

**Living on the Edge: The *Mise-en-Scène*  
and the Marginalized Self under the Reign of Terror  
in Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death***

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**Abstract**

This paper argues that the spatial design of the *mise-en-scène* in Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death* is well built into his portrayal of the individual as marginalized self in the French Revolution. The paper is divided into four parts. The introduction briefly explains Büchner's critical reflection on the brutal tyranny of history's Grand Mechanism and the meager existence of human individuals and justifies the importance of spatial structure in the play. The first part of the main body examines the analogously marginalized existence of the two political rivals, Danton and Robespierre, with focus on their seemingly different but implicitly similar presence of being too less marginalized and too much marginalized at one and the same time. The second part explicates the sorry plight of the common people and the female characters, including the poverty and brutality of the *san-culottes*, the idealization of Julie and Lucile, and particularly the metaphorical significance of the larger-than-life nymphomaniac Marion, who is considered an inherent rival equal in weight to Robespierre. A particular spatial design especially discussed in both parts is the moments when Danton, Robespierre, Julie, Lucile, and Marion are respectively presented at the window, deliberately brought to the verge, to a "boundary" for the "*presencing*" of their existence. Finally, the conclusion summarizes all the discussions on the individuals living on the edge.

**Keywords:** Büchner, *Danton's Death*, *mise-en-scène*, marginalized self, space, Reign of Terror, French Revolution

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# 活在刀口上：畢希納《旦通之死》劇中的場景調度 和恐怖時代下邊緣化的自我

## 摘 要

本論文的主旨在於論證畢希納《旦通之死》劇中場景調度的空間設計與法國大革命人物邊緣化自我的描繪兩者之間的緊密結合。論文分四部分。緒論簡述畢希納對於歷史「大機制」之殘酷暴虐與個人自我之貧乏存有的批判省思，以及論述空間結構在本劇中的重要性。論文主體第一部分探討兩位政治對手旦通與羅伯斯庇爾同樣邊緣化的存有，聚焦於兩人貌似歧異實則隱然相似之處，亦即同時邊緣化不足與過度邊緣化。第二部分解說平民與女性角色的困境，包含平民的貧苦與殘忍、女性角色朱莉與呂西亞的理想化、尤其是可視為足以和羅伯斯庇爾相庭抗禮的女性成癮者瑪莉安的隱喻意義。兩部分中特別共同討論到的一點是：旦通、羅伯斯庇爾、朱莉、呂西亞、以及瑪莉安各自臨窗省思的場景，實為劇作家刻意將其推至邊緣、邊界而「呈現」其存有。結論總括前述人物生於邊緣處境的論述。

**關鍵詞：**畢希納、旦通之死、場景調度、邊緣化自我、空間、恐怖時代、法國大革命

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I watched a snail crawl along the edge of a straight razor. That's my dream.  
That's my nightmare. Crawling, slithering along the edge of a straight razor and  
surviving. -- Colonel Kurtz (in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*)

In *Danton's Death* the guillotine appears onstage for the first time only at the  
denouement, but its presence can be felt from the beginning to the end. If I were  
to stage *Danton's Death*, the shadow of the guillotine would be present through-  
out the play. It would always be looming over the stage or the audience, over the  
actors and the spectators alike, since in this kind of theater the spectators become  
the actors. -- Jan Kott (*The Gender of Rosalind* 71)

... a boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized,  
the boundary is that from which something begins its *presencing*.

-- Martin Heidegger (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 154)

## 1. Introduction

One of the amazing but little explored features of Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death* (*Dantons Tod*, 1835), perhaps the most celebrated and controversial drama on the French Revolution, is its peculiar way of presenting the Reign of Terror from the marginal perspective, a remarkable manipulation of *mise-en-scène* closely integrated with its playwright's pessimistic reflection upon human beings' meager existence. As expressed in his much-quoted letter to his fiancée Minna Jaeglé around 10 March 1834, Büchner finds in his study of the Revolution "the terrible fatalism of history"; he feels that human individual is "just foam on the wave, greatness mere chance, the rule of genius a puppet-play, a laughable struggle with an iron law.... 'Must' is one of the words of damnation with which mankind is baptized" (1987: 290). This "iron law" is the appalling order of history which repeats itself again and again. In Anthony Kubiak's words, what Büchner laments over is the unregenerate "sameness" in human nature, the "lack of free will" of the individual (1994: 85). In an earlier study of drama, this "iron law" is given another name, the "Grand Mechanism," by Jan Kott as he finds in Shakespeare's histories – not only is it cruel, but it is also "a tragic farce" (1967: 33), as many kings are quite aware of it. For Kott, the mastermind of the Grand Mechanism is the self-conceited and self-conscious Richard III contemplating upon his own deformed figure: "Here for the first time Shakespeare has shown the human face of the Grand Mechanism. A terrifying face, in its ugliness and the cruel grimace of its lips. But also

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a fascinating face” (1967: 35). In a more recent philosophical discourse, Büchner’s observation on Destiny, his assertion that the word *must* is one of the curses “with which mankind is baptized,” is cited and appropriated by Slavoj Žižek to demonstrate the dialectics of freedom and necessity, of choice and determination: “The lesson of repetition is rather that our first choice was necessarily the wrong one, and for a very precise reason: the ‘right choice’ is only possible the second time, for only the first choice, in its wrongness, literally creates the conditions for the right choice.”<sup>1</sup> That is, while free choice is a total illusion for Büchner, it is a “retroactive illusion” in Žižek’s ongoing dialectics at its best: our freedom is predetermined, indeed, but, in a Hegelian sense, we can still “freely ‘posit’ the very necessity that determines us” (2012: 466). Büchner’s “terrible fatalism of history,” so to speak, falls short of Žižek’s dialectical perspective of progressive history. The “iron law” of Büchner is closer to the Grand Mechanism of Kott: names of kings and rulers change, but history goes on and it knows no individual. Büchner’s “terrible fatalism” also partly explains why an orthodox Marxist like Georg Lukács would condemn the playwright as a fascist and his play a misrepresentation of history.<sup>2</sup>

The overwhelming dominance of history’s necessity over the individual’s personal freedom accordingly suggests an inherent conception of mankind’s marginalized position in the Grand Mechanism of history. In Büchner’s acute awareness of the wretched state of human fate, indeed, looms large his conviction that history is “discontinuous, fragmented, and chaotic” (Gilman 22), with the individual not only as “foam on the wave” but also as marginalized self. Such individuals include Büchner himself and his dramatic characters living on the edge – “edge” in its multiple senses of “margin,” “border,” “boundary,” “danger,” as well as in its more literal reference to the edge of the guillotine blade in the Revolution. On the part of Büchner himself, the composition of *Danton’s Death* legendarily witnessed his perilous situation at the time. The play was written within about five weeks – from January to February, 1935 – while he was hiding himself in his father’s laboratory from the impending pursuit of

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 2012, p. 465. Žižek’s citation comes from the 1963 edition of Büchner’s *Complete Plays and Prose* trans. by Richard Muller, in which Büchner’s letter to his fiancée is dated 1833, much earlier than that dated by Michael Patterson’s version of 1987. The 1988 German version, however, assumes the date to be about March 9-12, 1834; see Georg Büchner’s *Werke und Briefe*, p. 288.

<sup>2</sup> In “Georg Büchner and His Fascist Misrepresentation,” Georg Lukács recognizes Büchner’s status as a revolutionary writer but finds faults with his not yet being “in position to see and recognize the proletariat as a class” (75), his lack of “a dialectical recognition of the laws governing the dynamics of society” (76), his *Danton’s* transferring “the discussion to the level of a discussion on principles of morality” (80), and therefore his inevitable crisis of “the old mechanic materialism as the ideology of bourgeois revolution” (83).

policemen because of his failed revolutionary activities in the then Prussian state, including his earnest participation in the organization of the Society of Human Rights and his dissemination of *Der Hessische Landbote* (*The Hessian Courier*), a revolutionary pamphlet with poignant criticism on the social injustice in the Grand Duchy of Hesse. In his own words, during his writing of the play, “the Darmstadt policemen” had been his “Muses” (qtd. in Benn 103). *Danton’s Death*, so to speak, was a play brought into the world by its author living on the edge.

On the part of the dramatic characters in the whole play proper, their predicaments are obviously much more complicated and thus worthy of detailed investigations. The marginalized individuals in the play include, no doubt, the title protagonist Danton and, ironically, his rival Robespierre as well. Quite often, indeed, even these significant historical figures are brought onto the stage at the seemingly insignificant moments of their life, so much that this play has been widely regarded as an unhistorical history play or described as an “‘anti-play’, a play with no hero” (Hilton 61). A typical observation of this temporal marginality, coupled with a feminist protest against the marginal role of women in history, can be found, for instance, in Laura Ginters’s discussion of the play as a “*Männerstück*” (“men’s play”) and “Dokumentartheater” (“documentary theater”), a “documentary recounting” of the downfall of Danton. After reviewing three productions of the play in the 1988/89 and 1989/90 seasons, Ginters concludes that “*all three directors* have turned away from the roar of the Revolution” to “the more intimate scenes,” that is, a perspective shifted away from the center to the edge of the historical stage. Since Ginters notices that these directors achieved their goals either by cutting “about half” of the text or “not cutting the text to any great extent,”<sup>3</sup> her emphasis on the importance of “*Regietheater*” (director’s theater), unfortunately, underestimates something implicit but significant in the *mise-en-scène* of the dramatic text already designed by the playwright himself.

The overall structure focused on “the more intimate scenes” is taken by Matthew S. Buckley as Büchner’s “resistance to abstraction and idealization.” Buckley offers a quite pertinent observation:

Rather than focusing on exemplary moments of grand politics, we are in *Dantons Tod* most often placed in a slight remove from the public stage, located a bit before or after the moment and scene of the great events of the play. The play’s many rapid scenes, rather than

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<sup>3</sup> Ginters 659, italics added. The three productions discussed by Ginters are respectively directed by Klaus Michael Grüber in Paris, Frank-Patrick Steckel in Bochum, and Ruth Berghaus in Hamburg.

focusing our attention upon spectacle and massed public confrontations or culminating at the moment of tragic Revolution's terrible collapse in Thermidor, shift our attention to less-scripted and less-settled moments of the Revolutions' theatrical politics, examining the Terror's politics from the margins, from the shadows and passing moments of what remains of everyday life. (2006: 126)

Not only does Büchner obviously shift from exemplary moments of grand politics to unimportant temporal fragments, but he also, in the spatial arrangements of individual scenes, deliberately emphasizes the existential marginality of almost all characters. The marginality exemplified in the play, so to speak, is neither limited to the temporal dimension of the revolutionary process, nor to the social status of women alone. Rather, as this paper tries to argue, it is an important spatial design of Büchner's *mise-en-scène*, which is sophisticatedly built into his illustration of human existence in the world. The following discussion, accordingly, will analyze the spatial structure of the play, with its focus, firstly, on the similarly marginalized existence of the two political rivals, Danton and Robespierre, and, secondly, on that of the *san-culottes* and female characters – with a possible exception of Marion – in the face of the “iron law” of history.

## II. Danton vs. Robespierre:

### Too Less Marginalized and Too Much Marginalized

Andrzej Wajda's 1983 film *Danton* opens with Danton's return from countryside to Paris: while his coach is passing through the *Place de la Révolution*, Danton glances up at a monolithic guillotine almost all draped in black cloak, only with its razor-sharp blade grinning at all the creatures down at its feet. Although Wajda's film is not based on Büchner's text but an adaptation of *The Danton Case* by Stanisława Przybyszewska, the opening shot of the film nevertheless pertinently bears out Jan Kott's astute postulate of the guillotine's domineering omnipresence in the play, with all the characters and even all the audiences living on the edge -- the edge both in a narrow sense of the guillotine's blade and in a broad sense of “margin” in contrast to the center of the stage/world.<sup>4</sup> Given that the Jacobin Club, the National Convention, the Revolutionary Tribunal, and the Committee of Public Safety are the political centers of the Republic,

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<sup>4</sup> As the author of the canonical *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Jan Kott's idea of incorporating the audiences under the shadow of guillotine may well suggest his interpretation of Danton and Büchner as “our contemporaries,” including Kott's personal legend of being a leading proponent of Stalinism in Poland and then, after his travel to America in 1965, an exiled scholar in the USA for the rest of his life.

the guillotine at *Place de la Révolution* can be well taken as their extension for public spectacle. It is noteworthy that in the overall structure of the play, 32 scenes in 4 acts, only five scenes take place in these power centers (Act 1, Scene 3; Act 2, scene 7; Act 3, Scene 4, 6 and 9) and never until the denouement does the guillotine appear on the stage – that is, all the rest of play in fact comprises scenes presented from marginal perspectives. The scene of the Jacobin Club is replete with the “Incorruptible” Robespierre’s notoriously tedious harangue to justify his Reign of Terror and insinuate Danton’s crime: “Libertinism is the political enemy of liberty; the greater the apparent services of the libertine the more dangerous it is,”<sup>5</sup> while in the scene of the National Convention, Robespierre’s another already too long speech is further augmented with Saint-Just’s no less rigorous oration: “The revolution is like the daughters of Pelias; she dismembers mankind to make it young. Humanity will emerge from the cauldron of blood like the earth from the flood waters, with the limbs primordially strong, as though from a second creation!” (42).<sup>6</sup> Whereas these two scenes, less interesting in theatrical sense,<sup>7</sup> present primarily the ideological justification of the state terrorism, the rather short scenes of the guillotine (Act 4, Scene 7 and Scene 9) no doubt exhibit the execution of state power. But equally notable is that even these two scenes are shown from the circumference: the execution scene opens with a woman’s yelling “Gangway. Gangway. The children are complaining, they’re hungry. I’ve got to let them see, to keep them quiet. Gangway” (68), and the focus of the final scene actually lays upon the newly widowed Lucile “*sitting on the steps of the guillotine,*” like the mad Ophelia, singing and shouting “Long live the King!” (71) – the audience’s attention is still directed to the periphery.

The opening scene of Büchner’s *Danton’s Death* immediately and conspicuously presents Danton as an outsider of the card game, an isolated, marginalized figure on the political stage of the Revolution. While his friends are playing cards with ladies, he keeps “*some distance away from them, sitting on a stool at Julie’s feet.*” But there is no genuine dialogue between the wife and husband. To Julie’s playful question “Do you believe in me?” he answers: “Know each other? We would have to break open each other’s skull and squeeze the thoughts out of the brain tissue” (5). Danton’s cynical

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<sup>5</sup> Büchner 1971, p. 15. Unless noted otherwise, hereafter all the references to the play will be to this edition and will be documented by page number in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Saint-Just’s allusion to Pelias’s daughter is quite dubious, since she is in fact cheated by Medea to kill her father in the hope to rejuvenate him and her father of course never revives; see, for instance, Euripides’s *Pelias*. However, here maybe lies Büchner’s implicit criticism on Robespierre and Saint-Just.

<sup>7</sup> The Jacobin Club scene is particularly horrible because, according to Hilton (70), here Robespierre speaks “in formulae and those formulae are the words of the present state of the Revolution. If he did not utter them someone else would.”

skepticism on the possibility of human communication and mutual understanding lays bare his own desperate isolation at the time, an attitude not unlike that of his author Büchner himself among his fellow students: “he constantly had a distasteful expression like a cat in a thunderstorm, held himself completely apart” (qtd. in Price ix),<sup>8</sup> the “thunderstorm” being the card games inside the room and the outrageous revolution outside, which, to Büchner/Danton, are one and the same thing. The metaphorical relationship between politics and card games in the play finds its expression in Hérault’s bawdy joke: “I wouldn’t let my daughter play such a game, the kings and queens fall on top of each other so lewdly and the knaves follow close behind” (6). Danton’s impenetrable loneliness, indeed, has separated him from his friends and even his own dearest wife, including no doubt the card games and the political stage alike. Once a national hero of the Revolution, “the chief force in the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the First French Republic” (Britannica Online Encyclopedia), but now in the face of the impending and ongoing Reign of Terror under the control of Robespierre, Danton is totally inert and lethargic. Deliberately marginalizing himself, he intends to wash his hands of the Revolution.

Danton’s utter inertia, as Maurice B. Benn observes, comes from “his sense of guilt” and “his sense of moral and political impotence” (1976: 112). For the sake of his own despair, he is quite inactive and lethargic, so much that, indeed, he keeps waving away his friends’ urgent appeal for efficient counterattack. To Camille’s request “Danton, you shall lead the offensive in the Convention,” his answer is a frivolous, idle talk: “I shall, thou wilt, he will ... If only we live to see the day, as old women say. In an hour’s time another sixty minutes will have passed. Isn’t it so, my boy?” (7). On the other hand, Danton’s lethargy or even suicidal boredom is strangely blended with his own arrogance, his own *hybris*. Warned of the coming danger by his friends, in Act 2, Scene 1, he tells them “I’m a relic, and relics are thrown in the gutter” (27) and, at the same time, “this is the main thing – they’ll never dare” (29). Earlier in Act 1, Scene 5, he keeps professing his own irreplaceable place: “The Revolution is like Saturn, it eats its children. (*After a moment’s reflection.*) But they’ll never dare” (20); “They never had guts without me, and they won’t have any against me” (21). Later, in Act 2, Scene 4, walking alone in an open country, Danton comes to a halt suddenly and begins to talk to himself: “I’m not going any further,” as if he reached a boundary, a border, or even an edge. His ensuing soliloquy reveals keen awareness of his own “flirting with

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<sup>8</sup> Dorothy James (22) even proposes that reference to the opening of human skull is perhaps “a mocking echo” of Pierre Jean George Cabanis’s (1757-1808, a French physiologist and materialist philosopher) idea of human brain “excreting its thought” since, as a medical student, Büchner must “have dissected enough brains to know precisely what one could expect to learn from dying brain tissue.”



death” in the hope that grave will kill his memory and bring oblivion, and at one and the same time his self-comforting complacency that “It’s all empty noise; they’re trying to frighten me. They’ll never dare!” (35). Danton knows well his place in history – he tells the Revolutionary Tribunal, “Now you know Danton! A few hours more and he will fall asleep in the arms of fame” (50). But his sense of guilt for the September massacre constantly draws him back into that horrible moment instead of moving forward. Even worse, perhaps, is that he set up the Revolutionary Tribunal, in the hope of saving “the innocent” (48) in case of such event, but this Revolutionary Tribunal has been turned by Robespierre into service of the Reign of Terror, manipulated as an instrument to kill more “innocent” people. Deep in his heart, Danton knows even better his own desperate dilemma. This explains the reason why, away from the center of political stage, the open-ended country here still brings Danton little hope; or, rather ironically, his only redemption lies in the seemingly ever-extending space which actually only becomes for him an ever-shrinking one, a grave.

The implicit spatial metaphor in this short scene of Danton’s soliloquy is extremely significant. Danton’s unwillingness to go “any further” points toward a deep consciousness of his own *place*, his very limits, and hence his existential crisis. Here Martin Heidegger’s inspiring observation on one’s *Dasein* (“being” or “being there”) in spatial terms, particularly his interpretation of “boundary” and “horizon,” may well be of some use:

*Raum* [Space] means a place cleared or freed for settlement and lodging. A space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared or freed, namely within a boundary [*Grenze*], Greek *peras*. A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*. That is why the concept is that of *horismos*, that is, the horizon, the boundary. Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds. That for which room is made is always granted and hence is joined, that is, gathered, by virtue of a location, that is, by such a thing as the bridge. *Accordingly, spaces [die Räume] receive their being [ire Wesen] from locations [places; aus Orten] and not from "space" [dem Raume].* (Heidegger 1975: 154)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The German origins in the square brackets are taken from the quotation by Jeff Malpas in his *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place* (2012: 254); the translation of “*aus Orten*” into “from places” instead of “from locations” is also Malpas’s modification. In addition to “boundary,” the German *Grenze* also means “border,” “frontier,” and “limit.”

Heidegger's juxtaposition of "boundary" and "horizon" is extremely significant; it implies the on-going and ever-extending process of life. A boundary may look like a border or limit of a place, or even the edge of the earth, yet since it is taken as the horizon, room of space can be constantly "let into its bounds." Such is the paradoxical identity of a boundary: "Every border is at once an extent and a threshold; it simultaneously activates the space that it defines and the area that lies beyond it" (Bush and McKee 2). In the words of Jeff Malpas, a boundary in such a sense of horizon is "the between ... the space between earth and sky, between gods and mortals.... the space across which we glance when we look up from earth to sky, the space we cross, but that also remains when we approach the figure of the god" (2012: 254).

The ultimate end to such a constant fusion of horizons/boundaries, of course, is death itself – the grave so desirable to the already too tired Danton is one of the places on earth without horizon. Even though one constantly crosses the border and approaches "the figure of the god," the boundary/horizon remains the same. A best sample of such a "figure of god," in the field of modern novel, perhaps is Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which Marlow summarizes his own difficult pursuit of Kurtz in the image of peeping over the edge of the world: "'The horror!'... It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through. True, he had made that last stride, *he had stepped over the edge*, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot" (*Heart of Darkness* 72; italics added). Such an indication of Kurtz's living on the edge and stepping "over the edge" is vividly recaptured in Kurtz's self-portrayal in Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 filmic version of Conrad's novel, *Apocalypse Now*: a snail "Crawling, slithering along the edge of a straight razor and surviving."<sup>10</sup> Far away from the European continent in a remotest edge of civilization, both Kurtz and Marlow find themselves, though with an important difference between an activist and an onlooker, similarly at the very dark center of the Black Continent and human heart. In terms of the two antithetical conceptions of center and edge, here lies another spatial paradox: "To travel to the edge is to find oneself at the heart, and to approach the center is to stand on the threshold. In *Heart of Darkness* the center lies on the circumference; the middle is on the periphery" (Levenson 156).

Such a paradox is also Danton's dilemma: he tries in vain to keep himself in the periphery, because he is always already involved in the very center of the political storm – he cannot be "Kurtz" and "Marlow" at one and the same time. His guilty sense for

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<sup>10</sup> Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now* was originally released in 1979. An important addition in the 2001 extended version, *Apocalypse Now Redux*, is that of the French Plantation scene: "two thirds of the way through the film, this scene intrudes with a nearly static, 25-minute marginally comprehensible political discussion, a variation from 'inherited' narrative orders of meaning that is radically destabilization" (Demory 347).

the horror of the September massacre is so heavy that it drives him into constant, profound despondency. Like Shakespeare's conscience-stricken Macbeth, Danton also "hath murder'd sleep" (II.ii.41). A chilling moment of his insomnia can be found in Act 2, Scene 5, when he is alone "*at the window*," totally submerged in somnambulist recollection, talking to himself: "Will it never stop? Will the light never be snuffed out, the noise never die? Will it never be silent and dark so that we don't have to watch and listen to each other's sordid little sins? – September!" (36). In terms of spatiality, the window is a border, an edge, between two worlds, separating as well as connecting the inside and the outside, in a similar sense of what Heidegger calls the "boundary" as discussed above. Yet it is deep night in this scene, a moment when Danton is literally leaning on the edge of the window and deeply sunk in his existential crisis. In a remarkable essay "Aesthetics and the Spatial Sense of Self," Richard A. Etlin propounds that night tends to abolish separation between the self and the world because "the splitting of the spatial sense of self into the near and the far is easily overcome in the night.... [and] the space beyond the horizon becomes assimilated to the unknown aspect of the future" (11). Night, in other words, grants one "an encounter with the beyond" (12). Yet, for Danton, the "beyond" is not the future; instead, he is constantly drawn back into and haunted by the horrible past.

Julie wakes him up, however, and asks him to pull himself together, trying to help him justify what he did in September, 1792, when he was in position of power and was forced "to condone the murder of approximately 1400 imprisoned suspects, Royalists and clergymen" (Richards 40):

JULIE. The monarchs were only forty hours from Paris.

DANTON. The fortresses fallen, the aristos in the city.

JULIE. The republic was lost.

DANTON. Yes, lost. We couldn't have enemies behind our backs, we would have been fools. Two enemies on the same plank, us or them. The stronger pushes the weaker off – isn't that fair enough?

JULIE. Yes, yes.

DANTON. We struck them down. It wasn't murder, it was civil war.

JULIE. You saved the country. (37)

Since it is civil war and revolution, it stands to reason that they have to defend themselves and even to kill. Darwin's idea of jungle law – survival of the fittest – seems to hold good to all. But such a reasoning can hardly alleviate Danton's guilty sense. His despondency deepens, pushing him into further philosophical inquiry and meditation:

Yes, I did. It was self-defence, we had to do it. The man on the Cross took the easy way out: “It must needs be that offences come, but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!” It *must needs be* – this was that *must!* Who will curse the hand on which the curse of *must* has fallen? Who spoke that *must?* What is it in us that lies, whores, steals, and murders? We are puppets and unknown powers pull the strings. In ourselves, nothing, the swords with which spirits fight – only the hands are invisible, as in fairy tales ... There, I’m quiet. (37; italics original)

This passage is a close paraphrase to Büchner’s aforementioned letter to his fiancée Minna Jaeglé. Danton’s quietness, however, does not mean his satisfaction with the answer that humanity is nothing but puppets manipulated by invisible hands. Rather, it suggests his giving up, his surrendering to the unknown power, to the blind force of fate. In other words, the good and right thing he did in September to save his country does not necessarily give rise to national happiness; instead, it brings about even more bloody terrors – and he considers it all his own responsibility. For Danton and for Büchner alike, as Maurice B. Benn observes, “the evil is not accidental or extrinsic but inherent in the order of the world; and the offences which we commit and for which we suffer the torments of remorse are offences which we *must* commit” (116). This “order of the world,” to borrow from Žižek again, also denotes the existence of “an atemporal transcendental act by means of which each of us has always chosen our eternal character: what we experience as fate is our ‘nature,’ the outcome of an unconscious choice” (2012: 465). The conventional concept of fate is here transplanted and incorporated by Žižek into his psychoanalytical reinterpretation: our experience seems our own choice, indeed, but it is in truth “an unconscious choice,” not a choice based on the so-called “free will” or freedom.

Danton’s interrogating the elements of human fate is an echo of Robespierre’s earlier meditation on the same theme in Act 1, Scene 6, and, interestingly enough, similarly at the window. For Hilton, these “thresholds or ‘liminal’ moments contain the play’s most richly metaphoric meanings” (66). In his brief meeting and debate over virtue and vice with Danton, the “Incorruptible” Robespierre is severely interrogated by his rival: “Is there no small, secret voice in you whispering just occasionally: ‘You are a fraud?’” (22). Danton denies the existence of virtue and vice alike. For him, all people are “Epicureans, coarse and fine ones. Christ was the finest.” We all act according to our nature, so to speak, and “It’s cruel to kick your stilts from under you like this, eh, Incorruptible?” (23) – “stilts” being a sardonic metaphor for Robespierre’s virtue and a mocking reference to his short figure. After Danton leaves in a lofty stance, Robespierre is alone with

his own deep reflection. He determines to get rid of Danton: "He must go." Yet, like Danton, he is also haunted by the past, particularly Danton's poignant and sarcastic reprimand: "That keeps coming back. Why can't I be rid of the thought? ... Some part of me, I don't know which, contradicts the rest" (23). Then he goes "*to the window*," to the boundary separating/connecting his inner and outer worlds, and starts his profound contemplation upon the nocturnal Paris and human nature:

Night snores over the earth and tosses in desolate dreams. Thoughts, desires, hardly dreamt of, confused and formless, which shuddered away from the daylight, now take shape and crawl into the silent house of dreams. They open doors, look out of windows, they half become flesh. Limbs stretch in sleep, lips mutter. And isn't waking consciousness only a clearer dream? Are we not sleepwalkers? Are not our actions dream actions, only more sharply defined, more complete? Who will blame us for that? The mind performs more thinking acts in an hour than this sluggish organism, the body, can imitate in years. Sin is in the mind. Whether thought becomes action, whether the body carries it out, is *mere chance*. (23-24; italics added)

This is a moment of Robespierre's existential crisis. The nocturnal Paris is apparently a "shade-haunted space," as Gaston Bachelard finds in Henri Michaux's prose-poem: there is "a spirit that has lost its 'being-there' (*être-là*), one that has so declined as to fall from *the being of its shade* and mingle with the rumors of being, in the form of meaningless noise, of a confused hum that *cannot be located*" (Bachelard 217, italics original). While "the rumors of being" is the nightmarish cry of "September" for Danton, it is the "night snores" in Robespierre's meditation. Robespierre's confession of his own contradictory nature, the sin "in the mind," seems to justify Danton's moral indictment on him as a "fraud." In the light of the criterion shown in the "*presencing*" – to use Heidegger's words -- of his inner self, including the seamy side of his own mind, the "Incorruptible" Robespierre is doing against his nature and thus can even be considered a "fraud." In his comparison between the two rivals, for instance, Maurice B. Benn on the one hand glorifies Danton's love for freedom even in his "disillusion and *taedium vitae*" and, on the other, criticizes Robespierre's personal ambition, charging that "Robespierre cannot prevent himself from occasionally seeing through his self-deception.... [He is] the type of semi-conscious *hypocrite* who stylizes himself as a modern Messiah in order to canalize the forces of popular fanaticism" (1976: 124-125; italics added).

Not simply "a modern Messiah," Robespierre is entitled "a bloody Messiah" (25)

by his own “friend” Camille Desmoulins, the editor of *Le Vieux Cordelier* at the time. Robespierre is ambitious, indeed, quite opposite to the Danton obsessed with death wish. Warned of his possible arrest on charges of venality and leniency to the enemies of the Revolution, Danton assures his friends of his own determination: “I’d sooner lose my head than cut off other people’s. I have enough of it” (28), “They want my head. Well, they can have it. I’m fed up with these vexations. Let them take it. What does it matter? I shall know how to die with courage. It’s easier than living” (34), and again, he wants to rest “in *vacuo*,” to plunge himself “in a greater peace than nothingness” (56). Whether or not he can save the innocent and keep the freedom of the Republic, Danton is willing to sacrifice himself rather than to bring more massacre on others. Robespierre is different. He accepts the epithet given by Camille Desmoulins, with his own reasoning:

Yes, a bloody Messiah who sacrifices and is not sacrificed. *He* redeemed men with His blood, and I redeem them with their own. He invented sin and I take it upon myself. He had the joys of suffering and I have the pangs of the executioner. Who denied himself more, He or I? But there’s madness in that thought. Why must we keep looking over our shoulders at that one man? Truly the Son of Man is crucified in all of us; we all writhe in bloody sweat in the Garden of Gethsemane, but no man can redeem another with his wounds. -- My Camille. They’re all leaving me. Everything is empty and desolate. I am alone.  
(26; italics original)

“No man can redeem another with his wounds” – that is, each individual has to account for himself. Accusing Danton’s libertinism as “the political enemy of liberty” (15), Robespierre allows no privilege to anyone, neither to Danton nor to himself. He is no less lonely than Danton and he is keenly aware of such a dilemma. Unlike the Son of Man, the “bloody Messiah” is regarded as a despot “who sacrifices and is not sacrificed” – but he is in reality ready to sacrifice himself as well: “They gave me to understand that any danger approaching Danton could also reach me.... I declare to you now: nothing will stop me, not even if Danton’s danger becomes my own” (40). Like Danton again, he understands that he may also fall a prey to the Revolution, which “like Saturn ... eats its own children” – in reality, historically, on July 28, 1794, only 114 days after Danton’s death on April 5, Robespierre himself was accused of being the “soul” of the Terror and was sent to the guillotine.

With regard to Robespierre’s self-consciousness of possible danger, however, Žižek offers an unusual perspective. For Žižek, the Jacobin’s Reign of Terror is not the

so-called “state terrorism” as usually assumed but a case of what Walter Benjamin calls “the divine violence,” a positive historical phenomenon of the moment when “those outside the structural social field strike ‘blindly’, demanding and enacting immediate justice/vengeance” (2007: x).<sup>11</sup> Žižek scrutinizes Robespierre’s perilous predicament by asking “how can Robespierre be sure that the process he has unleashed will not swallow him up?” and reaches an answer in direct opposition to Maurice B. Benn’s charges against Robespierre:

It is here that his position takes on a sublime greatness – he fully assumes the danger that now threatens Danton will tomorrow threaten him. The reason that he is so serene, that he is not afraid of this fate, is not that Danton was a traitor, while he, Robespierre, is pure, a direct embodiment of the people’s will; it is that he, Robespierre, *is not afraid to die* – his eventual death will be a mere accident which counts for nothing: “What does danger matter to me? My life belongs to the homeland; my heart is free from fear; and if I were to die, I would do so without reproach and without ignominy.” (2007: xvii; italics original)

Robespierre’s utter apathy toward his own death designates his “sublime greatness” since he embodies the will of the people. In the play proper, Robespierre’s answer to an anonymous citizen’s question “What is the law?” is “The will of the people” (11). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that, for Žižek, Robespierre is more than a mere instrument of the people’s will; his staring down the threat of danger and even death is itself “the heroic assumption of the solitude of a sovereign decision. It is a decision (to kill, to risk or lose one’s own life) made in absolute solitude, not covered by the big Other” (2007: xi). It is “heroic,” indeed, but still a step away from martyrdom. Since Žižek interprets the Benjaminian “divine violence” in the precise sense of the old Latin motto *vox populi, vox dei* (ibid.; “people’s voice, God’s voice”), one may be tempted to infer that Robespierre is a martyr in terms of Thomas Becket’s definition in T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*: “the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, not lost it but found it.” Yet at one and the same time Becket also emphasizes again and again that “A Christian martyrdom is no accident.... A martyr is never the design of man” (Eliot: 199). In terms of such a stricter critique, whether or not Robespierre – as well as Danton -- “designed” to martyr himself remains a mystery because it is a matter of one’s purely inner world. Or, perhaps Robespierre intends to be something other than a “martyr”; as Rodney Taylor postulates, in

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<sup>11</sup> For details of Benjamin’s “divine violence,” see his “Critique of Violence” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, 277-300.

his comparison of himself with Jesus Christ, Robespierre in fact “assumes the responsibility of a saving divinity”:

Robespierre perceives the magnitude of his responsibility: he agrees within himself to allow the blood of others to be shed in full consciousness of the thought of blood which causes him to suffer. In resolving, out of his despair, to continue the struggle for the inception of a new social order, Robespierre assumes the burden of history. While Jesus’ life acquired immortal status through his *escape* from history, Büchner’s Robespierre recognizes that he must accept the agonizing historical *obligation* which the “Freiheitsideal” of his beloved Revolution imposes upon him. (1988: 89; italics original)

The “full consciousness” of Robespierre seems to suggest his deliberate “design” – but even this conjecture is beside the question, since the obligation is assumed to be “imposed upon him.”

More revealing, however, is the significance of “accident” brought out in both rivals’ conscientious consciousness, which inevitably testifies to the insignificance of the individual in the face of the “iron law” of history. Žižek’s verdict that for Robespierre “eventual death will be a mere accident which counts for nothing” also holds good to Danton. Robespierre’s meditation at the window – “Sin is in the mind. Whether thought becomes action, whether the body carries it out, is mere chance” – together with his harangue at court – “nothing will stop me, not even Danton’s danger becomes my own” – gives evidence to a deep realization of himself living on the edge; that is to say, he is at one and the same time too central and too marginalized. By the same token, Danton’s similar self-consciousness and self-conscience bespeak his deliberate discard of his central stage and embrace of the marginal place, though with a bit of arrogance for his historical, central position already occupied and still expected to prosper in the near future. In Žižek’s way of speech, we may even say that both of them are at one and the same time too less marginalized – Danton in the past and Robespierre for the time being – and, in the long run, too much marginalized in the Grand Mechanism of history.

### **III. Marginalized Existence of the San-culottes and the Female Characters**

Whereas the protagonist Danton and his rival Robespierre are implicitly “marginalized” in *Danton’s Death* as already discussed, the marginalized existence of the common citizens of lower class -- known as “san-culottes” at the time -- and the female



characters seem much more apparent, but with no less significance.<sup>12</sup> In the structural changes of the *mise-en-scène*, it is certainly quite common to see that the spatial shifts among scenes are closely linked with the thematic content of the play. For instance, the spatial shift from the marginal site of the san-culottes to the center of political stage finds a remarkable expression in the beginning of the play. After the presentation of Danton's isolation in the opening scene, the next scene immediately moves to another marginal site, a street scene in which we find the melodramatic quarrel between the drunken Simon and his wife over their daughter's prostituting herself. Under the influence of liquor, Simon demands a knife to kill his own daughter. His wife tells him that their daughter has "just gone off to do her stint *on the corner*" and retorts that "Would you have breeches to pull up if the young gentlemen didn't pull down theirs?" (9; italics added). The quarrel naturally gives rise to some other san-culottes' laughter and then debate over the issue of class conflict: "Yes, a knife, but not for the poor part. What did she ever do? It's her hunger that's the whore and beggar. A knife for the men who buy the flesh of our wives and daughters" (10). Hence an anonymous young man with a handkerchief passing by is identified by some frenzied citizens as an "aristo" and brought to the lantern to be hanged. The spatial implication here is quite significant: the street corner is the very existential space of the marginalized san-culottes. It is the place where they grind away for survival and even the only place where they can find their justice. Yet, the "Incorruptible" Robespierre shows up to claim the importance of the law, that is, in his words, "the will of the people." He urges these "poor virtuous people" to join him in the Jacobins, leaving Simon and his wife behind and their daughter still "on the street corner" (12).<sup>13</sup> Then in the Jacobin Club, the pioneering power center of the political stage at the time, the next scene witnesses Robespierre's speech on the necessity of bloody violence for France: "The weapon of the republic is the Terror, the strength of the republic is virtue – virtue because without it terror is corruptible, and terror because without it virtue is powerless. The Terror is an emanation of virtue; it is no more than swift, stern, inexorable justice" (14). Terror, taken as synonymous equivalent of virtue and justice, is the only guidance of law. Terror, so to speak, is validated by the law, "the will of the people." Transferred from the street corner to the Jacobin Club, the "will of the people" is turned into the rationales of the Reign of Terror.

The ending of Act 1, Scene 2 -- with the drunken Simon and his wife and their

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<sup>12</sup> By juxtaposing the san-culottes and the female characters in the same section, no intention is made to equalize them in any sense, except their dramatic weight as minor characters in contrast to that of the protagonist Danton and his political rival Robespierre in the play.

<sup>13</sup> Besides its usual usage meaning the common people of the social lower class in the late 18<sup>th</sup> France, "san-culottes" is also often used to refer to the radical followers of the Jacobins. The message here is that, as a stage prompter, Simon is no doubt a san-culottes, but with little association with the militant Jacobins.

daughter left on the street corner -- casts sarcastic criticism on the Revolution itself. On the one hand, the Revolution goes on whereas the sorry condition of the poor remains the same. On the other, in the lynching scene of hanging the anonymous young man looms large the irrational brutality of the class conflict. Whether or not such a demonstration of mob law should be considered a manifestation of the Benjaminian “divine violence” might be controversial. The juxtaposition of the Simon family with the lynching and the desertion of the poor by/with the manipulation of class hatred into political struggle, however, calls the cause of the Revolution itself into serious question.

Another similar example is to be found in Act 4, Scene 7, in a brief shouting of an anonymous woman already mentioned: “The children are complaining, they’re hungry. I’ve got to let them see [the execution], to keep them quiet” (68). Much earlier in Act 1, Scene 2, a citizen declares that “Our wives and children are crying for bread, and we’re going to feed them with the flesh of the aristos” (11).<sup>14</sup> As Dorothy James notices, the theme of “‘heads for bread’ is quite common in the writing of the period (1982: 10). In other words, the guillotine becomes a stage that feeds the people with heads instead of bread, and the audience even demands more sensational novelty of the performance: To Lacroix’s last speech to the people: “You’re killing us on the day you’ve lost your reason. You’ll kill them on the day you get it back,” some voices among the crowd shout back: “That’s been said before. What a bore” (69). Since *Place de la Révolution* is turned into a theatre and the execution a bloody show, all people indulge themselves in it – “*singing and dancing La Carmagnole*” (68) -- so much that their pains in reality are forgotten. As Reinhold Grimm observes, the execution is “welcomed and boisterously celebrated as a kind of popular festival” (1985: 148). As theatrical performance, the execution thus exercises an important function of cohesive instrumentality for the authority. Such an instrumental power of theatre is further underpinned in the play by a seemingly irrelevant incident: in Act 2, Scene 2, a gentleman on his way to the theater tells another his fear of a puddle on the street: “The earth is a thin crust. I always think I might fall through where there’s a hole like that.... You’ve got to step warily, it might break under you. *But do go to the theatre, that’s my advice*” (33; italics added). Both the theater for the gentlemen and the guillotine for the *san-culottes* alike offer a comfortable refuge, an escape from their pains – the gentlemen’s pains of being demonized and the poor people’s pains of being exploited and hungry.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew S. Buckley observes that the executions of Hébert and Danton in the play are “oddly peripheral and, quite notably, unstaged. That of Hébert is merely reported in the opening scene, and during the execution of the Dantonists the play’s focus is not the spectacle of the guillotine – the focus point for the crowd of Place de la Revolution – but the more intimate conversations taking place among its waiting victims” (2010: 128-129).

<sup>15</sup> In his short essay “*Danton’s Death* and the Dictates of Theory,” Anthony Kubriak cites the “puddle” scene of the play and argues that “theatre’s dreadful illusions are somehow a refuge from a

In the case of the mother among the crowd on the margin of *Place de la Révolution*, an even discomforting implication is that the poor people like her are so morally apathetic and emotionally brutal that they may well be beyond cure. In David G. Richards's observation, such people

represented as being dehumanized and brutalized will give the impression that they are not worth saving.... Danton's attitude toward the people and the author's portrayal of them suggest that the revolutionary impulse may in fact be better sustained by hate and disgust for the men in power, as Danton admits it was for him, than by love and sympathy for the poor. (1977: 45-46)

The poor people's moral apathy toward bloody executions and their gullibility may invite little commiseration, indeed; they may even leave the play's audience with an impression of them in sharp contrast to that of the oppressed and the exploited in *The Hessian Courier*. Büchner's *The Hessian Courier* is, after all, a political propaganda on the injustice of the hierarchical and economic system of the time rather than an exploration into human nature.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, one may well argue that the dehumanization of the poor people results exactly from the long-term distortions of human nature under such a detrimental system. However, the less human characteristics presented may unlikely evoke the same sympathy for the poor generally expressed in realistic and naturalistic literature; rather, the sordid nature laid bare on the stage in *Danton's Death* can certainly give further evidence to the meager existence of humanity as "foam on the wave," including the haves and have-nots alike.

Whereas Büchner's pictures of the *san-culottes* are blended with something brutal and callous, the representation of two marginalized female characters, Julie and Lucile, tends to be idealizing. As wives of radical revolutionaries, both women sacrifice themselves for their husbands. The lack of genuine communication between Julie and Danton in Act 1, Scene 1, as aforementioned, can only be ascribed to Danton's inertia and skepticism. She tries her best to help Danton shake off nightmarish memory after his somnambulist scream (Act 2, Scene 5). Then she never appears again until Act 4, when Danton is already arrested and jailed: Scene 1 is her short directive to a boy to give Danton "a lock of her hair" (60) and Scene 6 is, before poisoning herself, her soliloquy at the window – very probably the same window where Danton once meditated upon

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terrorizing, ontological danger" (1994: 83). Kubriak's essay is a rewriting of part of his own 1991 book *Stages of Terrors* (116-119).

<sup>16</sup> For Büchner's *The Hessian Courier*, see his *The Complete Plays* edited by Michael Patterson, pp. 231-241.

the dark night – addressing the sunset in lyrical speech: “The sun has gone down. The earth’s features were so sharp in its light, but now her face is as calm and grave as a dying woman’s” (68), with an obvious metaphor of Danton as the sun already gone and herself as the earth to be buried in total darkness while the boundary/horizon is fading away – both images of the setting sun and darkening earth together apparently reveal her suicidal intention.

It is noteworthy that Julie’s “sunset soliloquy” – like the other two of Lucile and Marion to be discussed later, and like Danton’s somnambulist recollection and Robespierre’s nocturnal meditation already mentioned in the previous section -- also takes place at the window, which denotes a Heideggerian “boundary” from which the dramatic characters begin their “*presencing*.” In appearance, the window looks like the door to a house, which, according to Gaston Bachelard, is a threshold separating and connecting the inside and the outside: “The door schematizes two strong possibilities, which sharply classify two types of daydream. At times, it is closed, bolted, padlocked. At others, it is open, that is to say, wide open” (222). Hence the wide open door renders the intimate room into intimate immensity, whereas the closed door suggests solitude or a “window” opening to the inner enclosure. Like the door, indeed, the window is a threshold. The window is a place where one is to see and to be seen. Unlike the door, so to speak, the window is “mainly for visual permeation” but does not “readily admit passage” (Patterson 2). It is one of the “insurmountable obstacles” (Starobinski 552). This insurmountability brings the window images in the play close to the Heidegger’s “boundary” as a place from which Danton’s dramatic characters unfold their “*presencing*,” though each with his/her own slight differences. No less than the sheer darkness seen from Danton’s and Robespierre’s windows, the three female characters’ “sunset soliloquy” at the window constitutes an “ambiguous space” in which “the mind has lost its geometrical homeland and the spirit is drifting” (Bachelard 218).

As for Lucile, Camille Desmoulins’s wife, critics in common have noticed in the denouement the allusion to the mad Ophelia and in her shouting – “Long live the king” – a cry for suicide.<sup>17</sup> In Büchner’s portrayal, however, Lucile is what I would like to call “a dramatic trinity” of Shakespeare’s Desdemona, Juliet and Ophelia. In Act 2, Scene 3, Lucile urges Camille to seek for Robespierre’s help, and after he leaves, she begins her soliloquy:

It’s a cruel time. Sometimes things happen like that. Who can find a way out? We just have to compose ourselves.  
[Sings] Oh parting, parting, parting,

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, James (24) thinks that Büchner makes Lucile “mad in a sweet, naïve Ophelia-like way.”

Who thought of parting first?

What made me think of that? It's bad that it should come into my head of its own accord. When he was going out I felt as though he'd never be able to turn round again, he'd just have to keep moving further and further away from me. – How empty this room is! The windows are open, as if a corpse had been laid out in it. I can't stand being here any longer. (35)

Lucile's song and narrative obviously partake the foreboding of death revealed in Juliet's soliloquy. In view of Büchner's familiarity with Shakespeare, Lucile's "parting" song which comes into her head "of its own accord" inevitably reminds one of the song of "willow" about a certain maid Barbary who, as Desdemona tells Emil before her murder by Othello, "died singing it; that song to-night / Will not go from my mind..." (*Othello*, IV.iii.30-31). And her imagination of Camille's leaving away, coupled with the image of the open window with "a corpse ... laid out in it," can be pertinently associated with Juliet's impression of Romeo's leaving for exile after their consummation: "O God, I have an ill-divining soul! / Methinks I see thee, now thou art so low, / As one dead in the bottom of a tomb" (*Romeo and Juliet*, III.v.54-56). In an extremely terse manner, Büchner compresses Shakespeare's three pretty and innocent female characters into a unique one, Lucile. Such an idealization of female characters has naturally brought up various criticisms. A severe disparagement on the characterization of Julie, for instance, comes from Dorothy James: Julie's suicide is regarded as something unrealistic -- "Julie's poisoning is no more real than Hollywood's version of leukaemia ... She is an emotion, a feeling in a pretty body with a pretty face, some who says 'Lieb Georg' and very little else. Neither we, nor Danton, nor presumably Büchner have the faintest idea of what goes on in her head" (23). James's similar denunciation extends to Lucile, taking her as a woman who "does not think, she senses," and both women's suicides are considered, in negative sense, "pure self-willed self-sacrifice for love." All these shortages, James asserts, are "partly a consequence of his [Büchner's] immaturity as a dramatist" (24-25).

Not only James's reference to Büchner's "immaturity" but also his dogged insistence on the austere criterion of realism is quite controversial. Büchner might be "immature" as a young man, indeed, since he died, in Michael Patterson's words, "at the absurdly young age of twenty-three" (1987: ix). But he is certainly far from being "immature" as a dramatist, for he is proclaimed "the forefather of modern theatre" by Bertolt Brecht and Anton Artaud.<sup>18</sup> It suffices to point out here that, in Büchner's own

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<sup>18</sup> See the front page of Büchner's *The Complete Plays*, ed. Michael Paterson. Since Henrik Ibsen has long been considered "the father of modern drama," Bert Cardullo postulates, "Büchner may

words, “a dramatist is for me nothing but a historian, but is superior to a historian in that *he creates history anew* ... The poet is not a teacher of morals, *he invents and creates figures*.... In a word, I have a higher regard for Goethe or Shakespeare, but very little respect for Schiller” (1987: 294-295; italics added). He intends his drama to be realistic, to be as real as possible, but that does not rule out the necessity of invention and creativity. What really matters is that the dramatic characters must be “human beings of flesh and blood whose sufferings and joy make me feel with them” (1987: 295). It is true that both Julie and Lucile are absolutely unreal in terms of their historical sources. Historically, instead of becoming mad, Lucile died a valiant death: some weeks after Camille’s execution, she was arrested “on charges of sedition” and guillotined (James 24). Even more ironical is that the historical Madame Danton – Louise Sébastienne Gély -- never poisoned herself; instead, she survived and remarried Baron Claude François Étienne Dupin in 1797 and died in 1856, outliving Danton for 62 years (Benn 140; Robertson 270). Büchner’s drastic changes of his historical prototypes, in the case of Julie and Lucile, then, are an aesthetic necessity because, on the one hand, their fates would otherwise remain unresolved within the limited space of the play proper and, on the other, as Herbert Lindenberger (1964: 38) observes, in Büchner’s design, they can “express a kind of pathos” not to be voiced so directly by their “much more Stoic-minded husbands.”

However, not all the female characters in *Danton’s Death* are idealized as Julie and Lucile are – an outstanding exception is Marion. Marion is a prostitute, perhaps the lowest and the most “marginalized” role in the stratum of society. Yet, unlike Simon’s daughter, who has to sell her body to support her family, including her drunk father, Marion is certainly larger than life and has a unique story of her own. Critics sometimes complain that a sense of heroic conflict is missing in the play (Hilton 69); indeed, in view of Danton as a passive protagonist “flirting with death,” it stands to reason that he is no rival of Robespierre. Strangely enough, compared with Robespierre’s lengthy oration on the necessity of the Reign of Terror in the Jacobin Club, Marion’s extensive narrative of self-portrait in Act 1, Scene 5 stands out to be likely competitive enough to be its rival both in length and in weight. Robespierre’s speech (878 words in Price’s translation) is an eloquent argument and Marion’s narrative (583 words in Price’s translation) is a vivid description: the one justifies the absolute necessity of virtue and terror, while the other enunciates the outright needs of nature and pleasure principle. Before her story, Marion gives a flat refusal to Danton’s erotic approach and then goes on to tell him her indulgence in sex and her reaction to her boyfriend’s suicide because of her debauchery:

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be said to be its grandfather” (2011: 23).

MARION. ... *But I was a sea, and the depths of me had been stirred; I swallowed up everything.* For me every partner was the same; all men merged into a single body. Well, it's the way God made me; nobody can get out of that.... *That evening I was sitting at my window. I was just sort of floating away on the waves of the sunset.* (I'm very sensitive, you know; I only know what's going on through my nerves.) Then a crowd came down the street, with children running in front and women gaping out of windows. I looked down and it was him. They carried him past in a laundry basket. The moon shone on his pale forehead, and his hair was wet. He had drowned himself. I couldn't help crying. That was the one big gap in my life. Other people have Sundays and week-days, they work six days and they pray on the seventh. Every year they look forward to their birthday, and to the New Year, and they feel sentimental. I don't understand all that. I know nothing about divisions or changes. I'm all of a piece, just one big longing and clinging. I'm a fire, a river. My mother died of grief. People point their fingers at me. That's stupid! The only thing that counts is what you enjoy -- bodies, holy pictures, flowers, toys. The feelings are just the same. Enjoy yourself -- that's the best way to pray.

DANTON. Why can't I take your beauty into myself? Why can't I embrace it completely?

MARION. Danton, your lips have eyes.

DANTON. I wish I were part of the air, to flood round you and break on every wave of your lovely body. (17-18; italics added)

Watching the sunset at the window as Julie and Lucie do, Marion experiences something totally different. While Julie compares herself to the earth deserted and deprived of its life by the setting sun and Lucie imagines her window a grave with corpse in it, Marion sees herself “floating away on the waves of the sunset”; that is, she is riding the sun, always floating and moving onwards with the life-giving sun. Actual death shows up under Marion’s eyes – her boyfriend’s corpse is carried past under her window. She “couldn’t help crying,” indeed. It is a moment of her existential crisis, but it is only a fleeting moment, a single exception in her life.<sup>19</sup> She simply leaves everything behind.

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<sup>19</sup> In Danton’s German version, Marion’s response to her boyfriend’s death is: “*Ich mußte weinen. Das war der einzige Bruch in meinem Wesen*” (1988: 81). Price’s translation reads “I couldn't help crying. That was the one big gap in my life,” while Mueller’s runs: “All I could do was cry. – It was

This explains why Julie poisons herself and Lucile becomes mad but Marion survives and prospers to enjoy life in her own way. Marion's defiance to the whole world proves herself a typical "libertine whore," who, in Kathryn Norberg's words, is "intelligent, independent, proud, and reasonable ... not diseased or monstrous; she is not humiliated or victimized either by life or her clients.... She knows no shame or guilt" (qtd. in Buckley 256).<sup>20</sup> She defies all norms and all the possibilities of social structuration. She is a nymphomaniac and she is her own measure.

Besides her "complete and fatal amorality" (Benn 137), two features stand out in the passage quoted above: Marion's unattainability and Danton's frustration. To Danton's erotic approach, Marion's second refusal ("Danton, your lips have eyes") and Danton's ensuing response are not what Richard Gilman calls "*aneinander vorbeisprechen* [talk at cross purposes]" or speech of "irrelevance," and hence 'Nothing in the sequence contributes to the active plot or connects factually to anything else' (Gilman 25-26). Nor can the exchange between them be explained away, as Dorothy James does, by taking Marion's bawdy joke about venereal disease -- "eyes" referring to syphilitic pemphigus -- as "an indication of her 'unreality,' since realistically, she must have been more exposed to the disease than most" (James 18). Nor even can Marion be simply taken as "the victim of her sensuality ... [who] has no soul" (Benn 136-137). Rather, just as Danton is -- in his own words -- "flirting with death" under Robespierre's Reign of Terror, his flirt with Marion here bears the same meaning and consequence -- he is a victim to the Revolution as well as to the whoredom. Silka Maria Weineck comments properly, indeed, that "Marion simply resists incorporation and annihilation: after all, Danton's protest calls for Marion's total submission. It is precisely Marion's ultimate unattainability, however, that guarantees her autonomy, the autonomy both of her character and her formal position within the play" (2000: 357). But Marion's autonomy bespeaks much more than a "formal position." In our comparison between Robespierre's speech and Marion's narrative shown above, it is easy to infer that there can be no bigger gap than the one between Robespierre's virtue and Marion's pleasure principle. Yet, paradoxically, there looms large a single link between them -- the motif of "terror." It is certainly no accident that prostitute, death, and the Revolution are often associated with each other by Büchner and his contemporaries: in Lacroix's warning, "Good night, Danton. This girl's [Marion's] thighs will guillotine you" (21); in Danton's words, "Freedom and a whore are the two most cosmopolitan things under

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the only time that my life ever stopped" (1963: 16). Mueller's version puts more emphasis on the German "*einzig*" (only).

<sup>20</sup> In French pornographic literature, "libertine whore" is considered the opposite to the "virtuous courtesan" -- "the innocent, often fatally diseased victim who retains her sexual naïveté and natural modesty together with a childlike sense of virtue" (Buckley 256).



the sun” (65); in Camille Desmoulins’s writing, “[Guillotine] is a widow who’s had a dozen husbands and buried them all” (25); or in Victor Hugo’s phrases, “*On couche avec, on ne la feconde pas*” (“Men lie with her [the guillotine / whore], but she does not become pregnant”) (qtd. in Kott 72). All these associations, together with the close link between Büchner’s observation on humanities as “foam on the wave” and Marion’s self-portrayal as “a sea [that] ... swallowed everything,” tend to hint at Marion’s unique position in the play: she is the incarnation of whoredom while Robespierre is that of the Revolution. Each of them has his/her own Reign of Terror and, for Danton and for Büchner alike, whoredom and revolution are very much the same thing.

#### IV. Conclusion

The paradoxical identity of whoredom and revolution, of a prostitute at the utmost periphery of social sphere and a tribunal at the very center of political stage, makes plain the playwright’s woeful vista of the callous tyranny of history’s Grand Mechanism and the meager existence of human individuals. Such a thematic content, as we have seen, is well integrated with its dramatic form, as exemplified in its *mise-en-scène* in spatial terms. Not only is the overall structure of the play mostly presented from a marginal perspective, but, within individual scenes, many characters – Danton, Robespierre, Julie, Lucile, and Marion at the window, in particular -- are also deliberately brought to the verge, to a “boundary” for the “*presencing*” of their existence, which is “just foam on the wave” for Büchner. The only exception is Marion, perhaps, as she may well embody, symbolically, the unsatisfied gluttony of desire and never-ending revolution, though in reality she might still be looked down as a prostitute at the bottom of social stratum. Perhaps, to put it a little further, the truly only exception is the guillotine. It is true that the guillotine shows its first and final appearance only in the very end, but, as Jan Kott postulates, it is omnipresent throughout the play. It is always there, so to speak, a prop that, in Manfred Pfister’s words, “assumes the characteristics of a dramatic figure” in that it has developed “some form of independent activity” (1988: 272). It is, no more no less, both the law of the Revolution and the execution of the law. Indeed, the guillotine can be well taken as the one and single protagonist of the play since, visible or invisible, it always occupies the central stage while all events take place around it, with all the other characters in the play totally marginalized, or even worse, like the Kurtzian snail, all “Crawling, slithering along the edge of a straight razor.”



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