

## Consciousness and Structure in *Danton's Death*

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This essay considers dramatic metonymy as a strategy to endow the plot-line with the potential to mirror consciousness. I will argue that Büchner invents the juxtaposition of public and private scenes in an attempt to represent the complexity of the whole, that is, he represents Danton's distance from the realities of his time by creating a schism between scenes that take place in Danton's world, as it were, and the ones happening in the streets of Paris. The fragmentation of consciousness is brought about by Danton's main dilemma: he is caught in an impasse between life in politics (existence for itself, represented by the revolutionary discourse), and hedonism (existence in itself, represented through the body). The structure of the play reflects these alternatives as Büchner compels his audience to partake in a schizophrenic drama and to follow the scenes through a pattern that oscillates between the streets of Paris and Danton's mind. When considered from this point of view, *Danton's Death* is in many respects a precursor of 20th century drama structure.

Büchner's "oscillating" dramaturgy eventually produces a certain effect of alienation. The Brechtian atmosphere is the result of the synecdochic structure, which I consider a sub-category of metonymy. Both tropes operate on the basis of the substitution of one literal term for another, but in synecdoche, specifically, the part of something is used to signify the whole (e.g. we use the term "five sails" to denote five ships). The synecdochic structure in *Danton's Death* is manifest in a sequence of episodes that provide the spectator with different perspectives on both the political situation and Danton's existential dilemma without revealing the entire "story". As a result s/he is asked to construct a context for the fragmented episodes that are being presented on stage. Since the audience is never allowed enough time to completely empathize with Danton, he remains psychologically distant. This is all the more impressive as a structural device because, instead of following the psychological nuances of Danton's soul step by step, the audience gets a chance to experience Danton's vision; it is able to stay judgmental, detached and non-committal amidst the political chaos of the Revolution. Büchner's sophisticated dramaturgy enhances yet another opposition in the play; the fragmented synecdochic structure is complemented by Danton's poetic metaphors, which lift him out of reality and ultimately prevent him from being fully present in the objective spheres of the play.

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"Danton, your lips have eyes," (I.v.)<sup>1</sup> is probably the most revealing metaphor in Büchner's play. It can be interpreted on two levels: on one it suggests Danton's lucidity, that he speaks what he sees, i.e. the truth; on the other, it alludes to the realm of sensuality to which Danton escapes. By allowing him to see the futility of communication, his lucidity separates him from others. The conviction that knowledge is relative and understanding is impossible creates a vacuum around him. He says to Julie in the first scene of the play:

We know very little about each other. We're all thick-skinned,  
we reach for each other, but it's all in vain, we just rub the rough  
leather off . . . we are very lonely. (I.i.)

To be able to hide from his inexorable awareness that he cannot differentiate between appearances and reality, he conjures up his own world of sensuality, which is only expressible through metaphors, is unattainable, yet ceaselessly desired. For Danton, metaphors are the only possible means to establish real interrelation between things and people; they are his only partners in the metaphysical existence caused by his lucidity. His metaphors strangely salute us from a somehow familiar distance; they are taken in by his eyes and evaporate on his lips. He says to Marion: "I wish I were a part of the ether so that I could bathe you in my flood and break on every wave of your beautiful body" (I.v.).

Danton's poetic metaphors are born from the desire to create an aesthetic experience out of his life, to lend it a perfect form that would hide his body until it can follow his mind, which is already somewhere else. His aesthetic immorality lifts his last moments into the sphere of art, where the necessary oblivion, the delicate balance between the real and the unreal, can be achieved. However, Danton's escape to aesthetics is not only reflected through his metaphors. In fact, his metaphors are only linguistic expressions of his newly established existence centering on the body. Although the "semiotic register"<sup>2</sup> isolates him from the male characters of the play, it bonds him to Julie and Marion. Experience originating from and returning to the body offers Danton an escape from his lucidity as well as an alternative mode of existence in sensual communion. His female companions understand this desire; when Danton momentarily parts from Marion to engage in a conversation with Lacroix, Marion remarks: "Your lips have grown cold, your words have stifled your kisses" (I. v.).

Even nothingness, which Danton hopes to attain after death, is somehow related to corporeality. The association of annihilation with the aesthetics of physical disintegration is reflected primarily in Danton's relationship with Julie.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the play, as she departs from life, Julie invites the sun to be her companion, ("The sun has set. The earth's features were so sharp in its light, but now her face is as still and serious as that of a dying person. . . . She's becoming even paler; she's sinking like a corpse into the flood of ether" (IV. vi.). Similarly, Danton often conjures up images of the deteriorating flesh that express his ambivalence towards physical disintegration which he both abhors and desires.

When waiting for his execution, he "rehearses" the final detachment of body and mind: "It's as if I'm smelling already. My dear body, I'll hold my nose and imagine that you're a woman, sweating and stinking after the dance, and pay you compliments . . . oh, that doesn't help. Yes, it's so miserable to have to die" (IV. iii). Finally, his last line connects sensuality to death in a rhetorical question addressed to the executioner: "Can you prevent our heads from kissing at the bottom of the basket?" (IV. vii).

The celebration of eroticism in the union of the senses is expressed in the dialogues between Marion and Danton. Marion finishes the story of her first sexual experience by concluding, "It's all the same, whatever we enjoy: bodies, icons, flowers, or toys, it's all the same feeling; whoever enjoys the most prays the most." In response, Danton identifies the erotic and the aesthetic while suggesting that permanent union is nevertheless impossible: "Why can't I contain your beauty in me completely, surround it entirely? In the end, Danton sanctifies sensuality through the religious imagery set up by Marion by referring to female sexual organs as "the equator where everyone who crosses the line gets a sublimate baptism" (I. v.).

The contrast between Danton's aesthetic immorality and his revolutionary morality resonates in the dramatic structure: the two together enable him to transform his life into an artistic experience. As I have discussed, the aesthetic existence that Danton creates for himself is colored by poetic metaphors. Once the audience decides to follow Danton's mind through his poetry it is, in a way, tricked and trapped into his subjective world. In other words, metaphors for Büchner supply the landmarks in guiding the spectator towards Danton's mind in such a suggestive manner that the audience can actually experience (if only through words) the sensual enjoyments with which Danton surrounds himself. Danton is isolated by his superior vision and hedonism as far as the other characters are concerned, yet by way of his poetry, he manages to communicate his fragmented perception of the world to the audience. At the outset of the play he is much more interested in his experiment than in the cause of the Revolution, which now he considers to be the major influence that pushed him to the edge of the abyss he has to confront.

Büchner overwhelms Danton and the reader with the language of the Revolution by a perpetual emphasis on the rhetoric of politics and sex. The vulgarity of revolutionary discourse is well known. The uniformity of speech patterns advertise the formation of a new ideological community, whose members can identify themselves on the basis of equality in language. In a way, revolutionary discourse (with its rhetoric, concepts and institutions) is identical to the historical force behind the revolution, which eventually devours its creators. Having realized this, Danton asserts his subjectivity by the use of poetic metaphors. In *Georg Büchner and the Birth of the Modern Drama*, David G. Richards maintains that Danton interweaves his speeches with metaphors because of his *ennui* over the theatrical rhetoric of the Revolution.

Rhetorical speeches, like theatrical performances, cannot be judged by the degree of truth they contain, but by their ability to move and persuade. Danton has become disillusioned with this type of performance precisely because it has no regard for the truth, because it precludes the possibility of authentic interpersonal communication, and, what is more, because it reduces human beings to the level of things. In its ability to manipulate and destroy men, language can be a powerful weapon in the service of those who wield it, but like the Revolution itself, it can escape the control of those who create and destroy it too.<sup>4</sup>

Although I basically agree with Richard's parallel between the Revolution and its discourse (in fact, I see the two as inseparable), I don't think the text gives us reason to believe that Danton cherishes any hope of "authentic interpersonal communication." Neither do I think that he is against theatricality *per se*. Let's start with the point about communication.

I would like to suggest that Danton is aware of the impossibility of showing one's true self in language and that is why he turns to metaphors to counterbalance rather than eliminate the problem. Metaphors are also essential to Danton to create his own sensual universe, which he only manages to share with the main female characters, Marion and Julie, who are equally expressive in their own lyrical voices. As the following piece of dialogue between Danton and Julie suggests, the limits of knowledge and learning in general (which result from the impenetrability of language), are obviously quite clear to Danton:

Julie: You know me, Danton.

Danton: Yes, whatever "knowing" means. You have dark eyes and curly hair and a nice complexion and you always say to me: dear George. But ( He points to her forehead and eyes. ) there—there: what's behind that ? No, our senses are coarse. Know each other ? We'd have to break open our skulls and pull each other's thoughts out of the brain fibers. (I.i.)

Danton is not the only one endowed with unusual linguistic patterns. Büchner seems to be fascinated with the devouring power of revolutionary rhetoric and the efforts made by various characters to overcome it. The linguistic diversity with which the *dramatis personae* contribute to the revolutionary rhetoric separates Danton from the other figures on linguistic grounds: Danton's metaphors are sensual, whereas the rest of the characters are concerned with the articulation of new concepts and with the linguistic foundation of a new ideology. For example, St. Just's words burst out with a directness that indicates his fanaticism. He compares the Revolution to the destructive forces of nature, "Humanity will rise up with mighty limbs out of this cauldron of blood, like the earth out of the waters of the Flood, as if it had been newly created" (II. vii.).

Robespierre, however, is incapable of expressing himself with such spontaneity. Whenever Büchner allows us a glimpse at the person behind the public figure, Robespierre seems to struggle between the necessity to act and thoughts of responsibility. ("It's ridiculous how my thoughts watch over each other. . . . Why can't I escape that thought? . . . The mind accomplishes in one hour more acts of thought than the sluggish organism of our body can carry out in years. The sin is in our thoughts.")

The words of Camille, the poet, show the closest resemblance to Danton's sensual metaphors. Even within the framework of political rhetoric, he describes the Revolution in a context defined by aesthetics. ("The government must be a transparent gown that clings closely to the body of the people. Every pulsing vein, flexing muscle, twitching sinew must leave its imprint. Its appearance may be beautiful or ugly—it has the right to be as it is." (I. i.) The overall dramatic effect turns the play into a kaleidoscope; idiosyncratic means of expression contrast each other just as much as they oppose the vulgarity of revolutionary discourse. Although with a different critical purpose, Janis L. Solomon calls to attention two extreme examples of diction in the play, which distinguish themselves from the average rhetoric of the revolution used both by Danton's friends and the people in the streets.

The first street scene offers an astounding montage of linguistic structures, ranging from Simon's bathos to the demagogic rhetoric in the speeches of the first and second citizens and on to the Messianic pathos of Robespierre. Each linguistic model indicates a different way of viewing the same reality. The speech structures furthest removed from the present material situation are those of Simon and Robespierre—the one grotesquely theatrical and fashioned after a non-existent, idealized past, the other prophetically exalted and directed toward an equally non-existent, idealized future. Both ignore the reality of the present moment and introduce abstract *concepts*, i.e., words such as honor and virtue, to deal with a *materially* wretched situation."<sup>5</sup>

The crisis of identity and its concealment in role-playing are recurring motifs in the play, contributing to its strong theatrical quality. The *theatricality* of *Danton's Death* is frequently downplayed by critics who concentrate on the political and philosophical dialectics between Robespierre and Danton.<sup>6</sup> As a result, they don't deal with the overall synecdochic structure of the play which is constituted by multiple fragmentation, rather than the basic ideological bipolarization of the two revolutionary leaders. Indeed, if we insist on binary structures, the contrast between Danton's private and public side, his past and his present, or his consciousness and the role he is trying to leave behind is much stronger, since the arrangement of the scenes fundamentally supports these oppositions.

Danton suffers from the fruits of his conscious or unconscious role-playing; he "has become" the hero of the Revolution in the eye of the public. However, the role is empty now; the Danton the people of Paris refer to has very little to do with the hero of Büchner's play. Simon's clichéd ideas of revolutionary heroism provide the threatening background to Danton's dilemma. There is no escape from this paradox. All levels of the play are engaged in the exploration of the rupture between signifier and signified, and in the investigation of, as Julian Hilton puts it, "the temperament that was able to rescue France but not himself."<sup>7</sup>

Role-playing completes the play-within-the-play atmosphere of *Danton's Death*, which Büchner achieves by providing his characters with idiosyncratic linguistic patterns on the stage of politics.<sup>8</sup> In search of assurances and identities, almost all the characters try to distinguish themselves linguistically through the assumption of roles. Most of these roles belong to noble and heroic figures known from history and literature. For instance, Robespierre identifies himself with the Messiah after Camille names him the Messiah of Blood, and compares St. Just to St. John. Danton calls the Jacobins "brothers of Cain", while Lacroix pronounces Robespierre "a Nero". At the other extreme of the revolutionary hierarchy, Simon imagines himself in the middle of a scene from antique Rome.<sup>9</sup>

With respect to Danton, however, role playing takes on special significance since it points at individualism, the play's major philosophical concern. The *form* of Danton's life has been created, the role already belongs to the past. He has become the revolutionary hero of actions, and he doesn't have the will or the energy to modify that image. Büchner is concerned with the contrast between two possible modes of existence during the entire play: the life for others (Danton's past) and the life for itself (Danton's present). The division echoes the well-known existential dilemma as does the cause of Danton's tragedy: individualism. Unable to dissociate himself from life completely, he can't take responsibilities for the consequences of his public service. The echoes of the September massacre constantly return to his mind, and although he intends to renounce his political role completely, his individualism doesn't allow him to let it go entirely. Disillusioned with the revolution yet clinging to his public stature, he repeatedly rejects the idea of his execution by saying, "they won't dare."

Nevertheless, existence without a purpose seems repulsive to Danton. He complains about the tedium of every day life which perpetuates uniformity. He pronounces the routine of dressing up and going to bed "sad", because "millions have done it this way and millions will keep doing it" (II.i.) To escape these alternatives Danton chooses hedonism, the celebration of the body. However, his aesthetic existence can provide only temporary relief. His individualism needs a public, and he can hope for the understanding of only his female companions. Moreover, despite his irony, he cannot obliterate his guilty conscience entirely; his memory haunts him. On these grounds, Danton rejects the idea of a possible escape to a place which he thinks, "is supposed to be safe; maybe for my

memory, but not for me—the grave would be safer. At least it would make me forget. It would kill my memory. But there my memory will live on and kill me." (II. iv.) It is precisely Danton's individuality, his inability to renounce life completely, which gives us a reason to call him a tragic hero in the Lukácsian sense of the word. Lukács differentiates the tragic hero from the mystic on the basis of their attitude towards death. While the tragic hero is doomed to confront it, the mystic merges with the "Unity of the All."<sup>10</sup> Despite the desire for nothingness, which is a constant element of Danton's speeches, he cannot accept historical insignificance, he cannot merge. His bitter lines to Lacroix reflect his fear that history will forget him:

You have a poor memory, you called me a dead saint. You were right, even more than you realized. I was at the Section meetings—they were respectful but like undertakers. I am a relic and relics are thrown into the street, you were right. (II.i.)

To counter his public image Danton intends to create a new form out of his life. Creating a "work of art" out of one's life is a dangerous experiment, a flirtation with death which Danton knows and enjoys. He is detached from the swirling life around him; his environment appears totally insignificant. His consciousness, painfully aware, isolates him from the others, but paradoxically, intimately connects him to the reader. The connection is based on the psychology of identification built into the structure of the play. Danton's recognition moment (as in *Hamlet* or in Camus' *Caligula*), precedes the time when the play starts. He knows what is to unfold and this implicitly provides the play with a double structure. The "isolated consciousness" will necessarily appear superior; the reader cannot help but enter the hero's mind and, as a consequence, will be (if unconsciously), inclined to see everything through his eyes. Thus, the hero's environment becomes distanced, the synecdochic whole breaks down into his "part" and its context and the play will emerge on the level of a chaotic spectacle, a *theatrum mundi* of aimless signifiers without a god to hold them together.<sup>11</sup>

We could say that the metaphysical resonance of Büchner's play is in part the result of this double structure. By way of "entering" into Danton's mind the reader is experiencing the core of the play to which the whirl of the Revolution serves only as example in contradistinction. Taking the expressionist point of view, we might say that the play takes place in the reality of the French Revolution and in Danton's mind simultaneously. Thus, the "objective time" of the chaotic, every day world is contrasted to Danton's "subjective time," the expansion of his last moment before he dies. His last moment is projected into a timeless dimension: while the Revolution is sweeping him away, the drama miraculously stops to provide us with the experience of Danton's crystallized consciousness. Nevertheless, the moment cannot be held longer than the play lasts. After the scream of schizophrenia has been heard, the hero has to die. Danton's powerful consciousness is useless, if not harmful in the world of action.

Again, as Julian Hilton puts it: "The whole strategy of the plot tends to undermine the play's title, for it is ultimately irrelevant to the plot whether Danton lives or dies."<sup>12</sup>

Consciousness and structure precondition each other in *Danton's Death*. Danton is dead before the play starts, and it is evident from the title that Büchner was more interested in the style of Danton's disappearance than in the events leading up to it. Similarly, we are fascinated by the dignity of Danton's "endgame," which is a triumph with a Janus face, a failure and a victory at the same time. Danton cannot escape his own mind; the choice of sinking his awareness into the ocean of sensuality cannot be successful. His is a conscious attempt at self-deception and as such is impossible to realize. The experiment for creating a meaningful present is futile, as it is reflected by the structure of the play as well. The romantic atmosphere of the scene with Marion is shattered by the arrival of the other prostitutes and Danton's friends. He cries out hopelessly: "To have lost so much time! As if it were worth it! (I.v.)

In the frontier situation of readiness for death, Danton's "alien" past seems to him even less coherent, even more deceitful than his present. A man who thought that by sending his gods into exile he could furnish the earth according to his own will, skeptically expects the next wave of the Revolution that will mercilessly sweep him away. Although he has stepped down from the stage of the Revolution the *encore* is still to be seen; the final, thrilling beauty of the guillotine scene is the main attraction for the audience, who loudly applaud the perfectly indifferent quickness of the blade. Death is a reality for Danton and this is what basically separates him from the mystic, as I have discussed above, in the Lukácsian sense of the word. Although his soul wishes to dissolve in death, his intellect doubts the peace of it. He says:

Oh, to believe in obliteration—that would help. . . . There's no hope in death; it's only a simpler—and life a more complicated, organized—form of decay; that's the only difference! (III.vii.)

His body loathes deterioration; Danton wants to live accepting the mystical unity between life and death, yet he cannot merge. His public self intrudes even into the last, clearest moments of his existence, unwantedly but decidedly present in his consciousness. The structure mirrors this twoness as well: the reader occasionally catches glimpses of the life of the historical Danton. The heat of his oration before the Revolutionary Tribunal is a warning signal that he is still bound by social existence and it is precisely because death is a reality for him that he can be a hero of a tragedy, since death is a necessary condition of self-consciousness in life. His awareness is the strongest in the last moment; it is as if Büchner wrote his tragedy about the crystal clearness of this flickering. The recognition moment and the events that led to it are long past before the play begins, as the rhythm of the memories of the September massacre in Danton's mind continuously reminds us.



However, besides the plot the play displays additional unusual features which compel us to readjust our principles about Classical tragedy. Danton is not a tragic hero in the traditional sense, yet he is the protagonist of the tragedy, and grotesquely so. As opposed to the Classical hero, who *actively* realizes his personal capacity to create a meaningful "whole" out of his life, as in the case of Oedipus or Macbeth, for example, Danton's action is his *passivity*. He is different from the Classical hero and in a sense much more powerful because his fall does not occur without his will; this is exactly where the paradox lies in the play.

Danton has realized that human action has no bearing on the course of events ("We haven't made the Revolution; the Revolution has made us"[II.i.]), now he finds meaning in his passivity. His *hybris* is concrete and abstract at the same time; on the one hand, it is the error of thinking that he created events, although he was indistinct in the "flow" of life; on the other hand, it is the inaction that results from such a recognition. Now his revenge on fate is that he consciously fills out the form of destiny, which monotonously elevates, then casts down the individual. His passivity, in Camus' term, is a "superior suicide" with a devilish smile, not unlike that of Caligula.

Danton's "superior suicide" results from the realization that his only freedom in life is the ability to say yes to his own death. He wants to die, he is "ready" at the beginning of the play, but before he goes he intends to make a statement. This statement is passivity turned into indulgence. Danton is totally indifferent to everything that is happening around him; he takes refuge in the world of sensuality. He locks himself up in the tower of purely sensory enjoyments, where the inevitability of events cannot bother him.

To develop this point further, let's take Thomas Mann's idea (discussed in *Death in Venice*), of discipline and licence as the major struggling forces in an artist's life. We might say that it is in the last moment of Danton's mind, projected into "objective time" and manifested in his "superior suicide"—that these two forces collapse into each other. Danton, being unable and unwilling to keep balance between the two, falls into the abyss. As with Aschenbach, the principle of discipline is characteristic of Danton before the play starts. It is embodied in the image of the celebrated leader of the Revolution ready to change the world. However, from the very first scene of the play, this image is fading into the past; what we see now is a consciousness losing touch with reality, and infected by indifference towards everything that represents his past. At the very moment when he is considered to have lost his grip on the events he is in perfect control. At the borderline of leaving the stage of the Revolution and departing on the road of sensuous pleasures that will lead him to annihilation, discipline and licence merge. It is here that the perfect moment of Danton's life is created and crystallized in the play. Mann/Aschenbach discusses the composition of form as follows:

And has not form two aspects? Is it not moral and immoral at once: moral in so far as it is the expression and result of—yes, actually hostile to morality—in that of its very essence it is indifferent to good and evil, and deliberately concerned to make the moral world stoop beneath its proud and undivided sceptre ?<sup>13</sup>

Danton hopes to dissolve in nothingness, which for him is identical to non-awareness. He wants to disappear rather than die, since his intellect reminds him (as it did Hamlet), of the possibility of a conscious after-life. His desired nothingness is a perfectly symmetrical world where no phenomenon appears; only the void can save the sceptic, who wishes to depart into annihilation from the intolerable chaos around him. Nihilism is illogical, defiant skepticism and as such is in opposition to tragedy, whose existence is dependent on the transcendental. Total negation of any sort of system whatsoever is impossible: we cannot be puppets in a Godless or useless world. If we are puppets somebody must move us. At the same time, if there is no God, yet there must be a system since the Sun rises every morning and always in the east. Similarly, on the social level, the next wave of the Revolution is a logical, social necessity. The play has several allusions to the laws of nature, and even Danton puzzles about the unintelligible "must" in man, which might be a sign of an unknown force in the universe.

The Man on the Cross made it easy for Himself: "It must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh."

It must—it was this "must." Who would curse the hand on which the curse of "must" has fallen? Who has spoken this "must," who? What is it in us that whores, lies, steals, and murders?

We are puppets, our strings are pulled by unknown forces, we ourselves are nothing, nothing !(II.v.)

Nevertheless, Danton often asserts his belief in the will of the individual, which makes his arguments inconsistent at times. Hilton makes an insightful observation about the necessity of such inconsistencies:

The difficulty is located in Revolutionary history itself: we all know that Danton went to the guillotine, and any play about this subject is prey to two dangers. Either it may belittle the historical events by over-simplification or excessive attention to artistic rather than historical truth, or it may work like a preprogrammed action that is untragic because it denies choice. Of necessity, therefore, the play has to negotiate between the inevitability of the end—the guillotine—and the many ways of presenting how that end is reached.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever difficulties this dramaturgical predicament brings to the play, it provides it with a challenging theatrical aspect which I believe outweighs the initial problems. As Büchner's letters suggest, the dynamics of the question of free will versus historical or natural force were probably not clear in Büchner's mind at the time he wrote the play. In terms of the play's reception this might yield advantages, since the implied ideological ambivalence intensifies the audience's involvement in the play. From the fragmented philosophical arguments the audience is challenged to create an ontologically sound whole, which is an impossibility. I guess one could call it Büchner's involuntary irony. From a theatrical perspective *Danton's Death* could be more involving than any of Brecht's plays might hope to be, since in Brechtian drama the spectator is usually confronted with ideological or moral opposites which are mutually exclusive.

It is because Büchner is ironical about logic itself that he gives the principle of nihilism to Danton. Nothingness is beyond reason and because it ignores logic, nihilism is the only position that does not compromise the truth.<sup>15</sup> The optimism of logic, typical of the Neoclassical tragedies, disappears from the play's world. As it is evident from the discussion between Paine and Herault in the Luxemburg prison, logic only proves that God, by being present in the thing and its opposite, cancels out its very existence.

. . . one could, however, also say that if God were to be all things, He would also have to be His own opposite—that is, perfect and imperfect, evil and good, blissful and suffering. The result would certainly equal zero, it would cancel itself out, we would come to nothing. (III.i.)

This irony shines through most of Danton's statements which appear to be offensive to others, but in fact could be interpreted otherwise. The Greek term, *ieron*, perfectly describes Danton's intentions as it refers to the dissembler of Greek comedy: the character hiding under a semblance or a disguise. Danton, however, doesn't (or only partially) resort to irony in order to achieve an artistic effect; for him irony serves the purpose of distracting others from false appearances in order to guide them to the truth. His irony is subtle and protective, under the sarcasm it communicates compassion.<sup>16</sup> Danton manages to sustain his ironic tone even in the face of death. In the last moment he consoles the dying Fabre with a joke: "The guillotine is the best doctor" (IV. vii.). In the *Alexandrian Quartet*, Durrell creates a character, an artist, strikingly similar to Danton, who is despised by his friends because of his irony. It is only after his suicide, when they read his unpublished letters that they understand his motives. I think they are identical with those of Danton. ". . . his irony was really tenderness turned inside out like a glove! . . . through his work he has been seeking for the very tenderness of logic itself, of the Way Things Are; not the logic of syllogism or the tide-marks of emotions, but the real essence of

fact-finding, the naked truth, the Inkling . . . the whole pointless Joke. Yes, Joke!"<sup>17</sup>

Danton's irony epitomizes the philosophical *skepsis* of the entire play: logic contradicts its own assumptions; everything is a question of point of view; unreal and real are interchangeable. This is why there could not be a more symbolic environment to represent the play's stance than a political one. The cheap logic of dogmatism and rhetoric seems ironical when put side by side with Danton's existential dilemma. This irony is further emphasized by the doubts of Robespierre which are remarkably similar to those of Danton.

And isn't our waking a more lucid dream, aren't we sleepwalkers, aren't our conscious actions dreamlike, only clearer, more precise, more complete? Who can reproach us for that? (I.vi.)

This ironic quality radiates from the structure of *Danton's Death* as well. The validity of one scene is immediately questioned or negated by the following scenes as the play oscillates between the streets of Paris and Danton's private world. Structure carries a parallelism between the chaotic, ever changing reality of the outside world and the instability of Danton's mind. The viewpoints abruptly shifting around him bring about an indecision similar to what the spectator feels while watching the kaleidoscope of scenes commenting upon one another.

What we see in Büchner is a transition from a metaphorical to a metonymical structure. The play's method of representing the wholeness of life is different from that of previous ages. A drama based on the notion of causality can no longer represent the world. Life cannot be explained rationally, one thing does not follow from another. Like signifiers gone mad and just vaguely referring to the signified behind, in *Danton's Death* the scenes exist primarily in themselves: they still represent the whole, but from different perspectives. As in naturalism, they compel us to form a point of view on our own, to find our way out of a maze in which we are only provided with reference points but not with a compass.

The synecdochic principle, which operates by contexture<sup>18</sup> forcing the reader to establish a context that can accommodate all the parts, works against logic in the play. The various scenes, although they all pertain to the main theme, are in contradiction with each other, representing different perspectives ironically. Simultaneously, the intrusion of the private scenes into the public and visa versa render the process of a society going mad.

The conjuncture between consciousness and structure is apparent on other levels as well. Just as the scenes semantically cancel out rather than support each other, the characters' dialogues do not really suggest interaction. The dialogues are usually monologues embodying a certain point of view, only to be followed by another one. In addition, although the opposite could be expected, the scenes are static in character. Most of them lack the dynamic of the Revolution, they

are like actions turned into ideas in Danton's mind. The synecdochic structure exposes reality: all the scenes are relevant to the whole, yet display only an ironical, mutually exclusive relationship betraying the illogicality of the world.

The omission of the metaphoric structures in art parallels the dawn of the critique of syllogism, as both are constructed according to basically the same pattern. The pattern is exploration by establishing contact in the hope that by connecting detail to detail the whole can be discovered. By the time of Büchner, Kant's influence is undeniable: art follows philosophy in questioning the omnipotence of logic. With the discontinuance of metaphorical serenity, synecdoche signifies the loss of the romantic perspective and irony is the result of the lack of a coherent picture.

Interestingly, in the midst of the metonymical structure, Büchner retained the metaphor in language. He retained it for Danton to express his belonging to somewhere else, his poetic intuition and his connection with nothingness. Danton expresses his doubts in poetry: "Nothingness has killed itself, Creation is its wound, we are its drops of blood, the world is the grave in which it rots" (III.vii.), and identifies sex and death in a lyrical way: "You sweet grave—your lips are funeral bells, your voice my death knell, your breasts my burial mound, and your heart my coffin"(I.i.).

"Danton, your lips have eyes" is the perfect, illogical metaphor of the play. The world is the humiliating play of unknown forces, where the possibilities are false alternatives leading to the same results. The choice between these alternatives is left to human freedom, which is nonsense *per se*. Even in the existentialist sense of the word, the idea of complete freedom is ridiculed by the permanent possibility of making the wrong choice, the awareness of the chance of "missing the mark."

The range of human freedom as a concept in a certain age is inversely proportional to its perceived value and is directly proportional to the extent the god-concept of the age is abstracted. Freedom is most desired at the early polytheistic stage, when the individual thinks that his choice is an important one, in fact, so significant that taking the wrong step can turn the gods against him. The concept of freedom is identified with the power of destruction. Ricoeur says of Prometheus in *The Symbolism of Evil*:

The freedom of Prometheus is a freedom of defiance and not of participation. Aeschylus has expressed this maleficence of Prometheus' freedom in the theme of the "secret". . . he possesses the secret of the fall of Zeus, the secret of the Twilight of the Gods; he has the means of annihilating being. A destructive freedom like this is not, for Aeschylus, the last word of freedom; it is only its first word.<sup>19</sup>

In the later phase of Greek tragedy and also in the plays of Shakespeare, the heroes are aware of certain limitations on their autonomy, but (with the exception

of Hamlet) they do not doubt the importance of human action. The tragic hero, even if he is aware of the necessity of his fall, confronts the transcendental. His is an active statement, which shows belief in meaningful human action. Only when God withdraws and an abstract entity, a force or the existentialist nothingness takes his place does freedom completely lose its meaning. It becomes an unwanted achievement, a contradiction in itself and the only possibility for the hero to reject it, is not to choose, remain passive and die.

Danton's last moment is an attempt at the "impossible" autonomy with the acute awareness that his own irresolution is a tautology; it does not matter whether he acts or not. His death is not only the closure of his life and the play, it is an unexpected limitation in our explorations: even death might not offer peace to a strange, schizophrenic mind, which is able to see its own and a myriad of other perspectives as well.

## Notes:

1. Georg Büchner, *Complete Works and Letters*, eds. Walter Hinderer and Henry J. Schmidt, trans. Henry J. Schmidt (New York: Continuum, 1986) All further references to the play will be to this edition.

2. I am using the term, "semiotic," in the sense Julia Kristeva defines it in contradistinction to the phenomenological aspects of language, and in opposition to symbolic, patriarchal linguistic representation. According to Kristeva's psychoanalytical binary, the "semiotic" expresses presymbolic materialities: gestures, rhythms, intonations and even laughter. The "semiotic" also emerges on the semantic level, when a word is charged with a plurality of significations by way of condensation and displacement.

3. Elke Haase Rockwell positions Danton's relationship to Julie in the mystic-idealistic tradition and sees her death as a critique of the death aesthetics of romanticism. In the same essay she provides a materialist interpretation of the class implications of the metaphors of decay in the play. "Todesthematik und Kontextstruktur in Georg Büchners Drama Dantons Tod," *Colloquia germanica: Internationale Zeitschrift für germanische Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft*, 18 (1985).

4. David G. Richards, *Georg Büchner and the Birth of the Modern Drama*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977) 67-68.

5. Janis L. Solomon, "Büchner's Dantons Tod: History as Theatre", *Germanic Review*, 54 (1979) 10.

6. See, for instance: David Roberts, "Büchner and the French Revolution: Two Arguments," *Komos*, 3 (1973); Walter Hinderer's introduction to Georg Büchner, *Complete Works and Letters*, and Alfred Schwarz, *Dramatic Theory and the Modes of Tragic Drama* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1978) 65-76. On Büchner's reformulation of the historical tragedy, see: Mark G. Pomar, "The Remaking of Historical Drama: Pushkin's Boris Godunov and Büchner's Dantons Tod," *Germano-Slavica: A Canadian Journal of Germanic & Slavic Comparative Studies*, 3 (1981).

7. Julian Hilton, *Georg Büchner* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1982) 60.

8. Wajda used this idea in his mise-en-scène (Warsaw, 1975) of *The Danton Affair* written by Stanisława Przybyszewska. Although the play—which dramatizes the philosophical dialectics between Danton and Robespierre and leaves it unresolved—is biased against Danton (his figure suggests revolutionary compromise), the directing was based on the principle of identification. Wajda situated the Revolutionary Tribunal amongst the audience, thereby enabling them to "witness" the trial within the framework of watching the play. This way the audience shares not only Danton's private side but his public rejection as well, becoming an accomplice in creating Danton's dilemma.

9. For a detailed analysis of the play's theatricality and its relationship to Camille's character, see: Janis L. Solomon, "Büchner's Dantons Tod: History as Theatre"

10. Georg Lukács, "The Metaphysics of Tragedy," in *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1974) 159-160.

11. If there is a *narrative* consciousness present, the effect will depend on the attitude of the narrator. If it is not different from the perspective of the other characters, he will actually bring the events closer to the reader (e.g. Kleist's *Penthesilea*). However, if the narrator is commenting upon the events and introduces a new attitude it will produce a distancing effect (e.g. Brecht).

12. Hilton 67.

13. Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice and seven other stories*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Vintage Books, 1936) 447.

14. Hilton, *Georg Büchner* 75.

15. David G. Richards compares this structure to parataxis, contrasting it to the hypotactic structure of classicist drama. "As opposed to the hypotactic structure, in which the complex logical and hierarchical interrelationship of parts is clearly established through the use of complex structures, the simple, serial arrangement of parts is ideally suited to the presentation of a fragmented world, a world in which clearly defined relationships are lacking, and in which the individual stands alone." See, *Georg Büchner and the Birth of the Modern Drama*, 77.

16. Wolfgang Kaempfer analyses the logical underpinnings of the play in terms of a contradistinction between Robespierre's rhetoric (as an embodiment of the binary logical argumentation), and Danton's realism (which reflects his sensory aesthetic world view and renders analytical rationality an ever increasing de-rationalization). "Logisches und analogisches Bewusstsein in Dantons Tod von Georg Büchner: Eine 'literatur-anthropologische' Anwendung," *Recherches Germaniques*, 12 (1982).

17. Lawrence Durrell, *Clea* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1961) 176.

18. I am using Jakobson's terminology as it appears in his essay: "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" in Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971).

19. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) 224.

