Reading without Interpreting:  
German Textual Criticism and  
the Case of Georg Büchner  

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To this day, the highest form of appreciation in German literary culture is honoring an author with a historical-critical edition. Such editions are vast enterprises involving private and public funding agencies like the Volkswagenstiftung or the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG); large committees of scholars with research assistants, doctoral students, Habilitanden, and secretarial staff; and publishing houses, some of which, like the Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, are entirely devoted to editorial projects. Often editorial projects lead to substantial scholarly disagreements, and in the last two decades there has been a remarkable number of competing editions of major authors such as Goethe, Herder, Celan, Kafka, and Hölderlin. The triangle of funding agencies, academic expertise and manpower, and publishing houses encloses a distinctly German practice of establishing and safeguarding a national canon of literary and historical source texts.¹ There are macrohistorical forces at work in this practice, such as the late nationhood of Germany, the compensatory reliance on literary and historical texts as proofs of Germany’s cultural and political identity, the structure of the German research university, and the ethos it engenders in its faculty. However, less obvious phenomena, such as the peculiar personalities behind editorial projects, the changes in scientific protocols, and the generational fault lines of postwar German culture, are equally responsible for this concentration on the care for the “solid letter” (veste Buchstaben) that


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Friedrich Hölderlin had recommended to the Germans.² A recent research project—financed by the DFG—has greatly advanced our understanding of the emergence of philological ethos in German universities of the nineteenth century; the project did not, however, focus on the peculiar German fascination with complete critical editions.³

In the following, I will look at this fascination from three different, not necessarily complementary, angles. First, I will briefly reassess the contribution of the towering editorial philologist of the nineteenth century, Karl Lachmann, in the context of classical and Protestant philology and against the backdrop of early nineteenth-century science. Lachmann’s decisions and convictions still hold sway over German editors, however critical and radical they declare themselves to be. Second, I will try to give a brief account of the remarkable reemergence of editorial controversies in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s. As the feuilletons of German newspapers show, this is a period that only now is congealing into a historical epoch; new sources are emerging, protagonists have died or are publishing memoirs, and a general sense of “pastness” is settling over it. My account, therefore, is more narrative and extrinsic than the reconstruction of Lachmann’s logic and practice. Last, I would like to show how cultural sediment and editorial logic shape—and distort—a major contemporary editorial project, Georg Büchner’s as-yet-unfinished Sämtliche Werke und Schriften. My hope is that these three perspectives may afford an instructive and culturally specific view on a practice that, even in the age of electronic publication, remains at the center of modern philology.

LACHMANN’S METHOD

Rarely has a philological practice been subjected to such close scrutiny as Karl Lachmann’s stemmatic criticism.⁴ The intensity of this interest is due to a variety of factors, among which loom largest Lachmann’s pivotal importance for at least three separate disciplines (Germanistik, classical philology, and theology) and the fact that he buried the

rationale for his procedure in his (mostly Latin) prefaces, letters, and very few essays. It is also true that what became known as his “method” is, to a large degree, a retroactive codification by his students and that in some of his editions, for example, in his editions of medieval texts, Lachmann did not actually follow his supposed method.\(^5\) Nonetheless, there is little doubt that Lachmann and his school have exercised a profound influence on the development of philology as a profession and that Lachmann crucially helped elevate philology to the dominant discipline in German academia.

The fundamental theorem of “the method” is “id quod recensere dicitur, sine interpretatione et possumus et debemus” (that which one calls recension [a nontechnical translation might be “sighting”] we can and have to perform without interpretation).\(^6\) Prior to the circular movement of hermeneutics, which extends from the emendation of a text to the full explication of its meaning, there must be a sighting, scanning, and sorting of the philological material that remain external to its semantic and immune to its rhetorical dimensions—immune to what Lachmann, in one of his rare commentaries on his practice, termed “innere Gründe” (intrinsic reasons).\(^7\) Recension is an analytical process in which the stemma of a text—the diagram of filiation that has since become the hallmark of editions in Lachmann’s wake—is reconstructed by treating manuscripts and printed editions as opaque exterior objects, identified and distinguished only by the errors and variants they do or do not share. These errors themselves are not errors in judgment or interpretation, but the result of purely exterior, mechanical lapses on the part of scribes, printers, or previous editors. The stemma represents an upward relation of authenticity between manuscripts and printings that is neither identical (though often parallel) with temporal ascendance nor identical with an increasing soundness of the text—which could be established only by assessing “inner reasons.” The best possible text is the result of emendation, not of recension. The strict separation of the two processes is Lachmann’s originary contribution to textual criticism.\(^8\)

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\(^6\) Quoted in the most interesting German book on Lachmann: Harald Weigel, *Nur was du nie gesehen wird ewig dauern* (Freiburg: Rombach, 1989), 163.


\(^8\) For a discussion of the distance between interpreting and reading, see David E. Wellbery, “Interpretation versus Lesen: Posthermeneutische Konzepte der Texterörterung,” in *Wie international ist die Literaturwissenschaft?* ed. Lutz Dannenberg and Friedrich Vollhardt (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995), 123–38.
This abstention from any contact with the inner strata of meaning in weighing the relative value of a text was very much in accordance with new protocols in the natural sciences that began to take effect in the 1820s. The reorganized Prussian universities and academies sought to expel any reference to the inner qualities of objects and forces to which Romantic Naturphilosophie had appealed in its search for “inner reasons” that would connect the various realms of natural objects and imbue them with a tendency toward the Idea, Art, or God. In 1828, on the occasion of the annual meeting of the Gesellschaft Deutscher Naturforscher und Ärzte, in Berlin, the Naturphilosophen, among them the founder of the Gesellschaft, Lorenz Oken, were actively prevented from participating in the main sessions; small working groups established new criteria for what would and what would not count as scientific data, and under what protocols such data should be read, sorted, and interpreted. At the same time, the profile of the natural scientist changed from the inspired amateur, who, like Goethe, felt entitled to pronounce on a variety of subjects and to present synthetic accounts of natural processes, to the gatherer, arranger, and analyst of increasingly narrow sets of data, who studiously refrained from any speculative inferences. Lachmann and his school urged this new ethic of the natural scientist upon the philologists: conjecture and divination, which had characterized the Romantic philology of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, were declared alien to the task of the textual critic, as was the broad and dangerously dilettantish appreciation of textual traditions in the manner of August Wilhelm Schlegel. Even the Nibelungen editions of Friedrich von der Hagen, which did compare manuscript traditions, had to give way to “wahre strenghistorische Kritik” (the true, exclusively historical critique), which alone could establish the worthiness of texts and serve as a basis for critical editions.

Equally in tune with the new scientific paradigms was the claim to universality in Lachmann’s method: like a measurement or an experimental procedure in the natural sciences, Textkritik could be performed on any text regardless of epoch and language, regardless even of its medium of transmission. Lachmann himself edited ancient and medieval texts for which he had to collate manuscripts, but he also


made a point of editing, with the same claim to scientific finality, the works of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, thus inaugurating the critical edition of modern German authors. So fervent was his belief in the novelty and value of editing modern authors that he sued the publisher of his Lessing for the copyright to the edition.

This claim to scientific objectivity in handling texts of all kinds and epochs laid the groundwork for what is still today called in German the science of literature, Literaturwissenschaft. It was Lachmann’s reduction of all questions of meaning to philological facts, of all hermeneutic vagaries to demonstrable textual phenomena, that allowed philology to become established in the universities as not just a legitimate but an exemplary discipline in the humanities. History, theology, art history, and the foreign languages would soon bow to this methodological dominance and base their investigations on philological procedures as well. The “exclusively historical critique” was also deemed to be highly salutary to the minds of high school and entering university students, who, as future civil servants, were expected to read petitions and write administrative documents with a critical eye. The rise of the German Beamtenstaat (state of civil servants) and the rise of Lachmann’s method are parallel and interlaced phenomena.

Lachmann’s method is not so much antihermeneutic as protohermeneutic; it sought to stabilize and free the universal hermeneutics of his mentor and friend Daniel Friedrich Schleiermacher from all worries about the material appearance of the text. This is the reason for the complementarity of their procedures: where Schleiermacher placed the author as originator of meaning, Lachmann placed the archetype as the origin of the textual tradition; where the interpreter wants to understand the author better than he understood himself, the philologist wants to help constitute a text that is better than any extant text; and where the hermeneut wants to redraw the historical horizon in which the text is to be read, the philological scientist wants to reconstruct the paths of transmission that brought the text to us. The evacuation of meaning in textual criticism is preparatory to the full exploration of the hermeneutic potential of a text, not opposed to it. It seeks to provide the material base upon which interpretation can soar.

The complementary relation between Schleiermacher’s universal hermeneutics and Lachmann’s universal textual criticism is most obvious in Lachmann’s edition of the New Testament. To papist critics (as Lachmann called them), the rejection of any received text and the

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11. For the most entertaining account of this philologization, see Anthony Grafton, The Footnote: A Curious History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
constitution of a new text solely along the lines of philological authenticity and manuscript filiation was sheer blasphemy, similar to Luther’s rejection of the church’s dogmatic authority in favor of the authenticity of the believer’s faith. But Schleiermacher, the preeminent Protestant theologian of his time, had revived Paul’s “pneumatic” conviction that access to the spiritual riches of the Scriptures must overcome too close an entanglement with linguistic detail: Schleiermacher appreciated Lachmann’s conviction that once the textual critic has constituted the text, he must disappear and leave the field to the “spiritual” interpreter. The anti-Judaic affect of this stance is palpable: where the proper place of philology is neglected, where textual critics intervene in spiritual interpretation and interpreters engage in textual criticism, “the worst deviation” in interpretation unfailingly results: cabalistic exegesis.

One way of keeping the constitution of a text free of hermeneutic interventions and yet to acknowledge its semantic dimension is to append a commentary to the critical edition. In view of the cabalistic dangers, this commentary has to be kept spatially apart from the constituted text—in a separate volume, if possible—and be curtailed in its explanatory reach. Christian exegetical traditions had long established that the sensus historicus could be unfolded without disturbing the spiritual layers of the text. Building upon these traditions, the German critical edition in its fullest bloom is the Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe mit Kommentar, which until today is the crowning achievement of any editorial endeavor.

There were other factors besides scientific rigor and Protestant fervor that contributed to the extraordinary sway “the method” held in nineteenth-century Germany; for our present purposes, this sketch of the German academic and scholarly landscape must suffice. It is important to remember, however, that no historical reconstruction can dissolve the fact that Lachmann was facing fundamental problems of literary and historical scholarship. His meticulous attention to the text grappled with the problems of how meaning can be recovered

and preserved in history and how editorial intervention, willingly or not, may contaminate textual artifacts. Lachmann was also keenly aware that political and theological authorities tend to derive their legitimacy from unchallenged textual surfaces, be this the text of the law or of Scripture. For all its literal and ideological conservatism, there was also defiance and protest in Lachmann’s textual purism, and these gestures were recognized in the 1970s by a new generation of editors in Germany.

RADICAL PHILOLOGY IN THE YEARS OF LEAD

The most recent history of editorial philology in Germany cannot be unhinged from the disasters of German history in the twentieth century. Perhaps the earliest indication of the fateful intertwining of editorial and cultural politics was the edition of Hölderlin’s works by Norbert von Hellingrath. Through Hellingrath’s membership in the circle around Stefan George, Hölderlin became the spiritual leader of a “Secret Germany” that was beginning to form outside of the exhausted structures of Wilhelminian Germany. Hellingrath’s death in the killing fields of Verdun in 1916 and his powerful essays and introductions to his edition, in which he underscored the incommensurable power of Hölderlin’s vision and the poet’s care for Germany as a fatherland, facilitated the acceptance of Hölderlin into the pantheon of the fascist state. A new critical edition of his work, the Stuttgart edition, was begun under the editorship of Friedrich Beißner, and in 1943, on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of Hölderlin’s death, a special edition of the so-called Patriotic Songs was prepared for the express use of soldiers in the field.

When in 1975 Dieter E. Sattler presented a radically new plan for a critical edition of Hölderlin, this project was largely fueled by outrage over this coincidence of editorial practice and political subservience in the Nazi period. A few years earlier, textual critics had demonstrated that Nietzsche’s oeuvre had been manipulated by the editors to suit Nazi ideology, and the unspoken assumption behind the attack against the Stuttgart Hölderlin edition was that Beißner, who in 1975 was still its chief editor, had similarly falsified the texts at the very level of their

decipherment and recension. Based on this assumption, Hölderlin appeared to have been twice victimized: first, in his day, an uncaring and repressive society had driven him into real or protective madness—this was the position of Pierre Bertaux and of Peter Weiss, later amplified and turned into radical politics by the antipsychiatry movement of the 1970s and early 1980s—then, a generation of philologists who had sold their conscience to the Nazis, and who were still holding onto the most prestigious university chairs, had either actively distorted his poetry or suppressed its potency by silence and neglect.

None of these background conflicts, which in the late 1970s became unbearably pressing because of the emergence of Red Army Faction terrorism and the Federal Republic’s heavy-handed response to it, were ever fully articulated. The debate was kept mostly on Lachmannian grounds and revolved around differing readings and the inclusion or exclusion of (apparently) spurious signs (corrections, superscriptions, single words and syllables, ink blots, etc.) on the manuscript pages in the constitution of the poems. Lachmann’s fundamental distinction between the level of recension (where readings are right or wrong) and that of emendation and interpretation (where ideological dissention can be expressed) prevented the discussion from ever becoming fully transparent. No one openly suggested that there were active and systematic misreadings and falsifications in the Stuttgart edition of Hölderlin; the main points of attack were rather that the editorial decisions were invisible to the reader and that a lack of editorial accountability concentrated too much power in the hands of the editor. To remedy this situation, Sattler and his collaborators on the new Frankfurt edition proposed to photographically reproduce all of the manuscript pages and to break up the process of text constitution into separate steps of transliteration, emendation, and constitution that could be followed and accepted or rejected by every interested reader.

The allegorical nature of these editorial debates is so apparent that one hesitates to mention it. Partly because of the enormous psychopolitical stakes, partly because of the singular power of Hölderlin’s

18. The demonstration that Nietzsche’s work had been manipulated was the motivation behind the editions of Karl Schlechta (Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke, ed. Karl Schlechta [München: Hanser, 1954]) and Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967]). The latter edition, although not finished, is currently being reedited according to new criteria.

late poetry, no one at the time seems to have realized that even with the proposed democratic access to the manuscript material the problems inherent in the editorial work would by no means be solved. Once one makes claims as to the meaning of a manuscript’s topography and its physical texture, reproductions have to be a whole lot better than those offered even in the latest volume of the Frankfurt edition. Hölderlin’s handwriting can be excruciatingly difficult to read even for experts, and the vicissitudes of his life, combined with the extraordinary dimension of his poetic and philosophical ambitions, make it very hard to determine either the sequence of poems and pages or the importance of apparently spurious remarks, poems, and corrections.20

Nonetheless, the ethos of radical philology (as this enterprise was quickly baptized by the German feuilletons) began to spread rapidly: the publisher of the Frankfurt edition, which had hitherto mostly published Maoist brochures, changed its name from Red Star to Stroemfeld (one of the spurious words on a Hölderlin manuscript) and began to sponsor a whole set of equally ambitious and equally radical editorial projects: Heinrich von Kleist, Karoline von Günderrode, Johann Peter Hebel, Georg Trakl.21 (There has recently been a well-publicized spat with the Bodleian Library at Oxford over Stroemfeld’s project to reproduce all of Kafka’s extant manuscripts, a project that would be unthinkable without the pathos generated by the Frankfurt Hölderlin edition.) Other publishers soon followed suit, and the 1980s and 1990s saw a remarkable rise in editorial activity—at a time, it should be added, when Germanistik underwent a profound crisis of disorientation. Some editions became so “critical” that they began to reedit themselves, like the Nietzsche and the Paul Celan editions.22 The Institut für Textkritik, founded as a cooperative of various editors and Stroemfeld publishers,


21. The transition from political to editorial activism is recounted in a long TV conversation between K. D. Wolff and Alexander Kluge. The only available transcription of this conversation can be found in Günter Krause and Herbert Holl, eds., Heiner Muller et Alexander Kluge, arpenteurs de ruines: Le grouillement bariolé des temps (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2004).

not only housed complete editions but also began to publish exemplary editions of single texts and to initiate discussions and projects about the challenges faced by editors and typesetters in the age of digital publishing. The journal *Text*, edited by the institute, has since become one of the most important forums for literary scholarship in Germany.  

In the eighth issue of *Text* in 2003, four of Sattler’s closest collaborators published a conversation about the volumes (7 and 8) with which the Frankfurt Hölderlin edition was to come to an end. This unusual format could not conceal the fact that it contained a devastating critique not only of the two last volumes but also of the whole edition that had inaugurated the new era of critical editing in Germany. The details of this critique are complicated and unfold their full force only when discussed in close proximity to the text. The general objection was that Sattler had intervened in the recension of the text because he had very definite ideas about the shape Hölderlin had wanted to give his poetic legacy to the Germans. The ramifications of these objections are vast and reach back to the earlier stages of the edition, which were not included in the conversation. It might well be that the earlier volumes will have to undergo similar scrutiny and that the ideology of access for all that had dominated this and other editions might need to be critically reviewed. However this unfolds, no one in 2003 could escape the sense of tragedy, or at least of painful generational change, when the crowning achievement of more than thirty years of editorial work was so unanimously condemned by a succeeding generation of editors and critics. This, of course, must have been exactly the experience of Friedrich Beißner and the editors of the Stuttgart Hölderlin edition three decades earlier.

It was to radical philology that the editors of the critical Büchner edition wanted to hitch their project. The call for a new Büchner was sounded shortly after the new Hölderlin edition was proposed, and the decision to include photomechanical reproductions of the extant manuscripts is obviously modeled after the Hölderlin edition, since there is, as we will see, little in the nature of the Büchner manuscript

25. Indeed, it is disquieting to observe in retrospect how many of the attitudes and presuppositions that disfigure the last volumes of the edition were already present even before it was officially begun; see *Text* 1 (1995): 127–49, *Text* 2 (1996): 143–72, and *Text* 3 (1997): 163–98.
tradition to support it. More important, the edition has once more brought to the fore the problem of how fragile the separation of recension and emendation, of text constitution and interpretation, is when strong interpretive assumptions are guiding an editorial project.

EDITING BÜCHNER

The governing assumptions behind the *Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe mit Quellendokumentation und Kommentar* (Marburger Ausgabe) are that Büchner was a realist author and that in his literary oeuvre he pursued a definite political agenda, which the chief editor, Thomas Michael Mayer, had early on identified as “proto-communist.”26 The equivalence of realism and communist, or at least progressive, politics has a long history in German literary scholarship, which in the case of Georg Büchner goes back to a pivotal 1937 essay by Georg Lukács in which Lukács accused all nonrealist readings of Büchner’s oeuvre of being “fascistic falsifications.”27 The acrimony of this position carried over into the first publications of the future Büchner editors and has since become characteristic of the publications of the Georg Büchner Society and of many statements, practices, and newspaper articles that have surrounded the emergence of the edition. Both the inhospitable scholarly climate and the excruciatingly slow pace of the edition—it took twenty-one years for the first volumes to appear—have had the inevitable effect that rival editions were prepared. The Deutsche Klassiker Verlag published in 1992 the first volume of a *Sämtliche Werke* by the eminent Büchner scholar Henri Poschmann, which was completed in 1999 and published as inexpensive paperbacks in 2000, the very year the first volumes of the Marburg edition appeared.28 Poschmann’s is a well-prepared, well-documented, and well-annotated edition that provides readers with easy access to the sometimes complicated trans-


mission of Büchner’s works. It was mercilessly criticized by the Marburg group.²⁹

_Dantons Tod_, Büchner’s drama about the late stages of the French Revolution, was the first of his works to be edited in Marburg; his haunting novella _Lenz_ was the second. Interpretation of the drama has long been hotly contested, since Büchner’s presumed revolutionary politics are difficult to reconcile with a play that seems to take a very distant, even fatalistic attitude to the bloodshed of the last days of the Terror. The novella’s interpretation turns on the question whether the protagonist’s madness is understood as caused by a repressive society around him or as an endogenous illness. These are the aspects of “Deutung,” of interpretation, which a latter-day Lachmannian like Hans Zeller urges editors to separate completely from the “Befund,” the material givenness of the text, and at first sight it appears as if the Marburg editors have tried to uphold that separation.³⁰

The edition is divided into five separate sections. First comes a photo-mechanical reproduction of the manuscript (this step is missing in the _Lenz_ edition, for reasons discussed below). As in the case of Hölderlin, the reproductions are supposed to grant unfettered access to a textual stratum in which the transition from philological material to interpretation has not yet been made. Such reproductions are of dubious value in the best of cases; they allow readers to assess superficially the topography of a manuscript and to follow the process of decipherment and transliteration (or, as in the case of Kafka or Robert Walser, to appreciate the aesthetics of handwriting in the interpretation of the work),³¹ but they also simulate an accessibility that can rarely, if ever, be realized. No reader could challenge a variant reading simply by looking at the reproduction; even where reproductions are of exceptional quality and projected on high resolution displays, a scholar would always insist on firsthand examination of the manuscript.³²

²⁹. Full documentation of the controversy can be found at http://schiller.germanistik.uni-sb.de/buechner/MBA/index.html.
³². This point was already made by Karl Krumbacher, _Die Photographie im Dienste der Geisteswissenschaft_ (Leipzig: Teubner, 1906), 7–16, and in various encyclopedias on editorial philology of classical texts. If the Büchner editors had really been serious about the reproduction of the manuscript, digitalization would have been the obvious solution. There are outstanding examples to be viewed on the web, e.g., http://image.ox.ac.uk/.
case of Dantons Tod, the value of the reproduction is further diminished by the fact that the only extant manuscript is obviously a fair copy for the publisher; it does contain a few corrections, but it does not grant the kind of insight into the author’s process of composition that, for example, Hölderlin’s Homburger Folio does.33

The second section is the differentiated transcription (Differenzierte Umschrift), which typesets the handwriting, indicates peculiarities of Büchner’s (fairly legible) handwriting, and represents the corrections and excisions. It is in the third section (Genetische Darstellung) that these findings are first interpreted, albeit in a technical manner; the manuscript, which in the corrections still contains the temporal dimensions of before and after, is straightened into the two-dimensional linearity of print. This is a condensed and inverted application of Lachmann’s stemmatic criticism to modern autographs—the filiation of manuscripts written by different copyists is condensed to the layers of production and correction in one manuscript by the author. Lachmann worked backward from the multiplicities of tradition toward a single version that would come as close as possible to the original text, whereas the genetic critic works backward from the comparative poverty of the printed text to the abundance of possibilities in the author’s productive process. Genetic criticism can be an enormously productive method in the case of real working manuscripts where corrections, even the placement of words, can give clues to the reading and constitution of a text, and the editors make a point of referring to the Frankfurt Hölderlin edition as their model.34 In Büchner’s case, how-

33. A notable exception is the groundbreaking edition of Büchner’s Woyzeck by Enrico De Angelis (Georg Büchner, Woyzeck: Faksimile, Transkription, Emendation und Lesetext, Buch-und CD-Rom Ausgabe [München: Saur, 2000]). The point of the reproduction here is not to create the illusion of readability but to use the drawings in the margins of the manuscript to prove that the play was written during Büchner’s studies at Giessen (1834) and at the same time as the pamphlet Der Hessische Landbote. This is obviously a major correction to the chronology, but also to the teleology of Büchner’s plays, according to which the tattered structure of Woyzeck is the result of formal innovation rather than of incompleteness. It is hard to imagine what the Marburg edition could add to De Angelis’s work. Reproductions of the manuscripts can be viewed online at http://schiller.germanistik.uni-sb.de/buechner/woyzeck/. Equally impressive and philologically “liberal” is a new bibliophile edition of Lenz: Georg Büchner, Lenz, ed. and design Klaus Detjen (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003).

ever, with a single fair copy, this step does not add any new insights to the reading of *Dantons Tod*.\(^{35}\)

The fourth section of the editorial sequence is the “emended text” (*Emendierter Text*), where the variants—those represented sequentially in the genetic representation, and in the case of *Dantons Tod* the few corrections Büchner made in two copies dedicated to friends—appear in good Lachmannian fashion in a critical apparatus. Because of the scarcity of variants, this apparatus looks a little like a parody of philological seriousness, since it mostly records different orthographies, or shows, in the case of *Dantons Tod*, the alterations made by subsequent editors in order to soften the obscenities of Büchner’s text; none of the editors’ emendations were unknown or change our understanding of the drama.

While establishing a readable (and/or playable) text is the end product of most other critical editions, the efforts of the Marburg editors culminate in a fifth stage, the “text referred to the sources” (*Quellenbezogener Text*), in the editions of both *Lenz* and *Dantons Tod*. As is well known, Büchner quoted large sections from historical accounts of Lenz’s life and of the French Revolution, respectively.\(^{36}\) The problem with Büchner’s quotations is that they are unmarked and unacknowledged. The re-sourced texts of *Dantons Tod* and *Lenz*, as they are presented by the Marburg editors—with their bold typeface and various degrees of underlining, as well as their coordinated marginia supplying the shorthand for the source texts—are invariably frazzled at the margins, since the editors mark single words, or even parts of words, as quotations. These apparently arbitrary fringes of quotations are the textual manifestations of the complete lack of any stated motivation for this extraordinary (for its time) poetic practice in Büchner’s letters and in his other extant writings.\(^{37}\)

\(^{35}\) A detailed description of what can happen to the continuity of a trace of lead or ink in the process of transliteration can be found in Roland Reuß, “Für eine historisch-kritische Kafka-Ausgabe,” in *Franz Kafka: Historisch-Kritische Augabe sämtlicher Handschriften, Drucke and Typoskripte*, ed. Roland Reuß, Peter Stangle, Michel Leiner, and K. D. Wolff (Basel and Frankfurt: Stroemfeld, 1995), 9–21, esp. 16–18.


\(^{37}\) In an oft-quoted letter to his parents (July 28, 1835, *DKV* 2:409–11), who were scandalized by the frequent and gratuitous obscenities in *Dantons Tod*, Büchner explained that he wanted to let his protagonists speak as they must have spoken in their historical moment, and he then proceeded to sketch out a theory of anti-idealist historical drama. Fraught as they are with apologetic intent, I do not believe these remarks can carry the explanatory weight of an *ars poetica* that is usually entrusted to them.
Against the backdrop of Lachmann’s epistemology of “scientific” textual criticism, and of the culture of radical objectivity shaping German editorial practice since the mid-1970s, the editors’ decision to complete the edition with this re-sourced version constitutes a serious intervention into Büchner’s text and into the reader’s ability to read it. Textual criticism in general, and recension in particular, has always had a peculiar relationship to quotation. On the one hand, in tracing the filiation of manuscripts and printings, recension is intent on establishing the faithfulness of quotation—quoting is a form of copying, after all. On the other hand, the constitution of an authorial text requires the distinction between “proper” text and quoted text within a specific work. Unlike his ancient or early Enlightenment forebears, whose texts were often porous and playfully stitched together of various “improper” elements, a Romantic or post-Romantic is supposed to have full control over his text—quoting, that is, must “mean” something.38

For the Marburg editors, Büchner’s practice of combining texts can have only one meaning; as the editors state in their commentary, “Büchner’s mode of writing using source materials, and the detailed and circumspect preparatory work, are testimonies for his will to combine imagination with accuracy.”39 Quotations, this implies, confer the status of realist representation on Büchner’s writing both because the source texts—the various accounts of the French Revolution in the case of Dantons Tod, Pastor Oberlin’s diary in the case of Lenz (and no doubt the court documents in the future publication of Woyzeck)—are judged to be themselves reliable documents and because quoting itself is the most reliable, most realistic mode of referentiality. Neither of these assumptions are unproblematic. Büchner’s source texts in the case of Dantons Tod pursue discernible literary and political agendas, and Oberlin’s diary belongs to the genre of pietist introspection that has its own rhetorical and stylistic imperatives. Furthermore, quotation can be, and has been, used as a means of irony, of distancing and alienating, and of feigning accuracy. The Romantic writer Jean Paul,

38. Citation causes excitation on the part of the reader—this is the consequence drawn by Eric Santner for the similar case of Kafka, who does not cite but who hides statements in his work that we presume mean something but never know what; see Eric Santner, On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 37–45.

39. “Büchners quellenbezogene Schreibweise und die detaillierten und umsichtigen Vorarbeiten dokumentieren seinen Willen, die Imagination mit Genauigkeit zu verbinden” (Büchner, MBA 3.2:209). It is not clear in what the detailed preparations might have consisted, other than Büchner’s borrowings from the public library.
much loved in the 1830s, is a good example of such ironic and devious quoting.\footnote{40}

This is not to say that the realist view of Büchner’s citation practices is absurd or wrong; it is just one possible view among many and as such does not belong among the presuppositions of critical text constitution. The version in the Marburg edition that shows the text with its clearly marked quotations might have a place in the commentary to the edition—and even there many attributions would have to remain tentative—but it cannot claim to have the same status as the photographic reproduction, the transliteration, and the emendation. By conferring prehermeneutic status on the identification of citations and arguing that this practice completes the restitution of the text, the editors preclude the possibility that the meaning of quoting itself might be at issue in Büchner’s text. Yet there are strong reasons to presume that quoting does indeed belong to the hermeneutic potential of both Dantons Tod and Lenz.

A striking example of the centrality of quoting within the text is the famous last scene of Dantons Tod. Lucille has just watched the execution of Danton and his friends, among them her lover Camille. Suddenly she shouts: “Es lebe der König,” whereupon revolutionary guards arrest her “in the name of the Republic” and lead her away. The editors mark the slogan as a specific quotation from an account of the French Revolution that describes how wives of Terror victims would shout royalist slogans so that they would be executed with their husbands.\footnote{41}

There is no denying that this is valuable information in a commentary to the play. But by categorically stating that Büchner quoted in this instance from a specific—typically sentimental—source, the editors impute a specific motivation to Lucille, a kind of suttee (which Goethe had made famous in his poem “Der Gott und die Bajadere”) or a kind of anticipated “Liebestod.” Yet it is perfectly plausible—and some of the interpreters decried by Lukács as “fascistic” falsifiers have indeed entertained the possibility—that Lucille has come to believe that any monarchical state is preferable to the interminable bloodshed of the Revolution, or that she has utterly lost her mind. Tethering the slogan “Long live the King” to a single source and imbuing it with a discernible intention, the editors unwittingly perform a kind of arrest of meaning.


\footnote{41. MBA 3.2:154.}
We can no longer see that the iterability and impersonality of the slogan—which itself is a sort of quotation—exposes the violence of Robespierre’s regime not only as juridical but as hermeneutic terror.\textsuperscript{42} From this perspective, the use of quotations throughout the drama could be read as a commentary on the radical disappropriation of language during the Terror, when semantic meaning was increasingly overwhelmed by performative factuality.\textsuperscript{43} This is not necessarily the definitive reading of the drama, but it is one that must not be excluded by the constitution of the text.

A far more egregious breach of editorial reticence mars, and to all intents and purposes invalidates, the edition of Büchner’s novella \textit{Lenz}.\textsuperscript{44} No manuscript exists of this enigmatic text. One would therefore think that the first steps in the constitution of the text (reproduction, transliteration, and genetic representation) have to be omitted, since the edition must rely on the \textit{editio princeps} alone. Surprisingly, however, there is a \textit{Genetische Darstellung}, which differs from that of \textit{Dantons Tod} only in that it carries the epithet “rekonstruiert” in parenthesis behind it. The explanation for this step comes late in the volume: the editors postulate the existence of three layers within the extant text that must derive from three different manuscripts.\textsuperscript{45} The criteria employed to differentiate these layers are: \(a\) the degree of dependence on the sources (in particular on Pastor Oberlin’s diary); \(b\) narrative perspective (whether events are recounted from Oberlin’s position, from that of an omniscient narrator, or from Lenz’s point of view); and \(c\) contradictory accounts within the novella (conflicting dates, details, and descriptions). In the remainder of the \textit{Editionsbericht}, these manuscript layers are called “zu erschließende Entwurfshandschriften” (preparatory manuscripts that have to be inferred)\textsuperscript{46} and later on simply \textit{Handschriften} with their own (uppercase) sigla.

Looking at these ghost manuscripts, one cannot but think of Lachmann’s proud claim that he could deduce not only the content but even the physical shape of the archetype at the root of the Lucretius tradition.\textsuperscript{47} But even Lachmann would not have gone so far as to


\textsuperscript{43} Peter Szondi still maintained categorically: “Das Drama kennt das Zitat sowenig wie die Variation” (\textit{Theorie des modernen Dramas} [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978], 18).

\textsuperscript{44} See the reviews posted in http://schiller.germanistik.uni-sb.de/buechner/MBA/index.html.

\textsuperscript{45} Büchner, \textit{MBA} 5:145.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 154.

print an archetype as if it were an existing manuscript; above all, he would not have made the reconstruction of the archetype dependent on criteria that are derived entirely from hermeneutic presuppositions. For the three formal criteria postulated by the editors to separate the manuscript layers neatly spell out the minimal criteria for literary realism as it is traditionally conceived: (a) reference to an outside world (represented by the source documents); (b) concentration on a theme or topic (in this case mental illness and its causes); and (c) realistic (that is, linear) modes of narration.

For brevity’s sake, let us assume that Büchner conceived of madness not just as a thematic concern but as a textual condition as well. The premise of such hyperrealism would be that madness cannot be contained within the straitjacket of traditional narration; to represent it in its full fury means to displace the fundamental criteria of realistic representation. What would follow from such a conception for the construction of a novella looks very much like the three interlocking displacements that we find in Lenz: first (corresponding to criterion a above), disregard for the linearity of time and for the three-dimensionality of space—the time line of the episodes in Lenz’s life is famously jagged, and parts of the text (the opening pages in particular) are devoted to the description of astonishing distortions of space. In-veterate realists might still read these distortions as representations and projections of Lenz’s shattered mind, hence the second displacement (corresponding to criticism b above), effacement of all differences between the narrator’s and the protagonist’s perspectives. Beginning at the latest with the famous sentence “He felt no fatigue, except sometimes it annoyed him that he could not walk on his head,”48 it is often unclear whether we are reading Lenz’s inner monologue or the narrator’s descriptions of his actions. Madness thus invades and confounds the distinction between narrative voices. And yet, even this could be conceived of as an authorial ploy, were it not for the third displacement (corresponding to criticism c), effacement of the difference between authored and quoted text. Despite the Marburg editors’ desperate efforts, the seams between Oberlin’s diary and Büchner’s “own” text cannot be clearly retraced, although there are areas where the density of quotation is higher and others where no immediate sources can be identified. Rather than remaining identifiable as two strata, quoted and unquoted material grow into one another and foil every attempt

to separate them. With these three displacements Büchner would have created the thoroughly mad text.

Again, this is surely not the only possible reading of *Lenz* and of its importance for nineteenth-century German prose, but it is one that ought to be possible on the basis of the edited text. Yet the pseudo-genetic edition imposes a teleology of realism on the text for which there exists no compelling rationale within or without Büchner’s writings. As was the case with *Dantons Tod*, these hermeneutic impositions, clothed as philological decisions, occur on the very level of text constitution for which Lachmann had postulated the need for critical abstention from any interpretation. The very least one has to say about the Marburg Büchner is that it does not adhere to the claims it sets out in its own editorial statements.

**LACHMANN IN CYBERSPACE?**

It might well be the case that the collapse of the Frankfurt Hölderlin and, it is to be expected, of the Marburg Büchner, as well as the ever-faster change in editorial direction of the Celan, Kafka, and Nietzsche editions, are signs that the epoch of sovereign Lachmannianism has come to an end, even in Germany. Hermeneutic theorists have long argued that Lachmann’s purism—his desire, to paraphrase Kant, to critique texts so as to make room for interpretation—is untenable and that every reading and every philological decision is at the same time an interpretative act. Undoubtedly this is true, but like all truisms it does not solve the problem at hand, namely that texts still need to be edited and that editors must do so with the intention of presenting as “objective” a text as possible. Challenging the Lachmannian dogma does not mean, as its defenders often worry, that scholars would have to give up all the presumptions of critical editing. Just because a task might be impossible does not mean one should not strive to do it anyway—every ethical decision stands under this predicament, and precisely for this reason editing is an ethical practice. Circumstances are slightly mitigated for historical texts, but as far as literary texts are concerned, there might be a single, or a last, but never an ultimate edition of a literary text, because the philological material is by definition unstable.


This instability manifests itself in two interrelated ways. First, literary texts are distinguished by the fact that they can, and frequently do, reflect on their own present or future philological form. A strictly philological definition of literature could state that literary texts are recorded linguistic phenomena that can make their philological form part of their signifying intent. Quoting is a rudimentary form of self-reflection; it multiplies the labor of recension and introduces a measure of uncertainty into the texture that radiates out to every stage of text constitution. Citationality—as this attribute has been called in recent debates—might be a prominent feature of literary modernity (Arno Schmidt’s monumental Zettels Traum might be the ultimate consequence of a text fighting off its editors [and readers]), but citationality applies already to texts in the classical tradition and will ultimately have to be acknowledged as an intrinsic possibility of all literary works at the level of their constitution.

The second source of instability has to do with the materiality of literary texts, their written, printed, or pixilated existence among other beings. This is the area where contingency is greatest—it could always be that a new manuscript will reappear and invalidate all previous readings—and where the transition from matter to meaning, the central mystery in all reading, is most difficult to ascertain. Whether a dot on a manuscript is a spill from the pen or a deliberate punctuation is most often a matter of editorial judgment (precisely the faculty Lachmann wanted to exclude from recension), and even the typewriter and the computer do not entirely eliminate every reasonable doubt.

The consequence that German editors—“German” insofar as they tend to the German literary patrimony and as they are beholden to Lachmann’s categories—must draw from this double instability is that the ethics of abstention from interpretation is not necessarily defeated by the insight that the editors’ object is always and at every stage of its

51. The term is due to Jacques Derrida, Limited Inc a b c (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988); for a more recent application, see Amy Hollywood, “Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization,” History of Religions 42, no. 2 (November, 2002): 93–115.

52. A comprehensive study of comparative editorial practices in the last decades would be desirable. Genetic criticism is the dominant approach in France; this has to be seen against the backdrop of the “cavalier” mode of editing prevalent in the Pléiade series and the importance of structuralist conviction in French textual studies. For an overview of present editions and projects, see http://www.item.ens.fr/index.htm. Similarly, the great achievements of Jerome McGann’s editorial projects, and the importance of his theoretical reflections on the matter, gain relief against the tradition of analytical bibliography, on the one hand, and of such editorial projects as the Library of America, on the other. The astonishing productivity of McGann’s orientation is obvious at http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/%7Ejjm2f/links.html.
constitution in need of interpretation. One way to proceed is through awareness of the concerns in the community of interpreters. In Büchner’s case, it would have well served the Marburg editors if they had acknowledged the remarkable body of recent scholarship on the history and theory of quotation. Acknowledging that editorial problems may have thematic and formal manifestations in the edited text would be a much more productive way of inviting readers into the ambit of editorial decisions than is reproducing blurry photographs of a manuscript.

Collaboration among different kinds of scholars should also be the consequence if the material instability and the historicity of texts were more actively acknowledged. Editors have given extraordinary care to the description of manuscripts, typescripts, handwriting, writing material, and so forth. But they see the paper and the books and the journals (to keep within Büchner’s time frame) as passive surfaces and the writing materials as instruments of inscription rather than as media with their own formative power. The media network through which information flows in, for instance, Büchner’s writings (libraries, journals, lectures, letters, pamphlets, etc.) has never been described in its interaction with the meaning of the texts. Our understanding of Büchner’s works might gain considerably if we approach them as written against certain literary genres as media of middle class cultures: for example, against the theater as a moral institution and against the novella as Biedermeier entertainment. More important, the perspective from the history of media would demonstrate the avant-garde nature of Büchner’s writings and suggest new media of editing that would fully realize the hypertextual constitution of these texts. One could imagine Web editions of Dantons Tod or Lenz where the quoted text is present either in clickable links or in other forms of layering. Once such projects are on the Web, they could become fully collaborative and interactive. Readers could publish their own readings and discoveries, be they further textual references, images, or proposals for reading and staging these texts. True, the editorial project would run the risk of becoming a playground for amateurs and hackers, but, compared to the imposition of a flawed monumental edition on the reading public, that seems the smaller and more ethically attractive risk.

53. No less than three contributions to the annual conference of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft in 2002 on “Rhetorik” (those of David Martyn, Uwe Wirth, and Bettine Menke) dealt explicitly with the relation of quotation and literariness (Jürgen Fuhrmann, ed., Rhetorik [Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004]). A good review of the important literature and very interesting original essays can be found in Anführen-Vorführen-Aufführen: Texte zum Zitieren, ed. Nils Plath and Volker Pantenburg (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2002).

54. An exciting project of this kind is http://www.hypernietzsche.org.