

# From Georg Büchner's Letters

*Translated by Maurice Edwards*

*Letter to his Fiancée, November 1833.*

I have been studying the history of the French Revolution. I have felt as if crushed beneath the gruesome fatalism of History. I find in human nature a terrifying sameness, in the human condition an inexorable force, granted to all and to none. The individual mere froth on the wave, greatness sheer chance, the mastery of genius a marionette play, a ridiculous struggle against brazen law; to recognize it, the supreme achievement, to control it impossible. . . .

I intend to bow no more before the parade horses and bystanders of History. I have accustomed my eyes to the sight of blood. But I am no guillotine blade. *Must* is one of the curses which baptized man. The dictum: "for it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh!"—is terrifying. What is it in us that lies, murders, steals? I do not want to pursue this thought any further. Oh, if I could but lay this cold and tormented heart on your breast!

*Letter to Gutzkow from Darmstadt, February 21, 1835.*

Dear Sir!

Perhaps you may have observed; or even, in less fortunate instance, your own experience may already have told you that there is a degree of misery which makes one forget every consideration and benumbs every feeling. True, there are people who maintain that in such a case one ought rather starve himself out of this world; but I came upon the living refutation of this position in an only recently blinded captain I met on the street who declared he would shoot himself were he not forced to live in order to support his family. That is terrible. You will easily perceive that there could be similar circumstances hindering one from making an anchor of one's body to be thrown from the wreck of this world into the water; and you will therefore not wonder at my breaking open your door, bursting into your room, thrusting a manuscript\* onto your breast, and demanding charity. I ask you to read this manuscript as quickly as possible and, in the event your conscience as a critic will allow, to recommend it to Mr. Sauerländer, and to answer forthwith.

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\* *Danton's Death.*

As to the work itself, I can tell you no more than that the most unfortunate circumstances forced me to write it in at most five weeks. I say this to motivate your judgment of the author, not of the drama as such. What I should make of it, I myself do not know; I know only that I have every reason to blush as far as History is concerned; still, I console myself with the thought that, with the exception of Shakespeare, all poets stand like schoolboys before History and Nature. . . .

Should the tone of this letter perhaps cause you to wonder, consider that it is easier for me to beg in rags than to extend a supplication in dresscoat; and almost easier, with pistol in hand, to say: "la bourse ou la vie!" than to whisper with trembling lips: "God bless you!"

*Letter to his Family from Strassburg, July 28, 1835.*

I must say a few words about my play. First let me observe that permission to make a few changes has been liberally abused: on well-nigh every page, something omitted, something added, and nearly always in a way most detrimental to the whole. Often the sense is entirely distorted or else totally gone, and almost downright nonsense takes over. Besides, the book literally abounds in the most dreadful misprints. They sent me no proofs. The title page is insipid, and it bears my name—which I had expressly forbidden; moreover, it is not on the title page of my manuscript. In addition, the editor stuck several vulgarities into my mouth which never in my life would I have uttered. I have read Gutzkow's brilliant critique and noted there to my joy that I have no inclination to conceit. Moreover, as to the so-called immorality of my book, my answer is as follows:

The dramatic poet is, in my eyes, nothing but a writer of history, but is superior to the latter in that he creates history for the second time. He transplants us directly into the midst of the life of an era, giving us, instead of a dry account of it, characters rather than characteristics, and figures rather than descriptions. His foremost task is to get as close as possible to history as it really happened. His book must be neither more nor less moral than history itself; but history was not created by the Good Lord to provide suitable reading matter for young females, and so I must not be blamed either if my drama is so little suited to that. I can hardly make paragons of virtue out of a Danton and the bandits of the Revolution! If I wished to describe their dissoluteness, I had to make them dissolute; if I wished to show their godlessness, I had to let them speak like unbelievers. If a few indecent expressions result, one need only reflect on the well-known obscenity of the speech of that time—of which what I let my people utter is only a weak distillation.

There remains but to reproach me for having chosen such a subject. But this objection was refuted long ago. Were one to let it stand, the greatest masterpieces of literature would have to be repudiated. The poet is not a teacher of morals; he invents and creates characters, he brings past epochs back to life, and people may then learn from these as they learn from the study of history and their observation of what happens around them in human life. . . . In that case (if one so wished), one ought not to study history at all because so very many immoral things are reported therein; one would have to go blindfold through the streets not to see the indecencies, and must needs cry out against a God who created a world in which so much debauchery takes place. If, moreover, someone were then to tell me that the poet should not represent the world as it is, but rather as it should be, I would answer that I don't wish to make it better than the good Lord who surely created the world as it ought to be.

Further, as to the so-called idealist poets, I find that they have given us almost nothing but marionettes with sky-blue noses and affected pathos, certainly not people of flesh and blood who make me feel their joy and suffering, and whose comings and goings fill me with horror or admiration. In short, I think highly of Goethe or Shakespeare, but very little of Schiller. That, moreover, the most unfavorable critiques are yet to appear is understood; for governments must demonstrate through their paid penmen that their opponents are stupid asses or immoral yokels. Besides in no way do I consider my work perfect and will gratefully accept any genuine aesthetic criticism. . . .

Three more refugees have drifted in here; Nievergelder is among them; in Giessen two students were arrested again. I am extremely careful. Here we know of no one arrested on the border. History must be a fairy tale.

*Letter to his Family from Strassburg, January 1, 1836*

. . . By the way, I definitely do not belong to the so-called Young Germany, the literary party of Gutzkow and Heine. Only a total misunderstanding of our social conditions could make people believe it possible to effect a complete reform of our religious and social ideas. Then too, though I by no means share their concept of marriage and Christianity, I am nevertheless annoyed when people a thousandfold more sinful in practice than these are in theory pull moral faces and throw stones at young, diligent talent. I go my own way and remain in the field of drama which has nothing to do with all these controversial issues. I draw my characters in accordance with Nature and History and

laugh at those who would like to make me responsible for their morality or immorality. I have my own thoughts about that. . . .

*Letter to his Family, September 1836.*

I have not let my two plays out of my hands yet; I am still dissatisfied with much in them and do not wish it to go as it did the first time. This is work one cannot be ready with at a set time as a tailor with his clothes.