Making a Whore of Freedom: Büchner's Marion Episode

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LACROIX *We've made a whore out of freedom!.*
DANTON *What else would it be? Freedom and whores: they're the most cosmopolitan things under the sun.*
—Georg Büchner, *Dantons Tod* (1835)[1]

For the past half-century, the plays of Georg Büchner have occupied an exceptional position in modern drama studies. Claimed as a foundational influence by the otherwise disparate movements of the early dramatic avant-garde and established by the last quarter of the twentieth century as inaugural, strikingly proleptic models for modernist drama, Büchner's work has stood at the centre of critical efforts to wrest the field of modern drama away from its traditionally Ibsenite heritage and redefine its formal genealogy within the larger trajectories and longer, more radical histories of drama in modernity. Unsurprisingly, the significance attributed to Büchner's drama has in that time undergone as many shifts and turns as have marked and inflected the study of modernity itself. Developing from near-mythic readings of Büchner as an expressionist avant-gardist *avant-la-lettre* and militant re-readings of his work as an unblinking, prophetically socialist critique of nascent industrial society, critical interpretation moved quickly in the revised modernism of the 1960s and 1970s to redefine his plays as anticipatory statements of existentialist revolt and erotic revolution. Since that time, as Büchner scholarship has become less politically charged and developed a closer historicist focus and a more contextual approach to textual interpretation, readings of his work have moved beyond such monological foci and anachronistic appropriations to a more material, more historically nuanced and more dialectical view of his drama, one in which the plays' engagements with subjectivity, class structure, philosophical and historical revolution, and questions of sexuality and embodiment, are understood not as proleptic wonders and markers of an unaccountable

genius but as keenly contemporary gestures reflective specifically of Büchner's position within that oddly paradigmatic, "second-generation" phase of European modernity described most vividly by Baudelaire and Marx and anatomized so provocatively by Benjamin.

Grinding and compressive rather than cataclysmic and explosive, driven by the implacable suffusion of industrialization and the disenchantment and exhaustion of revolutionary upheaval, this phase in European modernity's successive, wave-like transformations of experience and of consciousness appears to have reached its greatest intensity in the mid-1830s, to have been characterized most prominently by a rapid and relentless process of representational delegitimation, violence, and collapse, and to have engendered a very particular sort of affective, ontological destabilization, an experience most vividly thought of as an almost cinematic double-exposure to the phantasmagoric illusions of wholeness left echoing from romanticism and revolution and the felt wounds of fragmentation, asseveration, and distraction inflicted by the immediate observation and experience of industrialism. Nowhere else do we find such a tensile marker of the wrenching shift from political to perceptual modernity, from registering political cataclysm to registering the violence of the modern everyday. Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1837) offers the playwright's best-known, as well as his most extreme, expression of this historically specific sort of split or doubled modern consciousness, but its first and most sustained and systematic articulation – its originary moment in Büchner's dramatic writing – is found earlier, in his epic historical drama of the French Revolution, *Dantons Tod [Danton's Death]* (1835). It is there, for example, that Büchner finds the scope, in Silke-Maria Weineck's terms, to deploy an embodied drama of eroticism as the "genuine antithesis to grand historical discourse" (360); there that the playwright articulates, in the contrarian lassitude of Danton – the play's central figure and in some sense Büchner's own mouthpiece – that materialist, nihilist spirit of revolt which, for many, best expresses his distrust of revolutionary ideals and their attendant liberating myths. And it is there, in *Dantons Tod*, that Büchner sets the fragmentary episodicity of his dramaturgy – perhaps his most significant formal contribution to radical modernist drama – against its intended target, the revolutionary–romantic illusion that the sweep of historical action and experience is shaped by the organic wholeness and coherence of epic or tragedy.

And, curiously, while these fundamental articulations of Büchner's outlook and art run throughout his first, sprawling drama, binding its disparate episodes together like axial threads, critical inquiry into them – and in consequence critical inquiry into *Dantons Tod* as a whole – has tended in recent years to focus increasing attention upon a single, brief scene in the play, the so-called "Marion episode." Here, all the lines of Büchner's thought and aesthetic appear to converge, and in one exceptionally

compressive moment: a brief, radically paratactic dialogue, formally compact and thematically condensed, in which, in John Reddick's apt phrase, we find a "prismatic expression of Büchner's complex and paradoxical sense of existence" ("Mosaic and Flux" 41).

In almost every sense, the scene is remarkable. First, in a play set in the very thick of the French Revolution, a play, in fact, that is constructed as a dense montage of fragments drawn directly from the historical record, the Marion episode seems to have nothing at all to do with revolution, or even with politics or public life.[2] Its action, a kind of detached romantic dream narrated by a musing woman sitting at her lover's feet, breaks not slightly but entirely with the surface plot of the play, and it does so, moreover, at a moment of enormous political and dramatic tension, both in the play and in history: that of the Jacobin denunciation of the Dantonists, the last party to stand in the way of the ascendancy of Robespierre and the full realization of the Reign of Terror, in the spring of 1794. With their fall, the French Revolution entered its final, frozen stage, pursuing a relentless course of militancy that drove it into the ground in less than half a year. As is well known, no moment had called so strongly for public action and public speech from Georges Danton himself, the Revolution's most powerful popular leader, a vital bull of a man best known as the iron-lunged orator who had summoned the people to the nation's defence in 1792 with a call for "L'audace! L'audace! Toujours l'audace!" Danton's voice, almost alone, had sparked the spirit of defiant popular military force that led to the French victory at the battle of Valmy, and with it, he had gained a position of almost unassailable authority as a radical leader. Yet, as contemporaries noted, he did curiously little to oppose the Jacobin attack on his faction; and here, in Büchner's imaginary vignette, we find Danton sitting idle, as if nothing has happened, in a prostitute's room in the Palais Royal. Although his irrepressible voice everywhere dominates the play's dialogue, the Revolution's greatest popular orator is here relegated to a clearly secondary, largely silent position. Our attention, like his, is claimed, instead, by an ephemeral character, a woman who remains unnamed in the dialogue and who neither appears nor is even referred to elsewhere in the play. In Büchner's first draft, in fact, Marion was given no name at all, her role being denoted rather by a dash. Yet this fugitive figure, as Reddick points out, delivers the second longest monologue that Büchner ever composed (*Shattered Whole* 186–88), and the exceptional length of her address is matched by its singular character. It is sufficiently brief to warrant quotation in full.

Scene 5: A room

DANTON, MARION.

MARION No, let me be! Like this, at your feet. I want to tell you a story.

DANTON You could put your lips to better use.

MARION No, leave me be. My mother was a clever woman; she always told me chastity was a lovely virtue; when people came into the house and began to talk about certain things, she would tell me to leave the room. If I asked what the people had meant she told me I should be ashamed of myself; if she gave me a book to read I always had to skip over some pages. But I could read the Bible as I liked, as there all was holy, but I didn't understand, and there was no-one I wanted to ask; I brooded over them myself. Then came the spring; things happened all around me in which I had no part. I was in an atmosphere all my own; it almost stifled me. I looked at my body, and it seemed to me sometimes that I was doubled and then melted again into one. A young man came around that time to the house; he was handsome and said crazy things. I didn't know what he wanted, but I had to laugh. My mother asked him to come often, which was fine for us both. Finally we saw no reason why we shouldn't just as well lie side by side between two sheets as sit side by side on two chairs. I found in that even more pleasure than in his conversation, and saw no reason why I should be allowed the lesser but be deprived of the greater. We did it in secret. And so it went on. But I became like an ocean, devouring everything and digging itself deeper and deeper. There was for me nothing but one opposite; all men melted into one body. That was my nature, who can escape it? Finally he noticed. He came one morning and kissed me, as if he wanted to suffocate me; he wound his arms around my neck, I was terribly afraid. Then he let me free and laughed, and said he'd almost done something stupid; I should keep my dress and use it, it would wear out all well enough on its own; he didn't want to spoil my fun too soon, it was after all the only thing I had. Then he left; again, I didn't know what he wanted. That evening I sat at the window. I'm very sensitive and cling to all around me through feeling alone; I sank into the glowing waves of the sunset. Then a crowd came down the street, the children running before it, the women looking out from their windows. I looked down and saw they were carrying him by in a basket; the moon shone on his pale forehead; his hair was wet; he'd drowned himself. I had to cry. That was the only break in my being. Others have Sundays and weekdays, they work six days and pray on the seventh, they feel a bit touched each year on their birthday and think a bit each year on New Year's of the year that has passed. I know nothing of all that. I know no pauses, no changes. I am always only one thing. An unbroken yearning and holding, a glowing fire, a flowing stream. My mother died of grief; people point their fingers at me. That's foolish. It makes no difference in the end, what gives one joy. Bodies, pictures

of Christ, flowers or toys: it's the same feeling, those that enjoy the most, pray the most.

DANTON Why can't I hold your beauty wholly within me, capture it completely?

MARION Danton, your lips have eyes.

DANTON I wish I were a part of the air, to bathe you in my flood, and break myself in waves over your beautiful body. (26–28)

In outline, Marion's monologue is clear enough: an autobiographical account, figured as a narrative of sexual enlightenment, that begins in childhood and extends through adolescence and puberty, the emergence of sexual desire, the apparently boundless growth of her sexual appetite, the suicide of her first lover, and her realization of philosophical enlightenment. Yet, in detail, the narrative is dreamlike; the speaker, immersed in sensation and feeling, offers an account composed mostly of vague scenes and meditations that in their simplicity and lack of specificity resemble the elements of a parable more than the markers of an individual life. Technically, the address pushes Büchner's fragmentary, episodic writing to extremes, offering a breathtaking, intricately constellated mosaic of vivid images, but a mosaic so paratactic, vague, and elliptical as to defy comprehension – even, it seems, by its enigmatic speaker. Connecting to everything "through feeling alone" (28), Marion herself appears, in the end, less a fully realized individual than a shimmering figure of the mind, an ever-the-same idealization of love or of longing cobbled together from jagged fragments of memory. Her lover, a sort of mosaic in himself, remains equally indeterminate and distant, an inconsistent, nameless, featureless figure who takes intermittent form (like much of the world that Marion recalls) as little more than the source of a set of disparate sensations: his conversation, she remembers, was delightful; his grip on her throat tight; his lifeless brow pale in the moonlight.

As Reddick points out, "nothing like" this passage "had ever been written in German literature before; indeed nothing like it will be conceived for many decades to come, and even then it will be a latter-day disciple of Büchner's, Frank Wedekind, that takes up the torch" (Notes 226n41). Almost Baudelairean in its embrace of the ephemerality of sense and the lingering of sensation, in its rag picker's seizure of the jagged fragments of the real, even in its fastening upon the figure of a prostitute as its emblematic subject, Marion's narrative offers a peerless example of Büchner's densely corporeal poetry of the modern, his sense of a world wrought of vivid flashes of sight, touch, and sound, a world we make sense of almost blindly, unthinkingly, snatching up meaningful bits as we can in the midst of its grinding, bloody, beautiful flow. Yet, as Reddick's gesture toward Wedekind suggests, in its dense parataxis, its apparent insistence

on resonant incoherence and radical isolation within sensational consciousness, the episode seems also to suggest, more fully than any other passage in Büchner's tragically slim oeuvre, the uncanny modernity of his drama – its closer resemblance to the aesthetics and modes of apprehension of the modernist avant-garde than to anything nearer its own time and place. Indeed, for Weineck, we find here Büchner's most sustained and assertive invocation of "a principle of pure eroticism" that denies temporal and personal differentiation, escapes the capabilities of narrative, and "challenges the fundamental constituents of History" (363). It is as if, in the midst of this grim historical drama, of a narrative that relentlessly illustrates and anatomizes both the destructive tide of revolutionary modernity and the grinding realization that individuals are "but froth upon the waves," as he put it elsewhere, Büchner sets a lyric poem of nihilist redemption that bursts like a quick bloom or a shell in the sky, punctuating and perhaps giving the lie to the immense weight of the historical world that it interrupts (Büchner, "Letter" 195).

It is a lovely vision, and one that highlights well what would make Büchner such a resonant model for modernist dramatists. However, it is also an inaccurate and largely incomplete reading, and one too closely tied still to that mythic construction of his drama that recent scholarship aims to revise, for it finds once again – if now in only one scene – a work of proleptic modernism, apparently disconnected from its moment and context, immersed in sensation and interiority, and expressive of a radical aesthetic of fragmentation and a repudiation of narrative cohesion and of historicity not seen again for half a century. And the Marion episode, if we look more closely, is none of these things. To the contrary, it is a tightly coherent, metatheatrical allegory, an episode both highly traditional in form and densely continuous with the action of the play in which it is set. Rather than breaking with the great historical conflict it seems to interrupt or rejecting grand historical discourse to offer a lyric burst of pure eroticism, it traces the whole of that conflict in exacting, synthetic detail – recasting, unifying, and commenting upon its action through the lens of a recognizable and widely known conceit. Rather than anticipating modernist montage and rejecting historical coherence and form, it looks back to and retraces a formal and a historical past and recasts the Revolution in terms of a liberating eroticism that by Büchner's time was obsolete. As I hope to show, such recognitions do not detract from the scene's interest and significance; rather, they make strikingly evident the manner in which Büchner's drama may be seen not merely to anticipate modernism but to reveal the complex formal continuities that connect modern radical drama to the past.

First, if the Marion episode appears to break entirely with the surface plot of *Dantons Tod*, it by no means breaks with the play's strongly

developed scheme of pictorial dramaturgy, for, as many critics have noted, it shares its basic disposition – a sustained tableau in which one character sits at the feet and rests on the lap of another – with two other and equally noteworthy moments: the play's opening tableau (13–14), in which Danton rests at the feet of his beloved wife Julie, watching as a group of his revolutionary associates play an obscenely suggestive game of cards nearby and comparing the lap in which his head rests to a peaceful grave; and its closing tableau (88–90), in which Lucille Desmoulins, the wife of Danton's closest associate, Camille Desmoulins, sits at the foot of the scaffold, in the lap of a guillotine still wet with her husband's lifeblood and, after singing to the angel of death, closes the play with a suicidal cry of "Long live the King!"[3] What conjoins these three scenes, however, is not merely a shared composition and an overlapping motif that links eroticism to death, but also a shared indebtedness to a fairly evident, very specific formal precedent: the scene of Hamlet's staging of *The Mousetrap*, the play-within-a-play through which the Danish prince aims "to catch the conscience of a king" (2.2.606); as the murderous pantomime begins to unfold, Hamlet settles before Ophelia, making obscene innuendos about resting his head in her lap (3.2.107–22).[4] The interest of this shared derivation is in part thematic, for it serves as a reminder that the eroticism of the Marion episode is less an anomalous focus on sensual experience than a medial return to the play's framing motif, a traditional figural play upon the connections between eroticism and death. However, its interest is also formal, for the three scenes' indebtedness to Shakespeare's metatheatrical *Mousetrap* suggests as well that these tableaux serve, like their model, to introduce an allegorical metadrama or "show" that "imports the argument of the play" – as Ophelia says of the pantomimic action that opens *The Mousetrap* (3.2.136).

The parallel to *Hamlet*'s metatheatrical drama is played out most clearly and fully in the opening scene of Büchner's play: Danton's injunction to "Look at the pretty lady [*die hübsche Dame*]; how well she plays her cards!" (13) is the play's opening line, and over the next few minutes, Danton and Julie – and the spectator – are made audience to the interior drama of the lady's card-table play, a mostly silent action of hands and eyes that receives its closing, explanatory caption in her suggestive exchange with Hérault-Séchelles:

LADY I've lost!
HÉRAULT It was a love saga. It costs money like all the others.
LADY And you declared your love, like the deaf and dumb, with your fingers.
HÉRAULT And why not? People often understand things best if they're said with the body. I manoeuvred a playing-card queen into a love affair. My fingers were princes turned into spiders; you, dear lady,

> were the Good Fairy, but it went badly, the lady was constantly in labour, and had another knave coming every minute. I'd not let my daughter play such games: the gentlemen and ladies fall so disgustingly on top of each other, and the knaves follow after in the same way. (14)

Most literally, of course, Hérault is referring in his story to the misfortunes of the card game itself, its tricks refigured as couplings. Yet the drama of the card table is, like *The Mousetrap*, one step removed from the surface plot, and, by occupying a dramatic space that stands inside but apart from the surface action, the card-table play becomes a symbolic internal drama, an allegorical vignette – with commentary that serves as its emblematic caption – that signifies "tropically," to adopt Hamlet's suggestive but formally precise terminology (3.2.232). In such terms, the knavish "argument" of Hérault's mute card-play isn't too difficult to discern, given the woman's anomalous character and Danton's opening comments about her reputation – that "she always shows her heart to her husband and her 'diamond' to everyone else" [*sie halte ihrem cœur und andern Leuten das carreau hin*] (13). Hérault's playing partner remains unidentified but for her uniquely specified social position as a "lady" [*Dame*] (13), a nominal status shared by her playing partners but by none of the many women who appear elsewhere in the play. The lady's narrative and social precedence, her apparent promiscuity, and her gambling suggest that she is one of those "former marquises and baronesses" whom Robespierre identifies three scenes later with the sexual corruption inherited by the Revolution (24), and in figurative terms, she thus becomes legible as embodying the *ancien régime*. Hérault's account of his ill-fated dumb show draws out, in rapid strokes, the corruption of that regime, recalling in particular the reputed promiscuity of the queen and, in a nice bit of figural suggestiveness, the most notorious example of the regime's corruption, the diamond necklace affair. This opening vignette is, thus, a very fitting prelude to the action of the play: a compact, dramatic allegory of the Revolution's pre-history.

That allegorical prelude is balanced by a similarly emblematic gesture toward the Revolution's post-history in the play's closing scene. There, we are offered the tableau of Lucille, Camille Desmoulins' broken widow, settled in the lap of the scaffold, reflecting on death, and deciding, in the end, to embrace it in an act of suicidal yet ironic verbal defiance, the "Long live the King!" [*Es lebe der Konig!*] (90) that closes the play. Her declaration, a subversive tactic taken up by many of the Terror's last victims in the months following the play's immediate action, points past and beyond its immediate situation to prefigure the Terror's not-far-distant collapse in paranoia and disillusionment and, with it, the end of

the radical revolution. Together with the play's opening scene, then, it frames the play's history as that of the Revolution, from its outset to its collapse: and, in fact, though *Dantons Tod*'s direct action spans only a brief period of thirteen days, its episodes, as I've suggested elsewhere, trace out very clearly the Revolution's history as a whole. Between these allegorical bookends, however, lies all of the contradictory mass of the play and its third and most enigmatic emblem: the Marion episode.

In structural terms, the homologies between the Marion episode and the play's framing scenes are easily seen: in a reversal of the opening tableau's gender configuration, Marion sits at the feet of Danton, occupying (as Lucille occupies when she sits on the steps of the guillotine in the closing metatheatrical tableau) Hamlet's position of directorial authority. Like Lucille, Marion directs attention not to a separately realized scene (a play within yet another play) but to her own narrative performance: "I want to tell you a story," she insists (26). The problem is that this narrative emblem is difficult to decipher, for allegory relies on the familiarity of convention for its legibility. The conventions of card-playing alluded to in the opening scene are sufficiently familiar, even today, to allow for figurative reading, and Lucille's concluding *vivat rex* is a similarly legible gesture. In the Marion episode, however, Büchner relies upon a set of conventions that are now rather more obscure, for they are drawn not from drama nor from popular culture nor even, as Reddick correctly asserts, from any precedent in German literature, but from the pornographic literature of pre-revolutionary France.

That Büchner was familiar with literary pornography has never seriously been questioned; in fact, the play that he was planning at the time of his death just two years later was a drama on the life of Pietro Aretino, the notorious Renaissance author of the *Ragionamenti [Dialogues]* and the *Sonnetti lussuriosi [Lust Sonnets]*, both foundational works of pornography.[5] Moreover, and a moreover is hardly needed, he has Danton claim *La Pucelle d'Orleans [The Maid of Orleans]* (1755), Voltaire's exceedingly well-known pornographic account (in verse) of the life of Joan of Arc, as favoured reading material during the last days of his imprisonment (65).[6] The play's explicit reference to Voltaire could hardly be missed, but what seems not yet to have been noted is the remarkable resemblance between the Marion episode and an even more widely known work of eighteenth-century pornography: *Thérèse philosophe [Thérèse the Philosopher]*, first published in 1748, almost certainly by Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, Marquis d'Argens. It was not necessary in 1835 that Büchner make this literary gesture explicit. *Thérèse philosophe*, or *T— p—* as the work was most commonly called, tops Robert Darnton's list of the "forbidden best-sellers" of the pre-revolutionary era, and even in Büchner's time this fictional autobiography of a female prostitute and *philosophe* remained

the single best-known work of pornography in Europe.[7] Many readers who might be expected merely to recognize Danton's last act reference to *La Pucelle* could reasonably be assumed to have read *Thérèse* – or at the least to have been sufficiently familiar with its contents to have recognized in Marion's narrative a clear echo of its story.

Like the Marion episode, *Thérèse philosophe* takes the form of a prostitute's autobiographical monologue presented as a conversational address to the narrator's lover, who serves as an obvious surrogate for the presumably male reader. Also like Marion's narrative, Thérèse's story is composed in a markedly decorous tone, despite (or, rather, in deliberate, piquant contrast to) its pornographic content. In both instances, the course of events is arranged as a sort of erotic *bildungsroman* spanning the female narrator's development from innocent sexual curiosity to enlightened libertinism. Significantly, the resemblances are not limited to such general, formal properties: the particular episodes of Marion's life bear a recognizable resemblance to the events that shape Thérèse. Both Thérèse and Marion begin as naïve children dominated by religious mothers; both experience in puberty an emergent sexual desire that is described specifically, and crucially, in terms of a doubling or splitting of the self. Thérèse is confused at "two passions within me" (Boyer 9); Marion, that "it seemed to me sometimes that I was doubled" (27). Both women find relief in the counsels of a new male acquaintance who appears initially as a household guest, wins favour as delightful raconteur, and ends by introducing the heroine to a materialist critique of religion that here – as in so many pornographic works of the time – clears the way for an embrace of libertinism. In both narratives, that critique is followed by a phase of extreme promiscuity, although significantly, in *Thérèse philosophe*, it is a secondary character, Madame Bois-Laurier, who undergoes and relates (in an autobiography within Thérèse's autobiography) that experience.[8] For both Marion and Thérèse, however, such promiscuity is associated with a moment of threatening vulnerability and loss of control, and both women emerge from their encounters enlightened, as libertine philosophers.[9] Finally, each offers her story as a sort of object lesson for the benefit of her now educated and aroused lover and narrative audience.

There are also, however, significant differences between Marion's narrative and its model, and in these, the episode's allegorical structure begins to emerge in sharper relief. As the example of Bois-Laurier suggests, Thérèse shifts over the course of her narrative through several sets of friends and acquaintances, a number of habitations and locales, and multiple lovers. In Marion's much shorter narrative, Büchner combines and radically condenses Thérèse's various life chapters, a formal tactic that accounts, at least in part, for the monologue's jarringly, seemingly proleptic paratactic structure and suggests, in addition, the manner in which the monologue may be

construed less as an inchoate mosaic than as a series of rapid, recognizable narrative gestures – that is, as a shorthand account of a familiar story. Such recognition, in turn, invites the reader to consider the possibility that Marion's indeterminate lover is to be understood not as an indeterminate and vacillating presence but as a sort of composite figure, a combination of different men cobbled together – for coherence on such a small scale – into one individual. But a composite of what? Or of whom? While Marion seems unmistakably to be a version of Thérèse, her lover contrasts radically, in his murderous jealousy and eventual suicide, with anything we see in *Thérèse* and, indeed, anything suggested by the generic conventions of pre-revolutionary pornographic literature. The tragic moonlit procession in which Marion's lover is carried dead beneath her window, his forehead gleaming up from a basket to provoke, as Marion puts it, "the only break in my being" (28) departs quite plainly from the materialist tendency of the earlier pornographic narratives to remain essentially comic and open-ended, proliferative, suggestive of infinite variation and repetition.

Yet, if Marion's lover diverges substantially from *pornographic* convention, he is not altogether unrecognizable, for his composite figure is pieced together of coherent parts, and these parts correspond, in characterization and effect, to the play's three primary characters, Danton, Camille Desmoulins, and Robespierre, whom Büchner, as I've shown elsewhere, employs as figures who each embody a particular rhetoric and a particular discursive phase of revolutionary politics (Buckley 120–48). In the attractive "young man" who inaugurates Marion's libertinism through senseless verbal play we can recognize the figure of Desmoulins, the paradigmatic speaker of the early Revolution's subversive, catachrestic rhetoric of liberation: in the play, as in the Revolution itself, "headlong, lightly-sparkling" Camille, as Carlyle aptly described him (77), was the foremost rhetorical satirist, miming, ironizing, and undercutting each successive language of power until Robespierre, a longtime friend and ally, found his sacrilegious attacks on Jacobin ideology intolerable. In their catalytic role, their liberating effect, and their subversively delightful outlook, the figures of Camille and Marion's young man are almost identical, and their major statements are strikingly similar as well. Just as Marion's lover aims through his delightful speech to undermine and eliminate one barrier to physical love after another, until his object of affection finally believes that they might "just as well lie side by side between two sheets," so Camille aims through his delightful political rhetoric to undermine and eliminate one barrier to political freedom after another, until the nation finally pursues a constitution that would, like "a transparent robe nestled snugly around the body of the People," yield "to every throb of the arteries, every tensing of the muscles, every twitch of the sinews" (19). Camille declares, in the play's opening, a similarly figured, similarly urgent need for a constitution that would be "a

transparent robe nestled snugly around the body of the People," yielding "to every throb of the arteries, every tensing of the muscles, every twitch of the sinews" (15).

Similarly, as Marion becomes "like an ocean, devouring everything" and as, for her, "all men melted into one body" (27) we can recognize both the popular image of Danton himself, the revolutionary figure who, in the play as in history, embodies the unification, in the crises of 1792, of the disparate mass of "the People," and his hyperbolic rhetoric, which carried that task through by melding the Revolution's enemies into a single threat, rousing the revolutionary populace to ever-increasing acts of destructive revolt against an increasingly undifferentiated foe. Once again, Büchner reinforces his figural homology with a close rhetorical echo of his figural character's initial image of the Revolution: here, Marion's description of a love that devours and dissolves its objects into molten passion recalls Danton's ironic, opening-act warning – a cautionary response to Camille's ardent figuration of the people's body – that "the statue of freedom is not yet cast: the furnace is glowing, all of us can still burn our fingers" (16). Finally, Marion remarks, her lover "noticed" her impassioned state (27), and in his discordantly murderous response we find the figure of Robespierre and his suffocating revolutionary devotion as they are expressed in Büchner's surrounding drama Throughout the play, as, again, in the historical Revolution, Robespierre exemplifies the stifling, unopposable voice of the Jacobin regime, strangling the body of popular politics in its disciplinary embrace, pursuing a politics of physical violence and rhetorical negation, periphrastic insinuation, and silence, and catalyzing the intense fearfulness that accompanied the Terror. In Marion's account, "He ... kissed me as if he wanted" suffocate me; he wound his arms around my neck, I was terribly afraid" (27).

What such parallel structures suggest is that in Marion's autobiographic musings Büchner offers a montage that is complex, to be sure, but not inscrutable and not the sort of radically inchoate combination of subjective, lyric fragments that scholarship has suggested. It is, to the contrary, a construction that is delicately and rigorously ordered and clearly allegorical in structure – an emblem much more closely related in formal terms to Goethe, even to the baroque *Trauerspiel*, than to Wedekind and Büchner's modernist heirs. Marion, most obviously, is both a prostitute and a figure for the Revolution itself as the living body and spirit of the people, and her autobiography sets the discursive progress of revolutionary politics neatly within the strikingly homologous frame of a conventional narrative [of] erotic liberation. Neither the antithesis of a grand historical narrative nor a vision of erotic utopia, Büchner's montage is rather a dialectical image in which these two discourses are meshed and interwoven.

Yet, if the structure of this allegory is clear, its meaning is more elusive. What does it mean to figure the French Revolution as an autobiography of sexual liberation, to write it, literally, as libertine pornography? Certainly, the trope linking revolutionary action to female sexuality did not by any means originate with Büchner. As Lynn Hunt observes, the eroticized figure of Liberty, or "Marianne," appeared in her more radical, active form quite early in the Revolution, and even in the nineteenth century, the sexually aggressive figure of bare-breasted Liberty leading the people was a commonplace (*Politics* 61–62). Such aggressiveness could easily be seen as negative, of course: the violence of the *journées* was described in terms of excessive, predatory female sexuality at least as early as the Insurrection of Women in October of 1789. Moreover, as Hunt observes and as Madelyn Gutwirth explains more extensively, the active, assertive female image of revolution was rejected and women's participation in politics suppressed, even within the Revolution's radical political culture (*Politics* 93–94; Gutwirth 211–368). Thus, while revolutionary action was, at times, figured positively in terms of female sexuality, Gutwirth makes very clear the extent to which both pro- and anti-revolutionary iconography linked active female sexuality, or even evident sexual appetite, to violence and chaos and tended overwhelmingly to prefer insipid, passive female figures in positive iconography (341–85). Such tendencies, she points out, only became stronger in the aftermath of the Revolution (382–86).

All of which makes Büchner's emblematic gesture toward a *pre*-revolutionary image of female sexuality more noteworthy. Marion, in fact, conforms recognizably to the literary type (as described by Kathryn Norberg) of the "libertine whore," a "particular picture of the prostitute" presented in "virtually all" of French pornographic literature between 1750 and Sade's *Histoire de Juliette, ou Les prospérités de la vice [The Story of Juliette: or, The Rewards of Vice]*, probably written (appropriately enough) in 1792 (227). As Norberg points out, the libertine whore contrasts markedly with conventional male-fantasy images of prostitutes from both earlier and subsequent pornographic literature. Unlike the "virtuous courtesan" – the innocent, often fatally diseased victim who retains her sexual naïveté and natural modesty together with a childlike sense of virtue – the libertine whore is "sensual, sensible and skilled. She is healthy and possessed of a very healthy – that is, normal – sexual appetite. She is . . . intelligent, independent, proud, and reasonable, . . . *not* diseased or monstrous; she is not humiliated or victimized either by life or her clients" (227). She "belongs," Norberg observes, "to the passions," and "[u]nlike the virtuous courtesan, she knows no shame or guilt" (228). She is "*complaisante*, but only up to a point" (231). The libertine whore, Norberg observes, is a male-fantasy figure, but one who "is – at least sometimes – in control" (233). That

authority is reflected formally as well, for the libertine whore, like Marion, characteristically narrates her own story (230). In the Marion episode, the very opening of the scene reflects immediately this conjunction of sexual and narrative authority: "No, leave me be" (26) are Marion's first words, and she follows them by claiming that authorial position which Hamlet occupied in the scene described earlier and that Danton himself occupied in the play's opening moments: "Like this, at your feet. I want to tell you a story" (26).

The stories told by libertine whores, in keeping with their character, generally offer more than personal histories of sexual encounters: as Norberg suggests, a libertine narrator relates her life as an exemplary story, as a confirmation of materialist philosophy and of her own position as materialist *philosophe* (227, 235). In the context of pre-revolutionary France, such narratives took aim at the hypocrisy of the church and at "the new cult of womanhood, with its belief in innate feminine modesty and virtue" (238). In *Thérèse philosophe*, it is the church that receives the brunt of the materialist critique. The "two passions within me, which were impossible to reconcile" (Boyer 9), that splitting of the self which Büchner carries over into the Marion episode, is in *Thérèse* specifically defined as the love of God and the love of sensual pleasure, and Thérèse offers her life story largely as the story of the gradual revelation she experienced that the difference between these two passions – indeed, their apparent opposition – was a false belief promulgated by the church. It is through just this sort of moral differentiation between various passions, Thérèse asserts, that "most of humanity" deludes itself "as to its virtues and vices" (qtd. in Darnton 251, 253). The parallels are evident in *Dantons Tod*. Marion concludes her narrative by asserting that "[i]t makes no difference in the end, what gives one joy. Bodies, pictures of Christ, flowers or toys: it's the same feeling, those that enjoy the most, pray the most"; and Danton, taking up her argument, adopts just the same reasoning in his immediately subsequent interview with Robespierre – in what amounts to his most forceful political attack on the Jacobins' ideals.

ROBESPIERRE Do you deny virtue?
DANTON And vice. We are all Epicureans, some coarse, some refined – Christ was the finest of all; that's the only difference between human beings that I can find. Everyone behaves according to his nature: what we do we do because it does us good. (33)[10]

In such terms, Büchner extends *Thérèse philosophe*'s materialist critique of religion and applies it to revolutionary ideology, and particularly to the religiously figured ideology of the Terror as it is presented here in Robespierre and St. Just.[11]

Yet, such direct analogizing, attributing to *Dantons Tod* the materialist argument of *Thérèse philosophe*, raises some difficult questions. As Darnton, Hunt, Norberg, and others have demonstrated, libertine literature contributed significantly to the discourse of political radicalism in the period leading up to the Revolution, but libertinism – a radical philosophy closely associated, before the Revolution, with the blurred social boundary between the aristocracy and the *haute* bourgeoisie – began to lose its resonance and relevance as soon as the Revolution began, and pornography, too, quickly lost its radical political charge as the Revolution forcibly eliminated old class structures and did away with the monarchy's regulation of the press. Moreover, with the elimination of the aristocracy and, as a result, of the exceptional social and economic displacement experienced throughout the period, prostitution too changed radically – so too did the symbolic status of the prostitute (Norberg 240–44). The libertine whore, exemplified here by Marion, was replaced almost immediately, in pornography as in life, by the *grisette*, or common prostitute – a figure exemplified in the play by the diseased and exploited Rosalie and Adelaide, who enter with Hérault-Séchelles immediately after Marion's narrative, and by the citizen Simon's unnamed daughter (17–18), the play's pre-eminent figure of the economic want that drove women to prostitution. Materialist pornography, Hunt reminds us, reached "its culmination and reductio ad absurdum" ("Obscenity" 330) in the mechanistic work of Sade – a culmination and collapse that coincides, as one might expect, with the onset of the Terror and its radical revision of the politics of desire. Politically motivated pornography, she argues, virtually ceased to exist after the 1790s, and opposition to pornographic literature had within a few decades shifted critically from political to moral grounds (302–03).

Büchner's invocation of libertine pornography, like his incorporation of Robespierre's speeches, is thus a gesture made with cultural fragments and literary fossils: Marion is a libertine whore, but such a figure would by 1835, and even in fact by 1794, have been recognizably dated – not exactly obsolete, but certainly qualified, mediated by the audience's awareness of all (including the Revolution) that stood between themselves and the vital libertinism of *Thérèse philosophe* – and in these shifts, the problems and contradictions of reading Marion's narrative as a libertine critique of the religion of revolutionary politics become more evident. Sharing that audience awareness reminds us, for example, that Danton's materialist insistence that "[e]veryone behaves according to his nature" (33) is – in the wake of the September massacres, the horrific violence of the Terror, and the privation that produced such sexual violence as the prostitution of Simon's daughter – more a nightmarish recognition than an insight that promises potential liberation: "What is it, what in us," he asks Julie, "that whores, lies, steals, and murders?" (49). Even Danton, *within* the play, is

irrevocably distanced from the philosophical moment of *Thérèse philosophe* by the violence of revolutionary politics – in both the theatre of the guillotine and the economy of the street. And, in fact, the play registers this distance, for Marion seems, even for him, less a living figure than an artefactual construction of revolutionary longing, a reconstructed image of the Revolution's lost motive spirit of desire, fashioned from those fragments of libertinism left scattered about by the mill of historical violence that that desire helped to catalyze, shape, and produce – the violence not only of the guillotine but of that similarly destructive tide of revolutionary sexual consumption into which Simon's daughter, the daughter of the people, disappears at the play's outset. The play offers evident support for such a reading: just before the Marion episode, at the close of the preceding scene, one Dantonist (Legendre) asks another (Lacroix) where their leader could be. "How do I know?" replies Lacroix.

> He's trying to re-create the Medici Venus piecemeal from all the *grisettes* of the Palais-Royal; he's making a mosaic, is how he put it. Heaven knows what limb he's working on right now. What a great pity nature has cut beauty into pieces like Medea her brother, and buried it in fragments in different bodies. (26)

Less an invocation of pure eroticism than a melancholic reconstruction of some lost ideal that might lend sense to fallen chaos, Danton's erotic project (and its literal embodiment in Marion and her narrative) thus mirrors, and recapitulates as a central emblem *within* the play's action, the larger *reconstructive* project that Büchner undertakes in the play as a whole: that of piecing together a mosaic of fragments through which revolutionary action and speech regain a discernible, if irrecoverable, unity and coherence and in which their underlying dynamic of violence and desire are revealed. Read in this way, the monologue's value to Danton and the philosophical logic of his attempt to re-create the Medici Venus become evident. In it, the action of the play's pornographic realm reflects and reveals that of its political realm, refiguring the theatre of the guillotine and the public action of the play as a theatre of eroticism and private sexual action and representing the fatal course of revolutionary history as a narrative of libertine desire even as it represents the fatal course of libertine desire in revolutionary history. Far from offering the image of a pure eroticism that throws off the burden of history, the monologue embeds libertine eroticism within a history that it illuminates and perhaps shapes but by which it is destroyed – both as a structure of action and as a model of subjective desire. For here, too, the unifying figure of the libertine whore that Büchner takes from *Thérèse* meets (just as Marion at the end of her monologue is met by Rosalie and Adelaide) the fragmented mosaic of the modern prostitute body, a dialectical image that, for the nineteenth

century, as Shannon Bell observes, became a privileged emblem of both the fragmented and commodified body and the liberating potential of the modern (44).[12] In this figural doubleness, this binding together of the violent genealogies of revolutionary history and of modern subjectivity, I'd suggest, the Marion episode registers the emergence out of Sadean violence of the fragmented and exploited modern subject, throwing a line across the fracture of the Revolution to reveal the specific historical processes that link Baudelaire's darkly profane, post-revolutionary figure of the streetwalker to Boyer's subversively vital, pre-revolutionary figure of philosophical enlightenment and libertine freedom.

Looking at the Marion episode in this way – as the Janus-faced emblem of a transformative change, the figure of a subjectivity that produces and entails its own fragmentation and ruin – has significant implications for our understanding of Büchner's relation to later drama. For, if Marion narrates the formation of the Benjaminian figure of the modern prostitute and offers, as well, a dialectical image of revolution, she also suggests – albeit as mosaic, not yet as montage, and much less as radical assemblage – the formative dynamic of that multi-chronic, fragmented subjectivity described by Strindberg as a characteristic condition of modernity. "My souls (characters)," as Strindberg famously put it in the foreword to *Miss Julie*, "are conglomerates of past and present stages of culture, bits out of books and newspapers, scraps of humanity, torn shreds of once fine clothing now turned to rags, exactly as the human soul is patched together" (60). Marion's self-narration, like the larger dramatic construction of revolutionary history in which it is set, is a conglomeration of very much this sort. In it, Büchner brings together the jagged fragments, moments, and temporalities of revolutionary history to construct not only a dialectical image of revolution but an exoteric, self-fashioned image of the historical formation of modern subjectivity.[13] More than merely marking a continuity within the play between the political and the erotic, the Marion episode thus suggests as well the connection and continuity between the radical subjectivities figured in Strindberg, Wedekind, and the avant-garde and those of the late-eighteenth century, locating between them the contradictory, multichronic, generic multiplicity of political theatricality during the Revolution, that initial and traumatic registration of the fragmentation of historical consciousness wrought by modernity.

And it is in this resonant figuration, a construct that recognizes the disenchantments of modernity even as it gestures toward the wholeness and unity of a lost allegorical coherence, that we may recognize finally Büchner's closer kinship with the doubled consciousness of second-generation modernity (that of Marx and Baudelaire) than with the radically disconnected aesthetic and anti-historical impulses and outlook of modernism. Invoking both the fragmentation of industrial modernity and the

synthetic wholeness of pre-revolutionary aesthetics, the Marion episode points both forward and back, linking Wedekind and Strindberg not only to revolution but to the allegorical drama of Goethe, Shakespeare, and the *Trauerspiel*. In the process, the scene uncovers that longer continuity in the drama's modern history suggested by what Jane Brown has aptly termed the "persistence of allegory." In such a reading, the Marion episode – and in a larger sense Büchner's drama as a whole – stands not as a mythic and proleptic example of modernism but as a sharply contemporary effort to trace the genealogy of modernity and a crucial nodal point in a longer, and more continuous, history of modern drama.

NOTES

1 All translations are my own.

2 It is, in Reddick's estimation, "totally disconnected . . . in its relationship to the rest of the play" ("Mosaic and Flux" 40). As Weineck puts it, the scene "stands on its own," neither "formally embedded in the dramatic context" nor "lifted from the historical record that would contain it in an implied extra-textual historiography" (355).

3 The similarities between these scenes have not gone entirely unnoticed. As Reddick points out, "despite its blatant non-integration at the relatively superficial level of plot and personae," the stage disposition of the Marion episode mirrors Lucille's concluding gesture ("Mosaic and Flux" 42–43); and, as Reinhold Grimm notes,

> Something that has hardly been noticed, let alone investigated, is the circular construction of *Danton's Death* and the concomitant function which is assigned to the two female figures as well as to love. This oversight is the more surprising since all these elements are particularly noticeable in Büchner's drama of revolution. One need only compare the first scene ("Danton on a footstool at Julie's feet") with the last scene, where Lucille sits "on the steps of the guillotine":
>
> > [DANTON No, Julie, I love you like the grave . . . your heart my coffin]
> > [LUCILE *(enters . . .)* I'm sitting in your lap, you silent angel of death . . . You dear cradle, . . . you sang him to the grave with your sweet tongue."]
>
> The connection between these images, the cyclical way in which they anticipate and echo one another, can hardly be overlooked, especially since they are so boldly unusual. (86)

4 I am indebted to Martin Meisel for pointing out this connection between Shakespeare's *Mousetrap* scene and Büchner's opening vignette.

5 An amusing and effective reading of Aretino's status is apparent in Paula Findlen's note as follows:

> In Torriano's *Piazza universale*, an Italian phrasebook for Englishmen, the forty-second dialogue, entitled "Stranger in Conversation with a Roman Bookseller," offered the following example of a model conversation in an Italian bookstore:
>
> > "I am seeking the works of A[retino]," says the Stranger.
> > "You may seek them from one end of the Row to the other, and not find them," replies the bookseller.
> > "And why?"
> > "Because they are forbidden, both the *Postures* and *Discourses*, that imbracing [*sic*] of men and women together in unusual manners, begets a scandal, and the Inquisition permits no such matters, it condemns all such sordid things, may not so much, but the Amorous Adventures in Romances it condemns." (56–57)

Quite a phrasebook! On Büchner's Aretino play, see Hauschild.

6 From act four, scene three:

> *([Camille] picks up a book)*
> DANTON What's that?
> CAMILLE *The Night Thoughts* [Edward Young's *The Complaint, or Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality*].
> DANTON Do you want to die twice over? It's La Pucelle for me! I want to go out of life as I'd go out of a brothel, not as I'd slink away from the bed of a nun: life is a whore that fornicates with the whole world. (81)

7 Darnton devotes an entire chapter to the work in his *Forbidden Best-Sellers*. On the popularity of *Thérèse*, see as well Hunt, "Obscenity"; Norberg.

8 Bois-Laurier, like Marion, relates her promiscuity to her "nature," explaining that "Nature was capricious with me from the beginning, placing an insurmountable impediment in the path that leads from girlhood to womanhood" (Boyer 91). An orphan, Bois-Laurier is prostituted at an early age, and "the solidity of [her] maidenhead" enables her to take on ever-increasing numbers of clients eager to deflower her: "These twenty athletes were followed by more than five hundred others during the space of five years. The Red and the Black, Justice and Finance placed me one by one in stranger and fancier positions" (97–98).

9 It is Bois-Laurier's attempt to prostitute Thérèse and her ensuing narrative of her own life as a prostitute that lead Thérèse into a threatening encounter with a client and provide for her narrative a surrogate experience of prostitution.

10 In light of Reddick's apt observation that "[t]he argument of the two men is clearly central to the specific plot and conflict of the play" (Notes 227n51), it is worth noting the evident resemblance between this statement and the argument made by Thérèse in her "Address to the Theologians on the Liberty of Man"; see Darnton 252–53.

11 Camille's catachrestic portrait in *Le Vieux Cordelier*, read aloud by Robespierre in act one, scene six, offers the best example of this presentation:

> ROBESPIERRE (reading) "Robespierre the bloody Messiah on his Mount Calvary, flanked by those thieves Couthon and Collot, sacrificing others but not sacrificing himself. The guillotine's holy sisters stand below like Mary and Magdalene. Saint-Just clings to him like St. John the Evangelist, making known to the National Convention the apocalyptic revelations of the Master; he carries his head like the holy sacrament."
>
> SAINT-JUST I'll make him carry his like Saint Denys – under his arm. (36)

12 For Benjamin, Bell notes, "[T]he modern prostitute body acts as a hieroglyph providing a trace to the sublime body, providing a connection with the sacred which can, however, be maintained for only a fleeting moment" (44).

13 Peter Uwe Hohendahl makes a similar argument about Büchner's treatment of subjectivity.

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ABSTRACT: No moment in Georg Büchner's drama has been assigned more significance as a marker of his radical modernity than the "Marion episode." Apparently unprecedented in form and content, this brief, enigmatic exchange between a prostitute and the protagonist of *Dantons Tod [Danton's Death]* is taken as the archetype of Büchner's jagged, proto-montage aesthetic, as the first example of his proto-psychological focus on the close rendering of sensation, and as the foundational statement of what is taken to be his proto-nihilist repudiation of history. This essay suggests that such impressions are mistaken. It reveals the Marion episode to be a tightly constructed allegory of French Revolutionary history, and one that takes as its precedent and pretence the most widely known work of pre-Revolutionary pornography in Europe, the once-forbidden *Thérèse philosophe [Thérèse the Philosopher]*. Linking the pornographic to the political, mirroring each in the other, the Marion episode, it suggests, does not use

eroticism to break with history so much as to illuminate it, figuring the Revolution as a process shaped and driven by a libertine structure of desire that its violence exhausts and destroys. Rather than marking out Büchner as a proleptic modernist, the "Marion episode," it concludes, places him firmly, with Baudelaire, in second-generation modernity, registering the emergence of the modern from the destructive violence of the past.

KEYWORDS: "Marion episode," *Dantons Tod*, Georg Büchner, *Thérèse philosophe*, pornography, French Revolution, allegory, drama and history, modernist drama, modern drama

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