (when a source text served as an incentive or source of inspiration). The edition enables us to realize that literary or philosophical source texts were treated as “Anregung”, whereas only historical sources were included in the third volume with (source documentation) “Quellendokumentation”.² In order to ensure the possibility of new discoveries of source texts, the editors make also a distinction between guaranteed (‘gesicherte’) and unguaranteed (‘ungesicherte’) sources. I am not sure if the editors do not operate with a too wide concept of source text.

This editorial work developed by Professor Dedner’s research team was not unreservedly welcomed in Germany.³ In fact, it has been strongly discussed in Germany, since its appearance in 2000. I must add that the edition of Büchner’s texts is a highly disputed field and became a “long-running footnote war”, to quote Michael Ott. Therefore it does not surprise us that the Marburg edition continues to provoke polemics among Büchner scholars. In fact, the fourfold presentation of the allegedly uncomplicated transmitted text, the over-documentation, the misuse of the materials in favour of the editors’ interpretation have been pointed out as some of the critical aspects singled out by the reviewers, mainly by Henri Poschmann (*editio*, 2003), a editor of Büchner from the former East Germany. The exaggerated dimension of the project, also in material terms, the immoderate goals as the presentation of the four editorial approaches and the exhaustive focus on the sources have been hardly criticized by Büchner scholars. We must refer the fact that a relative small drama, around 150 pages in a paperback edition (Leseausgabe), has been transformed in the historical-critical edition, as the result of thirteen years of work, in four volumes with one thousand, six hundred pages. At the same time, the exaggerated presence and intervention of the editors have been severely evaluated as “a combination of enthusiasm and pedantry” by a biographer of Büchner, Jan-Christoph Hausschild (Radio Bremen, 16.04.2001).

It is not my purpose to discuss the editors’ principles of critical editing or editorial theory or to question editorial concepts. My aim is to appreciate this edition from the view point of a Germanist, to assess its usability and potentialities in the literary and cultural studies – that is, my goal is not to close the debate, but to open it. As a professor of German literature, I do recognize the interest of scholarly editing as well as its cultural value. But I also have some reserves and questions that I would like to submit to you.

Scholarly editing is not only a mere autonomous discipline: it necessary dialogues with other disciplines like History and Philosophy. Besides, editions are good indicators of the way in which different periods of time deal with texts belonging or not to the literary canon, which philology helps to build. As Bodo Plachta (“Change of Generation”) has pointed out, scholarly editing is not a mere documentary enterprise, but it pursues the task of preserving the historicity of texts and thus of interpreting history too. I do recognize the interest of the interdisciplinary practice in the editorial research of this project. But, in the case of *Dantons Tod*, isn’t there a danger of speculation, or eventual distortion of History, regarding your edition? (Herbert Wender, 2000, *Der Spiegel*)

Editors are a fundamental part in the literary communication. As a kind of the author’s last will executor, the editor’s work always mediates between a text and a reader, the author and the public space.

With some reserve, I could sometimes agree with the principle defended for example by Georg Witkowski (224), that the editor is as an interpreter and a co-creator, especially when he is faced with an unfinished oeuvre as Büchner’s. However, in the case of the Marburg edition one can say, in my humble opinion, that the editors took this mediation function of scholarly editing and its “source dependency” too far. Sometimes we obtain the impression that editors no longer have readers in their horizon, as they involved themselves in exhaustive graphic and semantic interpretation and in an avid deconstruction of the text. I’m afraid that an exhaustive editing model such as this can deter the user of an edition rather than stimulate him to explore its poetological, rhetorical, and cultural potential.

As we know, a critical edition must represent the growth\making of a work of literature, and the textual development by means of the chronological presentation of different variants. But is it really necessary and meaningful to incorporate so much documentation of the sources Büchner used, even in a strong source-dependent text as *Dantons Tod*? As re-constructors of the history of the text creation, the editors have to trace relations between the text itself and the sources. But is it necessary to include such

a wide and complicated critical apparatus – and I am especially referring to the documentation of the genetic text – so hard to decipher by the non-specialized reader? Isn't there a tendency to overemphasize the writer's sources? Is it really important so much information on Büchner's life and time or about historical figures like Robespierre and Saint-Just? Aren't they well known by the users of an historical-critical edition? I am not sure if we gain a better understanding of the text with so much information. Is this not a too deep deconstruction of a literary text? Doesn't it lead us to the idea that only a patchwork from a well made montage lies on the deep structure of the aesthetic object? Is it really so important to know the exact genesis of the text? Where are we then to find the pleasure of reading? What about the creative and undeniable genius of the author?

I belong to the group of readers you have just mentioned: I don't feel cheated but disturbed, when I am confronted with such massive deconstruction of *Dantons Tod*. As an editor don't you feel sometimes too powerful in relation to the text?

As the authorial intention is unknown, or at least unstable, how can we be sure of the authenticity of the text variants handed down to us? And as we know this editorial insecurity / uncertainty is even stronger in the drama *Woyzeck* and in the novella *Lenz*. Aren't you afraid of shaping a text against the authorial intention? – and I know this is a problematic concept⁴. You have just said you aren't certain how Büchner would have reacted to the extensive documentation of sources in your *Dantons Tod* edition. You also said that the discovery of the source dependency in the 19th century resulted in a downgrading of the play. I think we all understand this downgrading. Do you think that today anything has changed in the way we face this source dependency? Aren't you questioning the author's creativity? Sure, we must take in account Büchner's concept of his drama, which establishes a clear relation to History (I quote the author: "I face my drama as a historical picture, which has to resemble its original."⁵), but by reducing the drama to dramatised history and literature – (and I quote you again) to "a medium in which writers can make discoveries about human behaviour, aren't you undermining the concept of literary text as an aesthetic object? Unless we consider Büchner's "extensive and even verbatim reproduction of sources" (as you put it) as text between quotation marks and interpret it as a feature of post-modern writing, a pastiche

or even a palimpsest, something that would imply a completely different approach to the author's work. For instance – couldn't we also analyse the influences of the source texts on Büchner's work and their possible interdependencies as a case of intertextuality? As I see it, some of the documentation presented in your edition could be of capital importance in an intertextual approach.

I would like to make a last reference to your commentary on *Dantons Tod*. The primary responsibility of the author of a commentary is to present an account of the genesis and growth (in an organic sense), the publication, and the reception of his\a text. Should he avoid critical judgements? I think this is a polemical field among the sub-disciplines of old philology. On the one hand, literary critics argue that the commentary should belong to their field; on the other hand editors claim that the commentary is part and parcel of the editing activity. It is obvious that editing underlies an interpretative research. But where does the editor's work end and literary criticism begins? How far may the editor go in his interpretative research?

As Gunter Martens (*editio* 7/1993, 39) asks: "Shall the editor conduct the reader by means of an exhaustive commentary?" In my modest view the reader should be given the opportunity for constructing his own reading, without the dominant guidance of the editor, even in an historical-critical edition.

Surely, the Marburg edition has its intended readers or users, that is, the readers for whom the research was done. I personally believe that the features that characterize historical-critical editions only meet highly specialized readers. On this subject, I'd like to quote the positive assessment of this edition written by Dirk Van Hulle (*Variants* 2/3, 2004, 365): "the Marburg edition convincingly shows that the task of the scholarly editor is not to deliver a glossy product, but to draw the attention to the process of invention. Instead of covering up textual problems, it is more important to present fragments as fragments, and thus enhance the reader's awareness of the text's fragmented character, without abandoning them in a textual labyrinth." I can hardly agree with this point of view. Or at least we should ask ourselves about the kind of readers Van Hulle has in mind. Of course, it is important, and sometimes unavoidable, to take the context of the writing into account, but the students Van Hulle refers to,

could get lost and discouraged in the huge documentation, unless we are speaking about students of editorial studies or scholars. In this case, the Marburg edition is really a gold mine where specialists can dig out an immense amount of information.

As you have said in the edition report, this edition is only a “vorläufiges Arbeitsmittel” (a work instrument with transitory value (MBA 3.3, S.3)), a kind of work in progress. How can you handle the precarious nature of your work when, for example, your edition of *Danton’s Tod* took around fifteen years to come out? I know that our work is always temporal, historical, and cultural – and in this sense relative, to say the least, since we may subscribe Michel Foucault’s contention that whatever lies beyond the level of historically and culturally specific discourses remains in any case inaccessible to human insight. Isn’t it a discouraging experience, after so much time involved in a research project, to have this feeling? But I think Foucault’s radical attitude is not compatible with your philological enthusiasm.

Although our audience doesn’t have access to your edition of *Lenz*, I would like to comment briefly on this work.

The Marburg *Lenz* edition is in my opinion a rather striking and readable, but among Büchners scholars it is as polemical as *Danton’s Tod*. (see for example Werner Weiland, 2004 /Herbert Wender, 2000) The reconstruction of the text is highly controversial. Some Büchner scholars argue that *Lenz* is not a fragmentary story, but a complete and finished novella. The Marburg edition offers three different texts: a genetic text, an edited text and a source-related text.

As the Büchner’s autograph is lost, no facsimiles could be presented. The genetic text is especially interesting because it refragments the novella and presents sections according to the chronological order in which they were written. In this genetic presentation, it becomes immediately clear, in accordance with the editor’s point of view, that Büchner did not start with the beginning, but gradually and tentatively came to understand the psyche of the protagonist. As expected, this editor’s decision raised criticism from some Büchner scholars (Werner Weiland / Herbert Wender). Instead of

the four volumes of *Dantons Tod*, we have here only one volume and three variants of the text in 500 pages.

Despite my reserves and uncertainties about the productive impact of your edition on the literary studies, I have no doubt that the Marburg edition of *Dantons Tod* is an extremely valuable piece of scholarship, an innovative and rigorous research work. I think therefore it will be, as it already is, an unavoidable research field for textual editors. As I said, I am not sure if the Marburg edition will alter the way in which Büchner is read and interpreted in the so-called literary studies, but its innovative procedures will certainly alter the scholarly editing patterns and principles and quoting Bodo Plachta “the Marburg edition paves the way to other editions.”(2002)

Congratulations for your extraordinary work!

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¹ On the eclectic Büchner reception see also Burghard Dedner (Ed.) 1990, p.7

² This division has a pragmatic reason, says Dirk Van Hulle, for Büchner relied so heavily on historical documents that the typographically marked “sources-related text” would become almost illegible if the literary sources were also marked.

³ The controversy has been disputed not only in specialized journals, but also in the press: Thomas Wirtz In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 12.12.2002, Johannes Salz Saltzweidel In: *Der Spiegel* 51, 18.12.2000, Heribert Kuhn in *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 17.07.2001, Michael Ott In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 22.2.2002.

⁴ As Gunter Martens (2004:43) pointed out “We don’t know the real author’s intention.”

⁵ Georg Büchner, Brief , 5. Mai 1835 in Georg Büchner Dantons Tod. Erläuterungen und Dokumente, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977, p.75.