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The Spirit of Matter in Büchner

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Abstract: In her article "The Spirit of Matter in Büchner" Barbara Natalie Nagel investigates different vectors of Georg Büchner's materialism: historical, philosophical, ethical, physiological. The analysis of what Büchner presents to be a necessary link between physiology and revolution aims to show how Büchner has a tendency first to entangle two relatively static, binary oppositions — literal/figurative and material/spiritual — in order then to play them against one another. Büchner thus uses the dynamics of literalization to evoke necessity: for example, if the revolution is conceived of in physiological terms, then the will either has to become physiological or biology has to become spiritual. With this, Büchner achieves a literary parody of materialism that points to alternative forms of materialism, such as Benjamin's "anthropological materialism" or Gnostic materialism, neither of which are purely material or purely ideal. Rather, Büchner's literary parody of materialism approaches what one might call "materiality without matter."

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Barbara Natalie NAGEL

The Spirit of Matter in Büchner

In a letter from 1836, the young German writer, revolutionary, and medical student Georg Büchner writes the sentence: "Our time is purely material" (*Schriften* 440). To read Büchner as a materialist writer is thus anything but new; he has been aligned with all sorts of materialism: historical materialism of course, but also in distinction from that, philosophical, ethical, and physiological materialism. When Büchner's relation to materialism is nevertheless put into question, it is usually on account of his alleged relationship to German idealism. Koji Taniguchi describes Büchner's work as oscillating between "Fichte's subjective idealism on the one hand, the voluntaristic ethics of which admonished him from early adolescence always to act 'according to my principles,' and French materialism on the other hand, according to which the human will must submit to physical, physiological and social constraints" (83). There would not be much to add to this if not for the fact that Büchner's affiliation with materialism was also rendered uncertain from a direction other than that of idealism and it was the merit of Günter Oesterle to point out that Büchner's *Woyzeck* stages "physiology and its parody" (201, 207). As a consequence, neither idealism nor materialism are safe from Büchner. In the following, I present a rhetorical analysis of a number of passages by Büchner in order to show that among the different vectors of Büchner's materialism, the discourse of idealism is subjected to a certain literary materialistic parody and, moreover, that this parody extends proleptically to the idealistic aspects of Marxist dialectics. This specifically literary materialism feeds upon — and at the same time takes apart — the idealistic moment or kernel of materialist doctrines, and it is at this very limit that the theoretical significance of Büchner's writing becomes most apparent. The notion of "idealism" will hence appear in two different functions: first, in Fichte's sense as subjectivity and the will, because the opposition between scientific materialism and subjective idealism relates to questions of voluntarism and determinism and second, Büchner's idealistic tendencies entail metaphysics in a more general sense insofar as the contrast between idealism vs. materialism is relevant for the status of concepts as such: even matter becomes metaphysical when consolidated as a concept.

Despite their affection for the revolutionary Büchner, historical materialists have at times had their problems with him. Already the first materialist reading of his work by György Lukács bears witness to this troubled relationship between Büchner and historical materialism. In his essay "The Fascistically Falsified and the Real Georg Büchner," Lukács is concerned with defending Büchner against fascist appropriations of his work. This attempt, however, is hampered by certain of Büchner's own utterances, which Lukács refers to obliquely and with some embarrassment as "unclear tendencies" (204). Lukács is referring to statements that do not fit into the image of the "consequent and disputatious materialist Büchner" — as for example a passage from a March 1835 letter to the co-editor of *Danton's Death*, Karl Gutzkow, in which Büchner rants: "Fatten the peasants and the revolution gets apoplexy. A chicken in the pot of every farmer and the Gallic rooster dies" (*Schriften* 400). The ancestor of Büchner's chicken is the proverbial *Gallic* national dish, the *poule au pot*, with which Henri IV intended to provide his farmers every Sunday. Büchner, on the contrary, pursues the opposite strategy of not allowing the living situation of the farmers to rise above the poverty-line: without hunger, no revolution. Hence, in his reading of Büchner's chicken-*sententia*, Emil Staiger admires the *sententia's* "brief severity, this inexorable soberness" but also warns of its "extreme cruelty" (141, 146). One could, of course, hold against Staiger's reading that Büchner's utterance can easily be interpreted analogously to the communist critique of socialism along the lines of "Don't let them fob you off with a chicken! Don't improve capitalism — abolish it!" Or, one could read these utterances as an expression of the fact that there is no revolution without sacrifices (see Werner 91; Schütte 198). Or, one might interpret it as a manifesto for a hunger strike, for turning peasants into revolutionary anorexics à la Simone Weil. But there seems to be something different at stake here insofar as Büchner *ex negativo* delineates the limits of a metaphorical reading of hunger. How so? Every metaphorical interpretation that agrees with Büchner's cynical premise — that material need should be aggravated in order ultimately to be resolved into freedom — runs the danger of

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functionalizing physical suffering as a means to a "just" end. This creates a circular economy in which just ends (allegedly) "justify" (unjust) means, an economy of which Benjamin gives an excellent account in his "Critique of Violence." Yet, hunger resists spiritualization or *Vergeistigung* that is, the characteristically free activity of *Geist*, except inasmuch as it is the very trope — and thus minimally spiritual — for the non-spiritual, for material conditions as such. Put otherwise, hunger is a trope for non-signifying materiality, for the collapse of sense. What is at stake here is thus the dynamic interaction between two relatively static binary oppositions: literal/figurative and material/spiritual; in troping its own external limit, spirit paradoxically realigns itself with matter and materiality, thus either driving spirit down into the abyss of the "literal sense" or converting materiality into an aporetic figure of itself.

This impossibility of reading hunger either purely spiritually or interpreting the revolution exclusively materialistically thus manifests itself in a constant interplay between literal and figurative speech; exemplarily, the following above-mentioned: "Fatten the peasants and the revolution gets apoplexy. A chicken in the pot of every farmer and the Gallic rooster dies." The *sententia* goes awry: the Gallic rooster dies and the anthropomorphized revolution suffers a stroke; concrete entities such as fat peasants and boilers are mixed with idealistic notions such as "revolution" and "Gallic rooster." As a consequence, the figurative terms are literalized, and returned, however awkwardly, to a certain materiality, just as the literal terms, as emblems of a political ideal, acquire a certain awkwardly figurative spirituality. In comparison to the Gallic rooster who in the years between 1789 and 1804 was the French heraldic sign, the symbol for a hard-won freedom, the boiler hen might be rich in meat but not in metaphor. What holds the different registers of the words "chicken" and "rooster" together is only a feeble *tertium comparationis* to which a broad hint has to be given through the use of italics: it is the polysemy of the semantic field of poultry. Within this field, even the fattened peasants resemble Thanksgiving turkeys. For a rhetorician like Quintilian surely this would be enough to dismiss Büchner's *sententia* as a corrupt *sententia* because "a verbal polysemy is connected with a false factual analogy" (VIII, 5, 21). In the case of Büchner's *sententia*, the false analogy consists of two parallelized sentences whose relation is suggested to be causal. In thus formulating a law of cause and effect from the "feathered" comparability, Büchner overstretches the latter. For not only does he suggest that there is a causal relation between the situation of the peasant population and the state of the revolution but also that this relation is inversely proportional: the better the peasants are, the worse the revolution is. This calculation is made about a half-year after the *Hessian Messenger* campaign failed. It hence seems reasonable to suspect a certain bitterness or at least resignation on Büchner's part (Mayer 50). After all, the peasants are said to have handed over most of the leaflets directly to the police: Büchner's co-editor Ludwig Weidig and his close friend Karl Minnigerode were imprisoned, Weidig tortured; Büchner himself was repeatedly interrogated and — after he had finally fled to Strasbourg — ended up on the wanted list.

How did the failure of the *Hessian Messenger* campaign alter Büchner's political views? A question often discussed: according to Jacques Rancière the consequences of the failure of the *Hessian Messenger* extend to Büchner's understanding of both revolution and science. Rancière is right insofar as the leaflet-protest indeed bears implications as strongly materialistic as they are idealistic (see Rancière 43; see also Müller-Sievers 115). On the one hand the aims of the protest — freedom and equality — are of course idealistic in nature. On the other hand, the outline of the pamphlet follows a statistical, scientific logic: the breakdown of the annual taxes of the people according to who is actually profiting from them shall mobilize the rural population for the revolutionary cause. In this alliance of revolutionary-idealistic with scientific-materialistic aspects — a combination for which we have already accounted on the tropological level in Büchner's letter to Gutzkow — Rancière sees the project of a "revolutionary science" realized, and then going awry. This is why Rancière reads the failure of the *Hessian Messenger* initiative not only as the miscarriage of idealism, but more generally as the end of Büchner's project of a revolutionary science: "A first divorce between science and the revolution. This does not mean that the revolution has been superseded or impugned by science. What is left behind is the idea that science can do anything for the revolution" (Rancière 44). Hence, Rancière argues that Büchner then abandons all hope that science could support or ground a revolution. Likewise, Armin Schäfer proclaims there to be a biopolitical turn in Büchner's work (179).

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One should recall, however, that already before the Hessian messenger campaign Büchner argued "that only the necessary needs of the big masses can provoke change" (Letter to the family June 1833, *Schriften* 369). Thus, rather than assuming a radical break in Büchner's attitude as Rancière and Schäfer do, I take the Hessian messenger campaign as intensifying Büchner's already materialistic tendencies — even as these materialistic tendencies remain in tension with a more idealistic position as expressed in Büchner's critique of Hobbes' materialism or Lamettrie's physiological anthropology (see *Marburger Ausgabe* 261). Lastly, I would like to modify Rancière's other hypothesis, insofar as Büchner does not at this point so much relinquish the alliance of physiology and revolution as he radicalizes this alliance in a parodic manner, pushing the link to a point of excess by attempting to think revolution in a purely physiological manner.

In Büchner, then, there actually looms a "parodistic materialism" that is more radical, or at least "more literal," than orthodox Marxism. For Büchner explains not only people's readiness to revolt but the notion of freedom itself exclusively physiologically: Only if the peasants famish will they eventually be able to free themselves from oppression! Of course the rising prices for bread were *a* crucial factor for the outburst of the French Revolution. But there is a significant difference between stating that hunger presents *one* reason among many for revolution, and abstracting a general law from this observation in the way that Büchner does when arguing that people first have to starve in order for a revolution to occur. Before the *Hessian Messenger* Büchner seems to have assumed that a revolution was necessary because people were starving. Now, after the protest has been brutally quashed, Büchner postulates that hunger has to be endured in order that there will be revolution. This demand alludes to a crucial question that will soon become a fundamental point of conflict between early socialism and Marxism: can the revolution be brought forth gradually, from within the system? Or does it have to occur with a single strike? As is well-known, Karl Marx fell out with Ferdinand Lassalle over this point. The latter endorsed a state-friendly, social democratic reformism (that is to say "a chicken in the pot of every farmer") and agreed with Otto von Bismarck on certain social reforms. Marx and Engels on the contrary rejected these kinds of reforms as "conservative, or bourgeois, socialism" that "is desirous of redressing social grievances, in order to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society" (85). Thus, just like Büchner, Marx and Engels, too, dismissed any sort of social security because to their view, the proletariat cannot truly be emancipated with the help of the state, but emancipated only through the latter's overthrow.

Büchner, therefore, shortly before Marx and Engels, comes to the conclusion that the hunger of the proletariat must not be alleviated because it is not a mere side effect but the only impetus for revolution. There is surely something "terroristic" about this procedure of turning empirical experience into a law. At this point, one might invoke Hannah Arendt's analysis of the French Revolution, in which Arendt argues that it was the peculiar connection of biological necessity with politics that generated the Terror (112). Arendt supports her argument with a quote from Francis Bacon's essay "Of Seditions and Troubles" from 1609: "the rebellions of the belly are the worst" (33). Although Bacon's (no pun intended) statement is meant to warn against rebellions, ironically it is suited perfectly to express Büchner's and Marx's revolutionary hopes. For Bacon knows that the belly lies at the very centre of the majority of all re-belly-ons (Foucault 282-84). Moreover, it is notable that just as Büchner's hunger-hypothesis switches between the figurative and the literal level, Bacon's sentence, too, can be read either figuratively or literally: one might understand it as a depiction of stomach trouble or of street riots depending on whether one reads the word "belly" literally, i.e., physiologically or allegorically in the tradition of the body politic (as represented in the "fable of the belly and its mutinous members") (see Gollinelli 43).

The climax of Büchner's thoughts on the causal relation between physiology and revolution appears to be the rather short sentence in his letter to Gutzkow: "Hunger alone can become the goddess of freedom" (*Schriften* 400). Büchner, one might say, is trying to take materialism at its word, to hold it accountable by arming himself with the cold tool of physiology in order to take revenge for the betrayal of his ideas. At this point, a question arises for Büchner that will a little later become urgent for Marxism: What conditions have to be met for a revolution to take place? How bad does the situation of the proletariat have to get in order for the revolution to be set in motion? Büchner's answer seems to be that first necessity must rule in order for freedom to come. But how

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does one think the passage from necessity to freedom? Just how necessary must necessity become for it to mutate into freedom? If for Marx and Fourier the worker herself is responsible for her self-reproduction and thus has to determine the minimal conditions for her existence, then Büchner's discourse on hunger shows the impossibility of deciding on such a minimum (see Osborne 100). If bare life can only be conceived in the form of an approximation insofar as it can theoretically always become "barer," then the question arises of how hungry one must be in order for the revolution to succeed. According to Rancière, it is this tendency towards the infinite (or the infinitesimal) that science and the revolution have in common with one another: "Science and revolution are condemned to do, in solitude, the same thing. The revolution too is a never-finished, infinite division, condemned to sophism and dissection" (46). Thus, Büchner alludes to something that Rancière will make explicit: the infinite division that the revolution and science both perform tends towards death. There is no passage from necessity to freedom. In a similar vein, Hannah Arendt writes: "*la terreur* as a means to achieve *le bonheur* sent revolutions to their doom … no revolution, no foundation of a new body politic, was possible where the masses were loaded down with misery" (221-22). Anyone who nevertheless seeks an impossible balance between urgency and power gets entangled in a quasi-tragic structure: only if there is sufficient hunger is there also sufficient motivation for revolution; but the fulfillment of the condition of urgency means that the revolution is impossible because there is insufficient power. The starving will not amount to much as a revolutionary army. This is something that Ludwig Feuerbach knew when demanding better nutrition for the people "for the sake" of the revolution, culminating in the slogan "man is what he eats" (367) from his 1850 essay "Natural Science and the Revolution."

It now seems a bit easier to assess what exactly in Büchner's hunger hypothesis might have been, so to speak, the bone of contention for Lukács. After all, Lukács is aware of the challenge that scientific progress presents for (Marxist) philosophy: the scientific logic proceeds blindly, he complains, regardless of its consequences. As a result, in times of scientific revolution, as for instance between 1789 and 1848, dialectical problems and social crises are likely to occur. For Lukács, it turns out that even the objective spirit contains the danger of irrationalism. This is because rather than assuming responsibility for its own insight, science falls prey to irrationalism when it turns the alleged unsolvability of a problem into a higher form of understanding (*Zerstörung* 93). Lukács imputes irrationalism first of all to biology — the science to which Büchner as a student of medicine is closest. This critique of Büchner admittedly has a point: one wonders if perhaps Büchner's genuinely corporeal — if not erotic — materialism is closer to Bataille then to Lukács. Yet, if it is really an excessive corporeality, unfolding between the poles of death or sexuality and power, which caused Bataille at times to be suspected of a fascist aesthetics (see Agamben 115; Hollier 4), then one wonders if Lukács's essay "The Fascistically Falsified and the Real Georg Büchner" is perhaps directed not only against a fascist reception of Büchner, but against Büchner's own self-"falsification." To put it another way: Is it really from the fascists that Lukács wants to protect Büchner? Or is it rather from Bücher's own "irrationalist" tendencies, that unfold in the interplay of science/revolution and death? Is Lukacs afraid that this physiological materialism might collapse into a fascism of matter? If one follows such a reading, then in the title "The Fascistically Falsified and the Real Georg Büchner" Lukács confronts two Büchners with one another: on the one hand the revolutionary, ideal Büchner whom Lukács calls "real" because this Büchner is faithful to the spirit of revolution and on the other hand the self-falsifying Büchner who overdoes materialism when pursuing it as a "revelation through the flesh" (to quote *Danton's Death* [*Dichtungen* I 29])

Walter Benjamin was the first to associate Büchner's specific relation to materialism with surrealism: "Georg Büchner, Nietzsche, Rimbaud" (204) are for Benjamin the untimely precursors of a crisis of the European intelligentsia — a crisis of the spirit one could say in Büchner's case. In what Benjamin calls "anthropological materialism," creaturely experience and political action take up the space that before was occupied by idealism and metaphysical materialism. Hence in anthropological materialism, political materialism and physical creatureliness are densely intertwined. More concretely, Benjamin praises authors such as Büchner for their awareness of the fact that freedom "can only be purchased with thousands of the toughest sacrifices" ("Sürrealismus" 212) and that misery can result in revolutionary nihilism. With this, revolution for Benjamin is revealed as a creaturely (a *leibliches*)

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endeavor — if we read the German notion of *Leib* (body) in Benjamin, as Rainer Nägele has suggested, as pertaining to a collective body that evades the binary opposition of spirit and matter – insofar as in anthropological materialism, "all creaturely innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharges" (215). Probably the most iridescent passage in Benjamin's essay on anthropological materialism is that about "the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination in a profane illumination of a materialistic, anthropological inspiration" (202). I would like to address the meaning of Benjamin's pointed yet enigmatic notion of "a profane illumination" by looking at other examples from Büchner's texts. In fact, the correlation of digestion and revolution into which we just inquired evolves, almost simultaneously, in three other texts by Büchner, one of them his public visiting lecture "On Cranial Nerves" held in Zurich in 1836: "thus, as an essential component of the digestive channel the tongue through the influence of the hypoglossus is subjected to the will and thereby becomes a true part of the head" (*Schriften* 169).

The tongue, one might think, belongs to the head. After all, this is where it is situated. Even though Büchner doesn't deny this fundamental assumption, he unsettles it by shifting the topographical *ground* for this belonging away from the head itself towards the digestive apparatus. According to the former quotation, the tongue is a "true" member of the head not due to its empirical location but only because it is linked to the digestive system. If one abbreviates this statement to what appears to be its essential content, then one might come to the conclusion that "as an essential component of the digestive channel the tongue … becomes a true member of the head." The tongue is part of the head because it belongs to the stomach! Obviously, this abbreviated version of the quote does not lack a certain absurdity. Yet it misses the crucial connecting link between the head and digestion: the will. The central position of the will is not only expressed in its function as a link between the head and the digestive system – it also determines the context of the quotation: the quote is part of an enumeration towards the end of the text in which nerve pathways such as the hypoglossus are distinguished from merely vegetative nerves, whose functioning remains unconscious. Following Büchner, nerve pathways like the hypoglossus raise vegetative life to the level of animal life because they are subjected to the will. Büchner's hypothetical identification of the will and digestion might seem counterintuitive in light of empirical experience or current scientific discourse. Let us work with this identification, however, as a subversion of the discourse of the will. Further, we must not forget that prior to Büchner, Hegel had already compared the teleological effect of the spirit with the appropriative drive of digestion. Werner Hamacher, in analyzing Hegel's attempts to spiritualize incorporations, comments more specifically on the mouth as a metaphor of the spiritual: for Hegel, the biological process that dissolves the distinctiveness of the devoured objects into the identity of the organism becomes the epitome of the dialectical transformation from the material real to the ideal (242-44). Analogous to Hegel's metaphorizing or spiritualizing reading of incorporation, Büchner's hypothesis, too, could be metaphorically abridged in the following way: The tongue belongs to the head because it is subjected to the will. One of the paradoxical consequences of such a statement is that everything that passes through the tongue is willed, even if unconsciously.

Metaphorizing interpretation presents one tendency of Büchner's phrase: t seems as if Büchner's formulation — just as earlier in the case of the hunger-hypothesis — is moving in two opposite directions at once. One metaphorizing and spiritualizing, the other literalizing and materializing, thus leading us back to the slight but all the more significant alternative between a metaphorization of matter and a literalization of the spirit. If in the hunger-hypothesis one had the choice of either interpreting revolution physiologically or hunger spiritually, then in this example the fact that the will fulfills an organic function means that here either the will or biology has to change in status; either the will must become physiological or biology must become spiritual. This is because Büchner on the one hand substitutes the will for the empirical position of the tongue in the head and thereby transforms vegetative into animal life. On the other hand, one notices a tendency towards a physiological-materialist explanation of the will. This physiological explanation of the will is something entirely different from the free will of the subject that wills itself insofar as the physiological explanation of the will renders the will "exclusively material." Büchner consolidates the borders that confine the concept of the will by physiologically consolidating them. Thus, the will stands right between the material and the immaterial, between the literal and the figurative, the mechanical and the organic.

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We know from Büchner's brother Ludwig (the author of *Force and Matter* and a representative of physiological materialism) that his older brother's scientific and literary writings ran parallel. The writing of *Danton's Death* in 1835 formed something like the obverse of Büchner's scientific research of the same time: "Büchner's work happened secretly and was multiply disturbed; while on his desk the anatomical tables and texts lay atop, he timidly pulled out from under them the sheets of paper down on which he threw his thoughts with a certain haste" (Poschmann 451). This report on the material overlap of Büchner's scientific and dramatic production asks us to test the congruity or convergence between the two fields of study, a task to which a lot of Büchner scholars have addressed themselves in recent years (Kubik; Ludwig; Müller-Sievers; Müller Nielaba). It will hardly come as a surprise that in this comparison literature productively complicates things. Büchner's literature ultimately causes the already somewhat unstable dichotomy of idealism and materialism to collapse. For example, there is the scene in Büchner's last drama *Woyzeck* (1837): the doctor scolds Woyzeck for urinating in the street. Woyzeck attempts to excuse his mishap by saying that it was "nature" that had overtaken him, but this is dismissed by the choleric doctor. He should have known better, the doctor rants, after all the doctor had proven that the closing muscle of the bladder is controlled by the will: "Didn't I prove that the musculus constrictor vesicae is subjected to the will? … There is a revolution happening in the sciences" (*Dichtungen* xi, 10-20). In this scene, Büchner performs nothing less than the literary parody, if not the refutation, of his own scientific hypothesis from *On Cranial Nerves* (the hypothesis that both tongue and digestion are subject to the will). It is no coincidence that the keyword "scientific revolution" comes up at this point – for this is exactly the sort of crisis that we encounter in Büchner's writing, a crisis that occurs at the very peak of the revolution. Interestingly, the physician Jean Georges Cabanis, whose studies Büchner read, proclaimed a revolution in art parallel to the social and scientific revolutions (see Cabanis 4; Oesterle 230). I would now like to argue that just as the Baroque follows from the scientific revolution of the Renaissance, what I would like to call "Büchner's romantic quasi-Baroque" is a reaction to the scientific revolution of the Enlightenment. In both phases, the scientific logic gets caught up in the excessive materiality to which theorists of the Baroque keep on returning: Heinrich Wölfflin speaks about the Baroque "pleasure in the force of matter" (40) and Richard Alewyn about the "urge to sensualization" (57). If the Renaissance and the Enlightenment are perverted to a "bad" immanence, this does not put a simple end to structures of transcendence. Rather, it leads to a new structure of overstretched transcendence, to echo Benjamin (48).

My final textual analysis is an attempt to read the quote from the lecture on cranial nerves in dialogue with Büchner's first drama *Danton's Death* (1835). In this last example we are able to witness how the Baroque processes of proliferation and univocalization in Büchner's quasi-Baroque are intensified by means of repetition (see Menke 155-56). Where scientific materialism fails, it returns to the unredeemed matter of Gnosticism and its linguistic analogue, the typological materialism of the deadly letter. How so? In Büchner's first drama, just as later in *Woyzeck*, the scientifically and philosophically reasoned certainty that nothing is uttered that is not also willed is shaken from the ground up (see Levesque; Lyon; Müller-Sievers). Friedrich Gundolf writes that *Danton's Death* appears as the "outburst of a raped will" (67). And just as in the earlier passages quoted, so too in *Danton's Death*, this destabilization stems from the introduction of physiology into the revolution. More specifically, Büchner's mourning play confronts us with the question that must be excluded from the scientific text: What if not everything that is said was also intended? What if the tongue would no longer tell the will what it wants to hear? What if, to speak with Wölfflin on the Baroque, in Büchner "both moments, body and will, had parted so to speak" (79-80)? Büchner's treatise "On Cranial Nerves" suggests the following: first that in such a case the tongue must no longer be connected to the will; second, because Büchner identifies the will with the metabolism, this means that the tongue likewise is no longer part of the digestive system; third, if the tongue is only a member of the head because it is subjected to digestion and hence to the will, then as soon as the tongue becomes independent of the will, it would no longer be part of the head, but a straying, masterless organ! Yet, if we stick to Büchner's anatomical scheme, the consequences of a slip of tongue would not stop here: if the tongue became autonomous, so too the extension of the tongue — that is, the hypoglossus — would be severed. As the hypoglossal nerves generally are described as the chief motor nerves of the

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tongue, any impairment of the hypoglossus results in speech disturbances or even in aphasia (Lanz 265; Smith 306). Thus, language itself is what is at stake in the hypoglossus. This is evident in the Greek compound *hypo-glossus*, which refers to nothing less than to a meta-language for *hypo* expresses something "beneath or below" — analogous both to a materialist "base" and an idealist "substance" (in Greek *hypo-keimenon*). Therefore, one could say that in Büchner's anatomical scheme the hypoglossus embodies the over-literal objectification of Reason itself in the nervous system. Now, what happens if one severs the hypoglossus, here understood as the meta-linguistic materialization of the will? Imagine the event: if the hypoglossus links the head to the digestive system, then slicing through it severs the head and cuts it off from the lower body. An all too familiar, uncanny sight: the cut of the guillotine! *Danton's Death* anticipates this cut in a language that reflects upon the literalizing effect of the guillotine. Sentences such as "These are dead people. Their tongue guillotines them" (*Dichtungen* 12-13) may be read figuratively in their immediate context, but when read from the deadly end of the mourning play, they also appear as reflections on death by a slip of the tongue. Likewise, Robespierre's demand that "virtue must rule by terror" causes immediate, physical uneasiness in Lacroix: "The phrase made my throat ache. — DANTON. It slices boards for the guillotine" (*Dichtungen* 18-21). The ambiguity that characterizes sentences like the latter seems to evaporate in the moment the guillotine blade falls down. The moment of death seems to bring the infinite process of *différance* to a violent stop by determining that the "literal meaning" (as if there were such a thing!) must only be that connotation which is supported by the outcome of the play. Hence, the guillotine can be read as a literalization of Büchner's scientific treatise on cranial nerves: it is the repressed, latent other side of the anatomical self-assurance that everything that is said is also willed. The guillotine is nothing less than a literalization machine staging the becoming-autonomous of the tongue. With this, a baroque and anti-Pauline form of materialism comes into play: the "typological materialism" of the split tongue and the deadly letter.

The principle of necessity that rules the lecture *On Cranial Nerves* in the form of the physiologically reasoned will reappears in *Danton's Death* but this time as "contingency" (*Dichtungen* 35) in the form of slips of the tongue. These slips, however, seem to be the rule. But if language slips constantly, then the whole notion of a mere "slip of the tongue" is unsettled. What else could speech be but a slip (or the generalized slipping) of the tongue? If contingency in this manner becomes absolute, then, as a consequence, it can no longer be distinguished from necessity (see Szondi 105; Derrida 41). Contingency and necessity collapse into one another. The epistemological challenge that this failure of the guillotine to make a decision causes is also thematized in the historical medical discourse on the guillotine. This discourse considers undecidability as the major threat of the guillotine. More concretely, the guillotine is equally praised and condemned for the fact that it "would cause no sensation and would hardly be noticed" (Soubiran 131) because the guillotine substitutes the spectacle of dying with a sudden cut. However, it is precisely the abruptness and invisibility of the procedure, which renders the question of where life ends and where death begins unanswerable (see Arasse 50). The rapidity and efficiency of the operation confronts medical commentators of the time with the problem of how to analyze an unobservable event, of how to distinguish between mind and body, between pain and painlessness. How to tell life and death apart if death, as Büchner's contemporary, the German physician Thomas von Soemmerring tried to prove, did not occur immediately upon decapitation? (Soemmerring 459, 473; see also Jordanova 49). One might also say that the more precisely the cut was performed the more uncertain it became when death eventuated. The shorter the moment of dying, the more phantasmatic the execution itself appears.

The literalizations that occur in Büchner's drama thus might act as a parody of Fichte's concept of act (*Tathandlung*), which forms the first unconditional principle of Fichte's *The Science of Knowledge* (1:91-101). Whereas in the act the subject posits itself in language, in the case of literalization, language becomes subject, thus expropriating the subject of enunciation. Revolutionary phrases manifest themselves in the Terror, which will eventually kill those who uttered these phrases in the first place. A sentence such as "These are dead people. Their tongue guillotines them" could thus be read as a meta-commentary on the effects of literalization, and as a reflection of one's being spoken by language. When Büchner in this manner presents language that is on the verge of turning into matter, he seems to be situated right between idealism and materialism, for he upsets the Christian

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as well as German idealist notion of "spirit and letter." Büchner not only thereby resists ideal spiritualization — he at the same time gestures towards a different economy of matter and spirit, one that performs what Benjamin called "a *profane illumination* of a materialistic, anthropological inspiration" ("Surrealismus" 202): matter *qua* matter is given a certain enigmatic spirituality. In Büchner's writings, "the literary" is thus the (material) space that prevents any of these discourses on materiality (the historical, the physiological, the typological) from becoming overtly dogmatic and rigidified.

In conclusion, Büchner's approach to materiality goes through three steps: the first is the quest for absolute materiality via science and history. In a second step, however, materiality already gets entangled in its own conceptual ideality for as soon as matter is posited as absolute, its metaphysical content can no longer be denied. The third step is performed by language: in *Danton's Death*, materialist history, as well as scientific materialism are turned into a literary parody of materialism. In the end, every conceptual ideality in Büchner remains bound to a linguistic materiality of the dead letter. This last stage is neither purely material nor purely ideal but probably best described as "materiality without matter."

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