

“The god called Nothingness”: Büchner, Shakespeare and Original Sin

[5,694 words]

Sin quite literally haunts the protagonists of Büchner’s *Danton’s Death*, as in a more metaphoric sense it haunts the play itself. Gazing from his window at a sleeping Paris, Danton asks: “Will it never stop? Will the light never die, the noise never stop? Will it never be dark and silent so we can stop hearing our foul sins? September!”¹ The reference is to Danton’s responsibility for the September massacres in Paris of 1791. Even Robespierre is surprised by sin: “Something inside me. A bloody finger, pointing. I wind rags around it but the blood seeps through” (p.30). Sin is also present in the comic subplot. Simon the prompter abuses his wife – “You apple rotten with sin” (p.13) – for prostituting their daughter in order to keep them from starvation.

Two of these passages resonate with Shakespeare. Robespierre’s haunting broadly echoes the bloodstained hands motif in *Macbeth*.² Simon’s abuse of his wife echoes Hamlet’s abuse of Ophelia in the nunnery scene: “Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?”³ Because neither passage can be directly sourced to Shakespeare, a claim of “resonance” may seem thin. Yet so saturated is Büchner’s play with Shakespeare (in the Schlegel/Tieck translation), that the point is less to identify direct citations or claim individual points of resonance than to pose the question of the *value* that Shakespeare held for Büchner. This at least is the conclusion reached by Jean-Louis Besson in the Shakespeare section of his book-length study of the sources for *Danton’s Death*.⁴ Whether “you apple rotten with sin” originates in the nunnery scene of *Hamlet* or whether it doesn’t, is pointless to ask in view of the obvious echo of *Hamlet* shortly afterwards, when Simon – himself a clone of ancient Pistol – apologizes to his wife:

Ah, can you forgive me Portia? Did I hit you?

That wasn't me. I was mad.

His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.

Then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it.

Where is our daughter? (p.17)

Not only is *Hamlet* directly referenced here but also *Julius Caesar* and *Henry V*.

My aim here is to pose the question of the aesthetic, intellectual or even spiritual *work* performed by Shakespeare in *Danton's Death*. Büchner's deep admiration for Shakespeare is part of the answer of course. The search for a dramaturgical model for the Terror of 1792, somewhere between the Shakespearean history play and Shakespearean tragedy is another part of it. (Terry Eagleton has already noted the weight of Büchner's stress on Aristotelian *hamartia*).⁵ But the core of the relationship – I will suggest – is the idea of sin: primal sin, original sinfulness. Behind or alongside of Büchner's obsession with Shakespeare is an urge to rediscover what I have elsewhere described as the driving force of the early modern English revenge play: the convergence of the Aristotelian with the Pauline senses of the word *hamartia*.⁶ Tragic flaw, original sin: these are two concepts for the same tendency of human timber towards crookedness, warping, radical evil or entanglement in vice, failure, futility, crime. The effect of combining them in a tragic-historical structure is not just to underline the Aristotelian notion of the flaw, but to redescribe that concept – to critically historicize it – in the sense of submitting it to a theological gaze that the Enlightenment had recently thought to have escaped. “We were botched when we were created, we lack something, some element”, muses Danton, “I cant name it, but we won't find it by pulling each other's guts out and scrabbling around in each other's entrails” (p.34). The rhetoric may not be Pauline, but the thought itself clearly is.

The previous question provokes others. How much of the original sin theme in *Danton's Death* is due to Büchner, and how much to Shakespeare and/or the traditional *topoi* upon which Büchner drew and was able to inform himself through Shakespeare? Must Büchner now be thought of as over-written by a regressive doctrine in the guise of a literary enthusiasm; or can we see him engaging the doctrine to elucidate an authentic intuition arising from what Kierkegaard – in his brief essay on *Hamlet* – calls “existence-categories”?⁷ This poses a broader issue regarding the activity of sources and influences between host and tributary texts. In which directions do the intellectual currents run or eddy? How far does the cited passage colonize the mental impulse prompting the citation; how far into the intuition of the citing author does the cited passage reach? In general terms there can be no single answer to this question. What we tend to find is a spectrum from passive reception of the citation to imaginatively or conceptually transformative uses (the high-water mark of which would be represented by Shakespeare's metamorphosis of his own sources). At one end of the spectrum, we find the citation shaping its host text: the relation here would be tutorial or doctrinal. At the other end, the host text absorbs the citation and transforms it: the relation here would be intuitive and dialectical. In the case of a formal *doctrine*, one would seem to be stuck at the passive end of this spectrum. By definition a doctrine is a teaching, a regimentation, a tuition. Original sin moreover is notoriously directive and intolerant even by the standard of other doctrines. It is not a proposition with which one “begs to differ”. One either swallows it wholesale like Baudelaire as a confessed disciple of Joseph de Maistre (the reactionary apostle of the “counter-enlightenment”); or one repudiates it like Voltaire in the mid eighteenth century as the pre-eminent stumbling block to progress.⁸ By the measure of Voltaire, Büchner could be said to entertain the doctrine – much like Shakespeare in *Hamlet* –

rather too enthusiastically. In both cases, the intuitive motive appears to invite the tutional element and cede too much to it. In Büchner's specific case, we must ask: does this active revolutionary compromise his radically progressive principles by engaging with a doctrine which (after de Maistre) is virtually married to reactionary politics?⁹

That is a real possibility. There is however another. In the first of the Bampton lectures of 1924, Norman P. Williams notes how unintuitive the doctrine of original sin had seemed a mere decade earlier on the eve of the First World War, when men consoled themselves "for the impossibility of accounting for the origin of evil by the assurance of its necessary and speedy extinction, as the result of an irresistible upward trend of moral evolution".¹⁰ But, he goes on to add, "the events through which humanity has lived since then have for ever dispelled such credulous optimism" (p.4). Notwithstanding his professed Christianity and respectfulness of traditional doctrine, Williams insists that the motive to belief in original sin is always existential before it is doctrinal. For the legatees of the Great War such belief is therefore an intuition first and a tution second. This is to say that the intuition seeks out the doctrinal and mythical ground rather than arising from it. Not only indeed was this the case of Williams and the survivors of the Great War to whom he refers, but such it was in the formation of the doctrine at the earliest biblical stages in the Old Testament. Williams argues that the Fall-doctrine in the Old Testament "originated in the thought of post-exilic Judaism and the result of reflection on the empirical universality of Actual Sin" (xi). The context and motive of this thought, then, was a national catastrophe. The story of Adam and Eve in *Genesis* is no more than a *locus classicus*, as suggested by the fact that the biblical *locus* had originally been *Genesis* vi, which tells of "the sons of the gods" breeding with the "daughters of men" (pp.23-29). Thus:

Whatever we may think of this regressive chain of reasoning, from the facts of the moral struggle back to the idea of an inherited taint and from that again to the conception of a primordial sin, it is clear that, inasmuch as the first Fall-story was that of Gen.vi, the doctrines of the Fall and of Original Sin cannot be regarded as standing or falling with the historicity of Gen.iii. (p.32)

The true foundations of the Fall and Original Sin are then, “psychological, based on bed-rock facts of ethical and spiritual experience” (p.31). We do not need to be positively certain of William’s case to see its suggestiveness for *Danton’s Death*.

To be sure Büchner discovers a clearly Pauline version of this doctrine in Shakespeare, and it is deeply there to be discovered. More importantly he discovers the doctrine because he has a deep existential stake in finding it. Writing in the wake of the German Enlightenment and in despair at the failure of the French Revolution, Büchner seeks to unearth a hoary theological complex that had been definitively interred by Volairean and Schillerian humanism alike. Turning from Schiller therefore (whose relative absence from *Danton’s Death* is noteworthy), Büchner avails himself not just of Shakespeare and contemporary dramatists (such as Tourneur¹¹) but the hoarier commonplace of the *theatrum mundi* that had served as a vehicle of an *hamartia*-laden view of radical human incapacity since antiquity. This in turn reinforces the pertinence of our approach via resonance or intertextuality rather than direct citation.¹² The *theatrum mundi* is at once independent of Shakespeare, and itself a vector of pessimism from Shakespeare through to Lenz, the *Sturm und Drang* poet who is himself the subject of Büchner’s monologue, *Lenz*.¹³ Büchner’s reading of Shakespeare is thus a thinking with Shakespeare about a mutual problem (sin), in terms of a mutually available formula, the *theatrum mundi*.

In this latter connection, I will suggest that *Danton's Death* (already known to resonate powerfully with *Hamlet*) resonates far more extensively than is thought with *Measure for Measure*, specifically – and profoundly – with what is perhaps the most elusive and philosophically dense engagement with the *theatrum mundi* in Shakespeare: the crux represented by Isabella's "glassy essence" conceit:

...but man, proud man,
 Dressed in a little brief authority,
 Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
 His glassy essence, like an angry ape
 Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
 As makes the angels weep; who, with our spleens,
 Would all themselves laugh mortal. (2.2.120-26)

While the primary metaphor here is that of a glass rather than a theatre, the two metaphors are closely related in Shakespeare as in early modernity generally (Marlowe asks us to view Tamburlaine's fortunes "in this tragic glass") and – we shall see – in Büchner.¹⁴ Was Büchner specifically responding to the "glassy essence" passage? It is quite possible in as much that – in Besson's view at least – the play is cited elsewhere in *Dantons' Death*.¹⁵ What interests me is the logic – the philosophy – of Büchner's take on the *theatrum mundi* commonplace as compared with Shakespeare's. To put this differently, I am interested in the remarkably powerful intertextual resonance between Büchner and Shakespeare: a resonance bespeaking both continuity and discontinuity, a chasm on the one hand and a bridge on the other.

We can begin with the point in Büchner to resonate most strongly with the "glassy essence" conceit of *Measure for Measure*. The context is scene six of the first

act: the interview between Danton and Robespierre. The two men are not quite alone. Present also is Félix Paris, a clerk of the Revolutionary Tribunal who – both in history and in Büchner – went by the name of Rousseau’s republican archetype from the *Premier Discours*: “Fabricius”. The name bespeaks the primary topic at issue between the two men: virtue. Danton is concerned to deflect Robespierre from the Terror. Robespierre’s answer is that the revolution is only half complete. The moral task is yet to do: “Vice must be punished, virtue must rule through terror”. Danton is skeptical not merely of the Terror but of virtue itself: Robespierre is “abominably virtuous”, his “self-righteous expression” a mask stuck to his face while “running about between heaven and earth, only for the miserable pleasure of finding people worse off” (p.28). In addition to the theatrical metaphor, there is surely an echo of Hamlet’s “crawling between heaven and earth” (*Hamlet*, 3.1.125). Büchner’s “zwischen Himmel und Erde herumzulaufen”, echoes the rendition of Hamlet’s phrase in the translation of Schlegel and Tieck: “zwischen Himmel und Erde herumkriechen”.¹⁶ That this echo goes un-noted either by Besson or by Jacobs (who each make a point of noting Shakespearean echoes) suggests something of the sheer fertility of Shakespeare within Büchner.

The indexing of *Hamlet* at just this juncture of the argument is highly significant. The scene from which the phrase is taken – the “nunnery scene” (3.1) – is that with the highest concentration of references to original sin: “virtue”, Hamlet insists, “cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it” (3.1.120-21).¹⁷ Ophelia must get herself to a nunnery so as not to be “a breeder of sinners”. Hamlet owns himself, “indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things, that it were better my mother had not borne me” (3.1.124-26). Hence he pictures himself “crawling” between earth and heaven, an image remarkably suggestive of Joseph de

Maistre's patristically derived imagery of serpentine groveling.¹⁸ Hence, to Rousseau's upright Fabricius (a role that Robespierre takes himself virtually to incarnate) Danton opposes Shakespeare's Hamlet: not the sweet prince but the crawling wretch.

In this regard too, it is significant that Büchner should twice echo Hamlet's most libertine pose: sitting with his head in Ophelia's lap and speaking bawdy just prior to the play-within-the-play. Büchner's play opens with Danton "sitting on a stool at Julie's feet" (p.9) and passing mordantly obscene witticisms. The same pose is inverted in Act one scene five, when Danton's mistress, Marion, sits at his feet to relate the history of her plunge into sensuality. In the badinage that follows, Lacroix opines that "Young girls should not be allowed to sit in the sun or the gnats will be doing it in the palms of their hands, giving them ideas" (p.24). There is an echo of Hamlet's advice to Polonius in respect of his daughter: "Let her not walk i'th'sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive – Friend, look to't" (2.2.186-87). Again there seems an echo of Lear's "the small gilded fly / Does lecher in my sight" (*The History of King Lear*, 4.5.109-10).

To Danton's taunting, Robespierre replies, "My conscience is clear"; to which Danton answers: "Conscience is an ape tormenting himself before a mirror" (p.28). The resonance with Isabella's lines in *Measure for Measure* (2.2.120-26) – quoted above – is nigh irresistible. The situations are similar: in both plays a self-righteous judge is criticized for hypocrisy. If at first glance however Büchner appears to have bypassed the "glassy essence" conceit, he delivers a compelling gloss on Shakespeare's "angry ape": the ape's reflection in the mirror torments him because it "apes" his every gesture. The thought is picked up very precisely in Robespierre's subsequent monologue (after the exit of Danton and Fabricius). In a clear reference to

the historical Robespierre's claim that false revolutionaries were to detected by their aping of revolutionary terminology¹⁹, Büchner's Robespierre is outraged that Danton should have abused him in his own phrase: "Kick my high heels? Use my terminology? Mine?" (p.29). It is at this point, that he slides into his own existential *mise en abyme* of "aping" and/or mirroring:

My thoughts watch each other....

No virtue? Virtue the heel of my shoe? My terminology?

Thought against thought, why can't I stop? (pp.29-30)

Robespierre's conscience is almost literally an ape tormenting itself before a mirror. The idea of thoughts as compulsive mirror-opposites suggests that the mind has no essential consistency beyond its "glassiness". Any claim to an essence which is not itself mimetic is thus a lie. The mind is a glass, in which the man-ape torments itself with its abortive theogonies²⁰, the ferment of its becomings and unbecomings:

There. There. Inside me, telling lies to all the rest of me.

He goes to the window.

Night snores over the earth and shifts in a desolate dream.

Insubstantial thoughts, desires only dimly suspected,

confused, formless, take shape and steal into the silent house

of dreams. They open the doors, stare out of the windows,

they become half-flesh, the limbs stretch, the lips move. And

when we wake, we may be brighter, more precise, more

concrete by daylight, but are we not still in a dream? Oh what

the mind does, who can blame us? The mind goes through

more actions in one hour than the lumbering body does in a

lifetime. A thought may be a sin, but whether or not that thought becomes a deed, whether the body acts upon it, is chance.

St. Just *comes on*.

Who's that in the dark? Light! Light! (p.30)

Robespierre's position "at the window" anticipates that of Danton mentally "hearing" the "foul sins" of the September massacre (p.43). His panicked call for "light" echoes the stricken words with which Claudius interrupts the play-within-the-play: "Give me some light. Away" (*Hamlet*, 3.2.257). The echo seems to guess at how Shakespeare's Claudius – the uncanny double who is eventually described by Hamlet as "this canker of *our* nature" (5.2.70, my italics) – emblemizes original sin as a repetition of Cain, the first murderer.²¹ Robespierre's unguarded meditation on thought suggests that man will never rise to the consistency of virtue – never approach God – because the mind will never escape the dreary circus of imitation. Thought will never be known to itself. Thinking is nothing but its own mirror, consciousness cloudily reflected back as unconscious. Wittingly or not, the passage reproduces traditional theological doctrine in respect of the teeming multiplicity of mental sinfulness: a moment's thought is embryo to a life-time of sinning. *In potentia*, so to speak, we are already, "the merciless MacDonwald, worthy to be a rebel for to that / the multiplying villainies of nature / Do swarm upon him" (*Macbeth*, 1.2.9-12). The mere *chance* that we may not act on what we already imagine is the only thing stopping us from becoming monsters. In a more existential vein, the passage also rehearses the twist given to the *theatrum mundi* formula in Calderon's *Life is a Dream*: if the world is a stage, then what is the more "real", waking or dreaming?

The dialogue between Danton and Robespierre in *Danton's Death* makes such strong sense of the figure of Isabella's "angry ape" that we are tempted to regard it as a close reading. Whether this is entirely so or not however, we must now ask whether Büchner's rereading – if that is what it is – exhausts Shakespeare's thought. Clearly, it does not (or would not). We have already noted the apparent absence of the "glassy essence" conceit from Büchner's text. This absence is only "apparent" for the reason that the "angry ape" figure substantially recapitulates it. There is however a scholastic dimension of meaning in "glassy essence" conceit that is not picked up by the "angry ape" component, and that is indeed absent from Büchner.²² J.V. Cunningham sees in Isabella's conceit: "the scholastic notion in a scholastic context: man's essence is his intellectual soul, which is an image of God, and hence is *glassy* for it mirrors God".²³ Yet, why should man be "ignorant" of his own intellectual soul? Cunningham cites an early modern answer from Raleigh's *History of the World*:

But man, to cover his own ignorance in the least things....that is ignorant of the essence of his own soul, and which the wisest of the naturalists (if Aristotle be he) could never so much as define, but by the action and effect, telling us what it works, (which all men know as well as he,) but not what it is, which neither he nor anyone else doth know, but God that created it, (*For though I were perfect, yet I know not my soul, saith Job:*) man, I say, that is but an idiot in the next cause of his own life, and in the cause of all the actions of his life, will, notwithstanding, examine the art of God in creating the world...²⁴

Man is then ignorant of the nature of his soul or his mind by nature so to speak.

Raleigh's non-Scholastic or purely Aristotelian perspective is much that of

Shakespeare's Achilles:

... Nor doth the eye itself,
 That most pure spirit of sense, behold itself,
 Not going from itself; but eye to eye opposed
 Salutes each other with each other's form.
 For speculation turns not to itself
 Till it hath travelled and is mirrored there
 Where it may see itself. This is not strange at all.

(*Troilus and Cressida*, 3.3.100-06)

These two “naturalistic” accounts of man’s ignorance of his own mind do not occur to Isabella, for whom (unlike for Achilles) man is “most ignorant *of what he’s most assured*” (my italics).

The immediate context in *Measure for Measure* partly explains how this works: the proud magistrate – “dressed in a little brief authority” – takes his essence as equivalent to his judicial function. He forgets that his spiritual identity is constituted by his mirroring of God rather than by his own self-assertion. To say that his identity is self-founded however, is to concede that it is mimetic because the costume of the judge is derived from the theatre of world. As “angry ape”, the judge plays “fantastic tricks” in an effort of competitive self-justification. His tricks however are viewed by a different audience than the earthly one they are designed for. This audience sits in “high heaven”. It consists of God, the angels and those few wise men who in any given age have understood the true or divine constitution of their identities and lived up to it. It is the classic statement of the *theatrum mundi* formula as given by John of Salisbury in the *Policraticus*, source of the presumptive motto (*Totus Mundus Agit Historionem*) of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre.²⁵ As I have argued elsewhere, there is a tension between the senses in which the presumptive motto of

the Globe works and the way in which the formula works in John of Salisbury.²⁶

Where the motto works at a horizontal or geographical level (the world is like a vast stage), the formula in the *Policraticus* works primarily at a vertical level: the world is a stage play ultimately for the benefit of a divine audience seated above in the spheres. This, as R.S. White has ably shown, is overwhelmingly the sense in which John Calvin took the formula.²⁷ In unabashedly religious invocations of the metaphor, the divine audience finds the spectacle risible. The gods, angels and saints split their sides laughing at the antics of these wind-up human marionettes. Isabella's version of the *topos* is more gentle: the angels "weep" to see the "fantastic tricks" of men. They would laugh only if possessed of "our spleens". But that would quickly make them mortal.

Having now glanced at the "scholastic" logic of Isabella's conceit, and at the medieval background of the *theatrum mundi*, we must now attend to its New Testament context. This – like the *theatrum mundi* metaphor – is registered in Büchner's re-reading, as the scholastic context is not. In *Measure for Measure*, Isabella's "glassy essence" image is the centerpiece of a longer passage of some seventy lines (2.2.74-145) in which she reminds Angelo of his fallenness. Against Angelo's insistence on the law, Isabella urges grace:

ANGELO: Your brother is a forfeit of the law,
And you but waste your words.

ISABELLA: Alas, alas!

Why all the souls that were, were forfeit once,
And he that might the vantage best have took
Found out the remedy. (2.2.73-77)

Human fallibility, Isabella reminds Angelo, would predict that many others besides Claudio must have offended against chastity without incurring such a harsh penalty.

This brings the counter-argument:

The law hath not been dead, though it hath slept.
 ... Now 'tis awake,
 Takes note of what is done, and like a prophet
 Looks in a glass that shows what future evils...
 Are now to have no successive degrees (2.2.92-100)

It is indeed Angelo's assurance of being able – like a prophet with a telescope – to look into the future, that provokes the conceit of the “glassy essence”. Isabella reads Angelo's prophetic pretensions as blasphemous: “Great men may jest with saints: 'tis wit in them, / But in the less foul profanation” (2.2.130-31). Worse, the pose – the assurance – blinds Angelo to the weightier Pauline symbolism of the word “glass”. After the Fall, man beholds his divine image “darkly” at best:

For now we see through a glasse darkly: but then shall we see face to face. Now
 I know in part: but then shall I know even as I am knowen.²⁸

It is because we see but darkly in a fallen world that faith, hope and love – chiefly love – are so much more important than wisdom or, “the gift of prophecie....all secrets and all knowledge” (*I Corinthians*, 13:2). Angelo's blindness to this is both the mark of his sinfulness and the reason he rejects Isabella's advice:

... Go to your bosom,
 Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know
 That's like my brother's fault. If it confess

A natural guiltiness such as is his,
 Let it not sound a thought upon your tongue
 Against my brother's life. (2.2.140-45)

Measure for Measure as a whole invites a reading in terms of the idea of fallenness. The entire world of the play, all the characters (including Isabella) are flawed to the root. The only redemption the play offers is through forgiveness issuing from an acknowledgement of one's own necessary failure.

We have urged a vigorous continuity between the thought world of *Measure for Measure* and that of *Danton's Death*. But we have equally conceded the presence of a large historical and discursive gap. To return to the idea of original sin from within an overwhelmingly secular and post-revolutionary thought world is not to rehearse the traditional chapter and verse of St. Paul. We should not expect Büchner (like Kant in Goethe's saying) to have "slobbered" on his philosopher's cloak to quite this degree.²⁹ For much the same reason, it is hardly strange that Büchner should not have picked up the full scholastic logic of the "glassy essence" conceit. The whole notion of the mind as a mirror of God – in principle if not in practice – is simply implausible in the context of *Danton's Death*. What remains all too plausible however is that, as Danton puts it, "we were botched when we were created, we lack something, some element" (p.34). It now remains for us to elaborate the contexts which make this thought so inescapable to Danton and so intuitive to Büchner.

The chief context offered by *Danton's Death* is that of the *theatrum mundi*. This in turn faces in two directions, towards the traditional roots of this figure and towards the totalization of theatre (or its idea) in revolutionary France. If Büchner is interested in the traditional meaning of the *theatrum mundi*, it is primarily as a

critique of the theatricalized logic of the Revolution. As Robespierre explains it to Danton, the Terror is necessary because the private sphere has evaporated into the public sphere. The Republican person is onstage whether he or she likes it or not; private morality is a matter of vital public interest. Vice is a palpable brand: “the aristocracy’s mark of Cain” (p.20). Hence, “the libertine is the enemy of the state” because vice in a Republic “is more than a moral, it is a political crime” (p.20). Loyalty to the Republic, therefore, must be active and public. The historical Saint-Just harangued the Convention: “you must punish not only the traitors but even the indifferent; you must punish whoever is passive in the Republic”.³⁰ Hence too the importance of the ancient Roman Republican heroes Junius Brutus and Virginius, in *Danton’s Death* and in the Revolution alike. Like plays about William Tell, plays celebrating Brutus and Virginius, were commonplace in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – in Britain as well as France.³¹ Their common denominator is not just the virtue of the hero, but the fact that the hero is always prepared to prove his virtue by sacrificing his private happiness (typically in the form of his children) for the public good. Thus, like “old Virginius” (p.13), who stabbed his daughter rather than allow her to be defiled by the lust of the patrician Appius, Simon the prompter threatens to stab his daughter for working the streets as a prostitute. Presumably with less naivety, Robespierre dons the mantle of Brutus. Paris (or Fabricius) reports how Robespierre “put on the expression of Brutus sacrificing his sons”: “He ranted about ‘duty’, said where liberty was concerned he was ruthless, he’d sacrifice everything, himself, his brothers, his friends” (p.26). Fabricius’s account implies a weary recognition of the theatricality of Robespierre’s words: their scriptedness and their posedness.

Büchner's characters are either constantly in-role or constantly aware of role-play by others. Danton's remark, "we were botched when we were created, we lack something, some element. I can't name it, but we won't find it by pulling each other's guts out and scrabbling around in each other's entrails" (p.34), doesn't quite fit the approved tragic register. Camille immediately rephrases this unrehearsed utterance in the correct key:

Translated into the grand, tragic style that would go like this: how long must mankind eat its own limbs in eternal hunger? Or: how long must we men, marooned on a wreck, suck each other's blood in unquenchable thirst? Or: how long must we algebraists of the flesh, hunting for the ever elusive and unknown x write our equations in mangled limbs? (34)

Remembered here are two revolutionary scenarios – a Prometheus play and David's *Raft of the Medusa* – and something along the lines of a Saturn play or the *Oresteia* perhaps, which is to say a "classical" rehearsal of the horrors of the *ancien régime*.³²

In this tragic register – incidentally the one favored by Robespierre – the mask conceals the hypocrite or the false revolutionary, just as in the *Virginius* play, a mask of Patrician dignity conceals the rapacity of Appius until it is finally torn from him by the terrorism of *Virginius's* virtue. Hence Robespierre's own faith in "unmasking" by Terror. Unmasking works however only if the masks are exclusively worn by the Revolution's enemies. But if everyone is playing a part, then tearing off masks is pointless. "Do that", says Danton, "and the faces will come off with them" (p.26). For Büchner's Danton, the joke is as much for men as it is on them:

I can't see why people don't just stand still in the street and laugh in each other's face. We should all laugh. From our windows, from our graves, 'til heaven bursts open and the earth spins with laughter. (p.38)

Camille has much the same thought, while awaiting execution in the Conciergerie:

All that effort, pursing your lips, painting your face, putting on a good accent. We should take off our masks. Then we'll see, like in a room of mirrors, only the infinitely repeated age-old image of the fool, the joker's head. We are very like each other. All villains and angels, idiots and geniuses...all variations in different keys on the same tune. (p.75).

In this image, we have returned full circle to the traditional *theatrum mundi*; which is to say to a version of Isabella's "angry ape". Yet Büchner cannot quite rest here. The whole point of the traditional *theatrum mundi* was its explanatory power. Somebody reliable – god or the heavenly chorus – was in control. This will never do for Büchner's Danton: "we are puppets of invisible forces. We ourselves are nothing. We are the swords with which invisible spirits fight – and we can't even see their hands" (p.44).

For all Danton's skepticism about the divine however, sin is undeniable. And if not precisely in a Christian form, then more in the form of what we have described as a haunting. When a nameless gentleman enthuses about a spectacular piece of staging:

Did you see that new play? The hanging gardens of Babylon! A maze of vaults, stairways, corridors, flung up in the air with extraordinary ease. Outrageous audacity, it gives you vertigo. An amazing mind... (p.39);

the audacious scenography becomes a waking nightmare. A puddle in the street, “could have been deep”. How deep? “The earth has a thin crust. You could fall right through a hole in the middle of the street. One must tread carefully. But as for the play, I recommend it” (p.39). Even for the by-standers, the theatrical scenery of the revolutionary drama plasters over a void, or something resembling Lucac’s “grand hotel abyss”. This is roughly where Büchner deposits us: on the threshold of modernity, yet by courtesy of the hoariest of doctrines (original sin), the hoariest of commonplaces (the *theatrum mundi*), and Shakespeare’s single most concentrated effort to think it.

To return to our initial questions: Büchner’s attraction to *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure* proceeds not just from his love of Shakespeare but from a deep intuitive “need” for the seemingly obsolete myth and doctrine of original sin. Hence does he privilege precisely those aspects and those moments in these plays in which the traditional theme finds its most powerful and elaborate expression. Büchner does not however follow Shakespeare into the remoter Patristic reaches of this complex in which the doctrine takes on its most affirmative form: man’s inability to see his own soul (his “glassy essence”) is ordained and thus not a cause for despair. The affirmative side of Christian doctrine is not germane to Büchner’s purposes because they have no optimistic tinge. Büchner’s motives are moreover historical rather than doctrinal, hence the deliberation of his focus on the trope of the *theatrum mundi*. Not only (so to speak) was this trope perfectly cast by history as an ironic foil to the overt theatricalization of the Revolution by Robespierre, but it was the same trope which had fascinated Büchner’s tragically deranged contemporary, the poet Lenz. To conclude: Büchner’s obsessive disinterring from Shakespeare’s text of the kindred themes of original sin and the *theatrum mundi* arises from authentic “existence

categories”. They carry no hint of ideological back-formations of the kind associated with the apostle of reaction, Joseph de Maistre.

¹ English text references are to, Büchner: The Complete Plays, Michael Patterson, ed., (tr. Howard Brenton and Jane Fry), (Methuen: London, 1987) p.43. Further page references appear in my text.

² The claim is made by Jean-Louis Besson, Georg Büchner: Des source au texte Histoire d’une autopsie, (Peter Lang: Berne, 1992), p. 313.

³ *Hamlet*, 3.1.122-23. References to Shakespeare texts are from: The Oxford Shakespeare, Stanley Wells & Gary Taylor, eds., (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1994). Further act, scene and line references appear in the text.

⁴ Besson, (1992), pp. 309-28.

⁵ Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic, (Blackwell: Oxford, 2003), pp. 245-46.

⁶ “Calvinism as Tragedy in the English Revenge Play”, *Shakespeare*, 9:4, (2013), 1-26.

⁷ Soren Kierkegaard, “A Side Glance at Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*”, in his, Stages On Life’s Way, eds. & trs., Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, (Princeton. Princeton University Press, 1991), pp.452-54, p.453

⁸ Bertrand Marchal, “Baudelaire, La Nature et la Pêché”, *Études Baudelairiennes*, Nouvelle Série IV, 12, (1987), 7-22; also, Daniel Vouga, Baudelaire et Joseph de Maistre; essai, (Paris, José Corti, 1957). For Voltaire, see, Ernst Cassirer, “Religion”,

in his, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, (Beacon Press: Boston, 1965), pp,134-96

⁹ See: Darrin M. McMahon, Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the making of Modernity, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001)

¹⁰ N.P. Williams, The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin, (Longmans & Green, London, 1927), p.3

¹¹ Besson (1992) finds little evidence of Schiller in *Danton's Death* (pp.299-301), but does find echoes of Tourneur (p.308).

¹² This is also Besson's preference: "Toutefois, la notion de transcription dramaturgique doit être maniée avec prudence. Il convient en effet de ne pas la confondre, en l'absence d'un support verbal, avec un parenté dans la thématique et de ne pas réinvestir sous cette rubrique ce qui aurait été éliminé ailleurs." (318)

¹³ See Besson's discussion of Lenz and the *Theatrum mundi*, p.318.

¹⁴ For the symbiosis of these two metaphors in the context of early modern geography, see my Shakespeare and the geography of difference, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994), pp.92-98.

¹⁵ Besson 1992, finds Büchner's "Da liegen allein, kalt, steif in dem feuchten Dunst der Fäulniß" to echo Shakespeare's "To lie in cold obstruction and to rot," (*Measure for Measure*, 3.1.119) in the translation of Wolf Baudissin in the Schegel/Tieck edition: "Daliegen, kalt, eng engesperrt und faulen" (p.316).

¹⁶ Georg Büchner, *Danton's Tod and Woyzeck*, Margaret Jacobs, tr. & ed., (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1996), p.45. *Hamlet, Prinz von Dänemark*, in, *W. Shakespeare's dramatische Werke*, A.W. Schlegel & L. Tieck, trs., eds., (Wilhelm Oechelhäuser: Stuttgart etc., 1891), pp.416-50, p.431.

¹⁷ For a contextual reading of this line, see my, "The question of original sin in *Hamlet*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 64:4, (2013), 396-424, 405-6.

¹⁸ "Every intellect is by its very nature the result, single yet in three parts, of a perception that apprehends, a reason that affirms, and a will that acts. The first two powers are only weakened in man, but the third is broken, and like Tasso's serpent it drags itself along, completely ashamed of its sad powerlessness." (Against Rousseau: On the State of Nature and On the Sovereignty of the People, Richard E. Lebrun, ed., (McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal, 1996), p.199).

¹⁹ See particularly Robespierre's speech, "On the Principles of Political Morality", in Robespierre: Virtue and Terror, Slavoj Zizek, ed., (Verso, London, 2007), pp.108-25.

²⁰ As against the seventeenth and eighteenth century model of the theodicy (from Leibnitz to Saint Just), Schelling developed a metaphysical version of theogony. See, Joseph P. Lawrence, "Schelling's Metaphysics of Evil", in The New Schelling, Judith Norman and Alistair Welchman, eds., (Continuum: London, 2004), pp.167-89.

²¹ For Claudius as Cain, see: Donald V. Stump, "Hamlet, Cain and Abel, and the Pattern of Divine Providence", *Renaissance Papers*, (1985), 27-38; Heather Hirschfeld, "Hamlet's 'first corse': Repetition, Trauma, and the Displacement of Redemptive Typology", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 54:4, (2003), 424-48

²² Though Baudissin (in the Schlegel/Tieck edition) translates “his glassy essence” literally as “sein glasern element” (thus preserving the conceit), the earlier and enduringly influential translation of Wieland renders it as “seiner zerbrechlichen Natur”: literally “his brittle nature”, thus replacing the attribute of reflectiveness with that of brittleness. Glass of course is brittle as well as reflective, but brittleness is not exclusively an attribute of glass. The translation of “essence” as “nature” completes the de-glassing process: there is no longer any conceit, and thus no possibility of a scholastic reading via Wieland. Though, as Besson suggests (p.316), Büchner seems to have read *Measure for Measure* in Baudissin’s translation, we cannot discount the possibility that he had read it in Wieland’s translation as well, and with something of Wieland’s bias.

²³ J.V. Cunningham, “‘Essence’ and *the Phoenix and Turtle*”, ELH, 19, (1952), 265-76, 266. Cunningham’s gloss is picked up in the note to this line in J.W. Lever’s *Arden* edition, 1967. Cunningham’s idea is still registered in Brian Gibbons’s *New Cambridge* edition of 1991.

²⁴ Sir Walter Raleigh, Works, (Oxford, 1829), Vol.2, xlvi; cited in Cunningham, (1952), 266.

²⁵ For this tradition, see: E.R. Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, tr. Willard Trask, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1979), pp.138-39; Richard Bernheimer, “Theatrum Mundi”, The Art Bulletin, 38:4, (1956), 225-47; Hawkins, Harriet Bloker, “‘All The World’s A Stage’”, Some Illustrations of the *Theatrum Mundi*’, Shakespeare Quarterly, 17 (1966), 174-78. An entry on the *theatrum mundi* has been completed by the present author for inclusion in The

Cambridge World Shakespeare Encyclopedia, Bruce Smith & Ton Hoenslaars, eds., forthcoming.

²⁶ Shakespeare and the geography of difference, (Cambridge, 2004), pp.75-79.

²⁷ R.S. White, “Theatrum mundi: The Theatre Metaphor in Calvin”, Australian Journal of French Studies, 31: 3, (1994), 309-25.

²⁸ *1 Corinthians, 13:12*, in, The Geneva Bible: The Annotated New Testament, 1602 Edition, Gerald T. Sheppard, ed., (The Pilgrim Press: New York, 1989), p.86.

²⁹ For Goethe, Kant’s “radical evil” was so close to the doctrine of original sin as to prompt the witticism that Kant had “slobbered on his philosopher’s cloak”. Cited in: Ernst Cassirer, Kant’s Life and Thought, James Haden, tr., (Yale University Press: New Haven & London, 1981), p.391

³⁰ Cited in, Joseph M. Butwin, “The French Revolution as *Theatrum mundi*”, Research Studies (Pullman, WA), 43, (1975), 141-52, 146.

³¹ In researching the Georgian repertoire of the *Theatre Royal* in Bury St. Edmunds, my colleague E.J. Kuti has discovered that when the eminent tragedian William Charles MacReady toured there for some four days (November 10-14) in 1828, with a four play repertoire, two of these were Shakespeare plays (*Macbeth* and *Othello*), and the other two were adaptations by James Sheridan Knowles: *William Tell, the Swiss Patriot*, and, *Virgilius, or the Liberation of Rome*. The roles were more important than the texts: each carefully chosen as a MacReady vehicle.

³² Michel de Certeau, “The Theatre of the *Quiproquo*: Alexandre Dumas”, in his, Heterologies: Discourse on the Other, (Manchester University Press: Manchester,

1986), Chapter 10. Certau considers *Reine Margot* as archetypally the drama of the *ancien régime* considered as “the other”: a drama in which the evil dynasty devours itself in its attempt to devour the future.