GEORG BÜCHNER (1813-1837)

Büchner fitted an enormous amount into a short life. He was born in a small town near Darmstadt in Hesse, western Germany. Germany was rearranged, with many other aspects of European states after the end of the long sequence of wars between Republican and Napoleonic (Napoleon Bonaparte became Emperor in 1802) France which followed the French Revolution of 1789. The wars covered most of the period from 1792 to 1815. In the peace settlement, Germany became a confederation of 39 states, a radical simplification compared with the previous Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (dissolved in 1806, after existing in various forms since 800) which contained about 1,800 entities. The title of Emperor stayed with the Habsburg family in Vienna, but was changed to Emperor of Austria and only applied to the central European lands inherited by the family. Hesse was the Grand Duchy of Hesse within the confederation: a very loose structure in which the Emperors of Austria and the Kings of Prussia competed for dominance. Büchner studied medicine from 1831 in Strasbourg (France) and Gießen (Hesse). He became a comparative anatomist of great distinction and was appointed a lecturer at the University of Zürich. He was also a political activist and pamphleteer with revolutionary republican and socialist views. Life was very uncomfortable in Hesse where the Grand Duke ruled in an autocratic and extreme conservative manner. France was more politically free since the July Revolution of 1830, in which the extreme conservative Bourbon monarchy was replace by the more liberal Orléanist monarchy. Büchner was a great reader of literary classics and became a writer himself of mostly drama (Woyzeck, Leonce and Lena as well as Danton’s Death) and also some prose fiction (Lenz). His literary reputation only grew slowly after his death from typhus before his works were staged. The themes of his work were very different for the nineteenth century. His collected works were published in the 1870s and his plays were first staged in the 1900s. The themes of revolutionary politics, atheism, nihilism, materialism and physical desire were not easy ones for his time.
**Danton’s Death: A Drama (1835).** Georges Danton was a major figure in the French Revolution, which limited then overthrew the power of the monarchy and the Catholic Church. He came to prominence as a member of the Jacobin club which became a centre of radicalism in the Revolution. The Revolution became progressively more radical from 1789 to 1794, alongside increasing polarisation in France and conflict with other European powers. Danton was associated with the September Massacres of 1792, in which politically suspect prisoners in Paris were murdered in their jails as the armies of Austria and Prussia invaded France. Prussia and Austria were backed by Great Britain. The Prime Minister was then William Pitt the Younger, who is associated with a harsh line against revolutionary France and its supporters in Britain. He was greatly hated by French republicans. In general, Danton was associated with rallying and unifying the revolutionary government, and its supporters, at a time of crisis. The monarchist armies were held back at the Battle of Valmy and the monarchy was abolished due to this and the 10th August 1792 uprising against the monarchy in Paris. The King at that time was Louis XVI, who is referred to in the play as ‘the veto’, because the 1791 Constitution left the king powers of veto over legislation passed by an elected assembly (national assembly which became the national convention after the monarchy was abolished). Louis XVI and his wife Marie Antoinette (an Austrian Habsburg) conspired against the constitution. Republicans sometimes worked with violent Parisian crowds of ‘sans-culottes’ (men who wore ordinary trousers as opposed to knee breeches with stockings worn by the prosperous) to force radical solutions to these conflicts with the monarchy and its supporters, but also had conflicts with the sans-culottes. Another crisis emerged in April 1793, when General Dumouriez who had been a successful general for the armies of the National Convention defected to Austria, which intensified fears of treason in the republican government. About the same time there was a revolt against the National Convention in the southwestern region of the Vendée. Danton initiated the formation of the Committee of Public Safety to defend the republican government. This became associated with arbitrary arrests and execution after rapid trials which gave little respect to the rights of the accused. The massed executions by guillotine became known as the Terror. Harsh counter-insurrectionary measures in the Vendée and in July to put down a revolt in Lyons (a southern city) were added to the Terror. Danton was behind the formation of the Committee of Public Safety, but did not serve on it. The leading personalities were Maximilien de Robespierre and Louis Antoine de Saint-Just. Though both had been associated with relatively moderate positions previously, they became enthusiastic for arbitrary arrest and execution of increasing numbers of supposed traitors and hypocrites,
who only pretended to support the republic. One wave of repressions was directed against Hébertist radicals, who wanted to go further than the Jacobins in controlling the economy and dechristianisation, in March 1793. The Terror then moved against relative moderates known as Girondins. Danton was unhappy with the growing radicalism of the Committee for Public Safety and the National Convention. One of his allies in these concerns was Camille Desmoulins, who was an old friend of Robespierre. Danton, Desmoulins and Robespierre had all been in the Mountain (the Jacobin deputies in the National Convention sat in higher benches so were known as the Mountain as opposed to the Plain, the lower benches where moderates sat) Desmoulins and Robespierre had been at school together. Nevertheless, Robespierre ordered the arrest followed by quick execution of both Danton and Desmoulins in April 1794, which ends the play. He fell himself in July, as by then a majority in the National Convention feared he would not stop finding traitors and hypocrites there to be arrested and executed. Büchner refers to most of the events above and a large proportion of the text incorporates real speeches given by characters in the National Convention. The most famous is Robespierre’s speech on virtue and terror. There he argues that a republic needs virtue and that virtue requires terror. Terror means the punishment of traitors who are the enemies of the people. Terror is necessary for the triumph of liberty over tyranny. Robespierre gave this speech to the National Convention on 7th May 1794. Danton was executed on 5th April. As the action of the play finishes with the execution of Danton, Büchner stretches historical reality when he gives the speech to Robespierre before the execution, but this is normal when art refers to historical events. Danton’s Death is not completely accurate as history, but it is close to historical reality, as one way of looking at these events, and knowledge of the French Revolution is helpful in understanding Danton’s Death. The play is also full of references to ancient Rome because their model of a great successful republic was the ancient Roman Republic. When Robespierre refers to virtue, he means the patriotism and self-sacrifice of the Romans as discussed by Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Rousseau and other writers on political thought. He does not so much mean morality in general, though the Roman sense of citizenship included ideas of self-restraint in personal behaviour and public supervision of behaviour which might disturb traditions and public welfare. People from Roman history mentioned in the play include two named Brutus, the first founded the republic in the sixth century BCE, expelling the last king and executing his own sons as traitors. The second led the assassination of Julius Caesar in the first century BCE on the grounds that he was turning himself into a king. Cornelia was the mother of two heroes (Gracchi brothers) of the Roman people in the second century BCE killed by
aristocratic conspiracy. Decemvirs refers to Roman commissions to establish new laws and the name is used to refer to the Jacobins trying to renew France with new republican laws. One character refers to Robespierre as a Nero, the first century CE Roman Emperor famous for his cruelty and deranged behaviour. There is a constant contrast between the pure Roman virtue of Robespierre and Danton who is more tied to physical pleasures and leaving people alone who are not purely virtuous. This is also a contrast between ancient Stoic morality (surviving Stoic authors include Seneca, 4-65 CE, Epictetus, 50-135 CE and the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, 120-180 CE) and ancient Epicurean morality.

Epicureanism is named after the Greek philosopher Epicurus. None of his works survive. The most important surviving Epicurean text, *On Nature*, is by the Roman philosopher Lucretius (99-55 CE). We also have knowledge of Epicurean ethics and early Stoic ethics through *On Ends* by Cicero (106-43 BCE), a Roman philosopher and politician. The Stoics argued that a good life means a life of pure virtue in which reason is above the passions. The Epicureans argued that a good life means following natural pleasures, by which they meant moderate pleasures compatible with a life of philosophical reflection and good actions. They were accused of advocating a life of pure physical pleasure and the word ‘Epicurean’ often has that meaning. Büchner refers to Danton as an Epicurean opposed in life style and morality to Robespierre, the pure Roman and pure Stoic. There are references in the play to the Jacobins as Catos, meaning Cato the Younger (95-46 BCE), a Roman aristocrat who was a Stoic and resisted the power of Julius Caesar through suicide, as a signal that it was dishonourable to co-operate with someone who was turning himself into a king. Büchner stretches Epicureanism and what we know about Danton, who was certainly more concerned with wealth and personal pleasures then Robespierre to produce a portrait of a man obsessed with Epicurean pleasures, particularly sex and a despair at a lack of meaning in the universe which he perceives as godless, material and lacking in moral purpose. He wants to lose himself in pleasure and in death, feeling no more energy to fight in politics. This is nihilism, which is the philosophical term for the belief that there are no values and/or that life is not worth living as it lacks purposes and its pains outweigh its pleasures. A prostitute who Danton associates with drove her lover to suicide when he found she loved pleasure not him, and feels absorbed into the physical process of the universe while seeking constant pleasure, also feeling her body contains two bodies, suggesting a deep sense of self-alienation in which identity is lost in the pure physicality of the body. Saint-Just gives a speech (imagined by Büchner) in which the deaths caused by the revolution are the same as any natural process which transforms the earth and neither should be condemned. He turns
this into a call for arms against tyranny, but seems to be in the same place as the more Epicurean characters, caught up in natural forces which lack moral purpose. Robespierre on his own speaks of life as a dream in which we do not act freely and condemns the idea of Christ that he can rid the world of sin through his own blood. Robespierre seems to both resist the Christian morality of self-sacrifice and doubt the virtue which he praises, thinking of the human mind as full of an infinity of thoughts which become actions by accident. It seems Robespierre and Saint-Just are just as nihilistic as Danton.

Robespierre is very disturbed by a Paris full of people concerned with wealth and fashion, people who seek to be famous as wits, people who seek to rise up in the world through marriage to the widows of executed aristocrats, a world determined by self-interested pleasures. The Paris he rejects has many similarities to the Paris described by Montesquieu in *Persian Letters*. Büchner may not be referring to Montesquieu in the play, as this was a widespread view of eighteenth century (and later) Paris, but it is certainly worth comparing the Paris described by Montesquieu and Robespierre’s idea of Paris.

Robespierre’s political ideal is close to that described by Montesquieu in the *Persian Letters* through Usbek’s story of the Troglohytes. A political thinker of the time appears in one of the prison cells full of victims of the Terror. This is Thomas Paine (1737-1809), who fled to France during the Revolution because his support for the Revolution meant his liberty and even life were in danger in Britain. He was previously famous as a supporter of the American Revolution, which he defend in *Common Sense* (1776). He defended the French Revolution in *Rights of Man* (1791) against Edmund Burke’s famous attack in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Paine found it necessary to move to France just before the book was published. Though he was regarded as a dangerous revolutionary in Britain, in France he was regarded as not strong enough in support of the Republic and was imprisoned. Büchner shows him in prison discussing atheism and Anaxagoras (500-428 BCE), a Greek Anatolian philosopher from the time of Sophocles and Plato, who moved to Athens and was sceptical of religious beliefs of the time. Paine was a deist rather than an atheist, but Büchner uses him to expound atheist materialist views close to his own. Paine is shown putting arguments against the existence of God, and discussing Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) as well as Anaxagoras. Spinoza was a Jewish-Dutch philosopher who argued in the *Ethics* that there is only one substance in nature, which is God. Spinoza did not define this view as atheistic but many thought it was. Paine eventually allowed out of prison because of diplomatic help from the United States. Paine was not as socialistic as Büchner, but was a strong opponent of monarchy and aristocratic privilege, arguing for a complete democracy and egalitarian spirit.