

Büchner in Spain: From Cervantes to Spanish Contemporary Literature

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Abstract: This essay offers a study about the presence and influence of the work of the German playwright Georg Büchner in Spain. In the first place, from the perspective of Comparative Literature, a comparison is established between the theater of Cervantes and the theater of Büchner, taking as reference the comparative figure of polygenesis. Secondly, the presence of Büchner in the Spanish and peninsular literature and theater of the 20th century is analyzed and documented, through the translations, interpretations, editions and staging of his theatrical and literary works.

Key words: Büchner, Spain, Cervantes, theater, polygenesis.

Resumen: Este artículo ofrece un estudio sobre la presencia e influencia de la obra del dramaturgo alemán Georg Büchner en España. En primer lugar, desde la perspectiva de la Literatura Comparada, se establece una comparación entre el teatro de Cervantes y el teatro de Büchner, tomando como referencia la figura comparativa de la poligénesis. En segundo lugar, se analiza y documenta la presencia de Büchner en la literatura y el teatro españoles y peninsulares del siglo XX, a través de las traducciones, interpretaciones, ediciones y puestas en escena de sus obras teatrales y literarias.

Palabras clave: Büchner, España, Cervantes, teatro, poligénesis.

Introduction

Literature and Literary criticism are very different visions of the world. They are two languages that result from different questions. They are mutually dependant, but they are distant, and sometimes even adverse, realities. Criticism time and time again tries to put norms to Literature, to establish canons (each epoch has its own, as does each ideological group). Nevertheless Literature makes a mock of all literary theories. Literature always survives criticism. It survives thanks to it. Perhaps this is because these days the critic has replaced the reader. I do not know if this substitution is definitive. I say this because Spanish Literature shares an intimate relationship with the Literature of Georg Büchner starting with authors like Fernando de Rojas in works like the *Celestina*, 1499; the *Numancia*, of Cervantes, 1585; *Luces de Bohemia*, Valle-Inclán, 1920; *El maleficio de la mariposa*, 1920, or *La zapatera prodigiosa*, of 1930, both by Lorca. These are only a few examples. Nevertheless, after the death of Büchner in 1837, it took Spanish literary criticism almost one hundred fifty years to start examining attentively the theater of this German author. The first Spanish translation of one of his works, *Woyzeck*, is from 1959 (see works cited).

1. The Reception of Georg Büchner in Spain

Publishing houses such as Cenit and Oriente were dedicated to publishing many books and translations from foreign languages, especially in French and Germany. Engagement literature was the focus of publication 1929-1931. Nevertheless, no work by Büchner was published in Spain during this time. However, *Politisches Theater* by Piscator was published in Spain before the Civil War (1936-1939).

After 1940, the reception of Büchner in Spain was influenced by French culture and literature, especially when the actor and theater director Jean Vilar, in 1951 at the Théâtre National Populaire, started to renovate his dramatic repertoire. In 1953, Arthur Adamov and Marte Robert finished their French translation of Büchner's theater plays. One year later Jean Duvignaud published the first French monograph on Büchner. This monograph continued to influence French culture for twenty years.

In February 23, 1959, the first performance of Büchner's theater play was made by Julio Diamante and by the group Teatro de Cámara Fénix at the Teatro Maravillas in Madrid (set design by Juan León and Francisco Merino as *Woyzeck*) (Diamante, 1959: 26).

Diamante's version was not performed in big cities. No professional group performed it. Nevertheless, the play could have been performed by several amateur companies, such as Aula de Teatro del Ateneo de Pontevedra, who performed this play in 1968. In addition, it could have also been interpreted by Teatro de Cámara de Zaragoza during that same year, (first in Aragón and after in Valladolid), during the Festival de Teatro Independiente. At the Escuela de Arte Dramático in Zaragoza, *Woyzeck* was selected as an exercise in the dramatic classes (Álvaro, 1969: 345).

On the other hand, in 1960 Manfred Schönfeld translated *Woyzeck* into Spanish. Five years later, Nicolás González Ruiz edited an anonymous translation of this drama in the *Antología de piezas cortas de teatro*, published by Editorial Labor. In 1966, Vicente Romano García finished the first Spanish translation of *La muerte de Danton* and a new translation of *Woyzeck*. This translation is very similar to Bergemann's text.

In 1972, Alfonso Sastre edited the theatre play *Historia de Woyzeck*, which was translated into Spanish by Pablo Sorozábal Serrano. The complete works were not edited until 1992. when they were edited by K. Forssman and J. Jané. C. Gauger translated Büchner's complete works into Spanish, based on the Werner R. Lehmann's edition (1967). In 1993 Javier Orduña and José Luis Cerezo translated *Woyzeck* and *La muerte de Danton* into Spanish for the Editorial Cátedra. The introduction to this translation offers interesting news and information regarding Büchner's reception in Spain since 1989.

2. Büchner's Theater and the Spanish Literature

The influence of Georg Büchner on Spanish Literature is not something that is perceived directly, but rather through what comparative Literature has denominated *poligénesis*, that is to say, the expression of the same literary phenomenon in different cultural and aesthetic systems. In this exercise of intertextuality, there are four authors in Spanish Literature whose theater maintains a close relationship with the work of Georg Büchner. They are Miguel de Cervantes, Ramon de Valle-Inclán, Federico García Lorca and Fernando Arrabal. For now we will only discuss the first of them: Miguel de Cervantes.

I am going to center my examination on two concrete works *La numancia* by Cervantes and Büchner's *Woyzeck* and to try to develop three main ideas: 1) the concept of tragedy expressed by Cervantes in the *Numancia* is very similar to that developed in German post-

romantic theater, especially that of Georg Büchner and Heinrich von Kleist; 2) many essential aspects of contemporary tragic theater are originally contained in Cervantes' *Numancia*, and become key in the theater of Büchner; 3) the literary analogies between the *Numancia* and *Woyzeck* are very strong (the suffering of humble and innocent beings as the protagonists of tragic events, the theories of Büchner on suicide, the existential conditions of the dramatic character as the subject of the tragic experience...)

3. Büchner and the Cervantes Poetics

The poetic of the ancient world, like its classical interpretation, demanded that the hero of the tragedy should be in some way responsible for the misfortune which awaited him; due either to a fault or moral weakness, or as the result of an error or excess in the use of power when exercising his faculties of governance. We have indicated how Aristotle observes that the misfortunes of an innocent or virtuous man do not lead to the tragic, but to an unjust suffering, or at the least to an expression of rejection or loathing (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452b 35-35-36).

Like those of Cervantes, the works of Georg Büchner defy the traditional definitions of tragedy, handed down from the most remote Antiquity, and confirmed by conservative poetics. Büchner tries to conceive a tragic form that surpasses the Greek and Shakespearian models, in its possibilities of uniting the inheritance of the past with the decisive changes of the Contemporary Age, its ways of thought, its social conditions, and its psychological and human material. Of his three main works, *Dantons Tod*, *Leonce und Lena* and *Woyzeck*, the one which we wish to consider at this moment is this last one, of which only an ample fragment is conserved. The text was rediscovered and published in 1879, but it was not until in the inter-war period that it reached, along with the rest of his literary work, a wider diffusion. Alban Berg composes his opera *Wozzeck* (1923) based on the tragedy of Büchner, whose dramas will decisively influence the dramatic art of Hauptmann, Wedekind and Brecht.

Woyzeck is the first tragedy of the Contemporary Age in which human beings of humble estate powerfully become protagonists in a tragic experience of existential conditions. The classic interpretation of the Aristotelian poetic had exiled the plebeians from all possibility of tragic experience and protagonism. The misfortunes of the lower classes could only serve as a grotesque note or humorous reference,

or in the best case as a chorus or resonance for the tragic feeling of their noble, aristocratic, monarchic representatives or protectors. The humble did not have the recognized right to the compassion of suffering nor to the dignity of pain. Only Cervantes, in the Modern Age, confers, with all aesthetic quality, this right to the Numantines: in the *Numancia*. For the first time in the history of the tragedy and in that of western poetics, a humble character is the exclusive protagonist of a tragic experience. Before Cervantes there is an empty space between compassion and the suffering that the common people live, between mercy and the pain that humble beings can experience. Rather than being heroes, the Numantines are humble people. Among the inhabitants of the besieged city there are no figures like Priam, Hector, Paris or Helen..., the great heroes or defenders of Troy. His women do not even reach the greatness of Andromeda or Hecuba, among the Trojans, or of the wife of Darius, among the Persians. Never before had humble beings been capable of heroic actions: this is one of the principle qualities of the *Numancia*, it is also one of the main qualities of the modern tragedy. This decisive contribution of Cervantine theater was not perceived in its own time. This is a historical valuation, in the development of European theater, which did not have any follow up in literary creation, which was more attentive to the theater of Lope and Calderón.

The dramatic art of Büchner was, in the Contemporary Age, the same as that of Cervantes in the Early Modern period: an innovation which went unnoticed. If Büchner's was one of the most radical ruptures with the social and linguistic conventions of the poetics of tragedy in the Contemporary Age, *Numancia* was no less so in the Early Modern Period, a period deterministic in the systematization of the poetics of Aristotle and rigorous when confronted with aesthetic liberties, whose rules Cervantes transgresses without any type of explanation; as he openly breaks the classic principle of decorum, by turning debilitated plebeians into the protagonists of tragic events, who innocently suffer evils unworthy of any tragic experience regulated by the old poetic, and who, because of the most absolute suffering and hopelessness, reach, from the humility of their social and individual existence, a dignity and a compassion until then unreachable by the humble.

4. The poetic of the tragic in Büchner's *Woyzeck*

As a dramatist, Büchner surpasses all the horizons of expectation of his time; in fact, he is an authentic precursor of the principle forms

of theatrical renovation of the 20th century, from expressionist theater to poetic drama, from surrealism to the theater of the absurd, from epic theater to social realism. Nevertheless, during his brief life Büchner did not write a treatise on literary aesthetics, in which he might have reflected on the function that he tried to confer upon Literature. Only by reading his literary work and his letters is it possible to reconstruct what may have been his beliefs about a poetics of Literature. Like Cervantes, Büchner was an idealist, but in contrast to the Spanish writer, the writings of the young German come from a more dogmatic idealism, and confer upon the reader a negative and pessimistic vision of human action. In his work we notice content and implications of a social, political, anthropological and physiological nature. Among his principle subjects are references to the freedom of man, the dignity of human life, and a critique of all those aspects of life that can prevent the total development of the individual.

Woyzeck doubtlessly constitutes, within this context to which we have referred, his most relevant and expressive literary work. We find ourselves faced with what is possibly the first tragedy of the Contemporary Age which, in its complex reflection on the human condition, is developed from a double perspective: philosophical-existential and historical-social.

Consequently, we will state that the literary poetics of Georg Büchner are characterized by the aesthetic combination of two concepts which, throughout his work, are found in perfect counterpoint: demystification and verisimilitude. These are two essential characteristics of Spanish Literature, and are very much present in two authors intimately related to Georg Büchner: Cervantes and Valle-Inclán.

Büchner mentions Shakespeare frequently, Goethe less so, and Schiller hardly at all —just to reject him. As far as we know, Büchner does not mention Cervantes in any of his works —nor any other Spanish writer, even in passing— in spite of showing surprising analogies with the author of the *Numancia* regarding a verisimilitude in the literary poetic and a formally heterodox conception of dramatic construction compared to his contemporaries.

From the perspective of western literary poetics, and, in a certain way, similar to what Cervantes did in the *Numancia*, Büchner introduces into art, specifically into tragic art, the verisimilar existence of the common man.

More than anything else, *Woyzeck* is a tragedy of humble beings, victims of adverse circumstances of which they are not guilty. In

this sense, *Woyzeck* is, in the history of German Literature, the first portrayal of a protagonist of a tragedy who does not belong to a noble or aristocratic estate, but rather, is a common man. In effect, in Büchner, the tragic experience confers a protagonism to characters of humble condition, as opposed to classic tragedy, where this role corresponded exclusively to the aristocracy or noble characters. The manifest antecedent of this dramatic conception in European Literature is found in Cervantes's *Numancia*, where the protagonists of the tragic experience are equally humble and innocent beings. The same thing happens to the protagonists of *Woyzeck*, also innocent beings, who inadvertently intervene in the random adverse events which give rise to the unfortunate circumstances that they are called on to live. One does not see any order or moral causality of a transcendent reality; everything is the result of chance and the considerations and exigencies that come from the most elementary conditions of material life. Marie, in one of her dialogues with *Woyzeck*, recognizes this fact in a desperate declaration that finishes with a definitive derision of everything human.

MARIE: Unsereins hat nur ein Eckchen in der Welt und ein Stückchen Spiegel, und doch hab' ich einen so roten Mund als die großen Madamen mit ihren Spiegeln von oben bis unten und ihren schönen Herrn, die ihnen die Händ küssen; ich bin nur ein arm Weibsbild [...].

WOYZECK: Wir arme Leut! [...].

MARIE: Ach! Was Welt? Geht doch Alles zum Teufel, Mann und Weib (Büchner, 1999: 239).

In a similar manner, in his dialogues with the captain, *Woyzeck* frequently insists on the conditions of poverty and humility that determine his form of life, frequently coming close to an existentialist and materialistic conception of humanity: "Wir arme Leut [...]. Wer kein Geld hat, Da setz eimal einer seinsgleichen auf die Moral in die Welt. Man hat auch sein Fleisch und Blut. Unseins ist doch eimal unselig" (Büchner, 1999: 240). *Ich bin ein armer Teufel* "I am a poor devil," is something he will repeat frequently at different moments in the work. *Woyzeck* continues his dialogue with the captain. The soldier shortly thereafter demystifies the idea of a ruling *morality* in the dominant classes, a type of prestigious idealization of human conduct, devised to protect the social privileges of the leading class, which, in this way, disguises its idleness and vanity. In this sense, such a virtue —*Tugend*— would be inaccessible to the humble classes, whose

knowledge of reality demystifies human prestige. Parallely, Büchner seems to confirm, by mouth of Woyzeck, that the moral dignity of the individual depends frequently on its material conditions of life.

Ja Herr Hauptmann, die Tugend! ich hab's noch nicht so aus. Sehn Sie, wir gemeinen leut, das hat keine Tugend, es kommt einem nur so die Natur, aber wenn ich ein Herr wär und hätt ein Hut und eine Uhr und eine Anglaise, und könnt vornehm reden, ich wollt schon tugendhaft sein. Es muß was Schönes sein um die Tugend, Herr Hauptmann. Aber ich bin ein armer Kerl (Büchner, 1999: 241).

5. Cervantes and Büchner: a Poetic of Freedom

It is impossible to signal too frequently the Cervantine precedents for characteristics present in the theater of the Contemporary Age. The literary presentation of humble characters as protagonists of tragic experiences and episodes, are indeed found in authors like Cervantes, whose tragedy *Numancia* can be considered a precursory example, in the European Early Modern Age, of a rare, absolutely Aristotelian, attempt to turn plebian beings into the exclusive protagonists of tragic events. The literary tradition of Antiquity had situated humble beings within the close limits of the comedy, to amuse —far from all critique— a public supposedly happy and satisfied with all of its social, governmental and political conditions. In the work of Büchner, protagonism falls upon beings who, up until then, traditional Literature —with certain exceptions like the Cervantine *Numancia*— had not taken *seriously*, nor as the object of anything serious. In humble beings there was no recognition of a possible tragic experience. I have examined this aspect of the originality of the theater of Miguel de Cervantes more extensively in another study, specifically in relation to the tragic experience. On this matter See chapter 2 of my work *Poética del teatro de Miguel de Cervantes* (2000), where I discuss the modernity of the poetics of the cervantina tragedy in detail.

The *Numancia* is a tragedy; perhaps first in the history of western dramatic art, that confers honor and dignity upon the heroic action of humble characters. Cervantes expresses and justifies the honor of villagers, in one of the most radical experiences of human existence, a decision of collective sacrifice, the suicide of an entire city.

Like Cervantes, Büchner is a writer who identifies freedom as the supreme value of humanity. The concept of “liberty” is doubtlessly different in both authors, but the idea that human beings have the right to think and to live freely in society is a common impulse in the work

of both authors. *Der hessische Landbote* [The Hessian Messenger] (1834) is a pamphlet of eight pages that adopts as its slogan the motto which identified the Jacobins during the French Revolution: “Peace to the huts, war on the palaces!” It constitutes a political writing directed to the common people, in which the use of the taxes collected from the citizens of the dukedom of Hesse is described and denounced. The public powers use them for the maintenance of repressive armies, for the privileged maintenance of the aristocratic classes, and for the propagation of a useless government bureaucracy and an equally sterile public administration. As Knut Forssmann and Jordi Jané have written in this respect, “el *Mensajero* habla al pueblo sin censurar las creencias populares ni ignorarlas aristocráticamente y, en lugar de utilizar conceptos elevados, como la honra y la libertad de la nación, las constituciones, los derechos humanos o la libertad de prensa —conceptos usuales en los panfletos mencionados, que los campesinos no entendían ni se interesaban por ellos—, les presenta sus propios problemas en su propia lengua, las causas reales de su miseria y la manera de superarla, evidenciando que los intereses materiales básicos de la gran mayoría de la población eran el motivo fundamental de la revolución, haciéndola necesaria” (Forssmann & Jané, 1992: 17).

One of the main characteristics of this writing is that it is directed to the common folk, to people of humble condition, far from all aristocratic, bourgeois or institutional distinction, and who become the most important protagonists in the literary creation of Georg Büchner, to the point that it constitutes an aesthetic prototype which, from the work of this German author, is explicitly introduced into the literary tradition of the Spanish Literature of the Contemporary Age, especially among the authors: Valle-Inclán, Federico García Lorca and Fernando Arrabal. Büchner writes: “Das Leben der Vornehmen ist ein langer Sonntag, sie wohnen in schönen Häusern, die tragen zierliche Kleider, sie haben feiste Gesichter und reden eine eigne Sprache [...]; ihre Weisheit ist Trug, ihre Gerechtigkeit ist Schinderei” (“Der Hessische Landbote” [Erste Botschaft, im Juli 1834], 1999: 40 y 52).

Similarly, his “Rede zur Verteidigung des Kato von Utika” [Speech in defense of Cato of Útica] (1830) introduces in the work of Büchner his first reflections on the subject of suicide, which is so important in Cervantes. This “Speech” constitutes Büchner’s elegy to the royal figure of Cato of Útica, and interprets his suicide to be the voluntary death of a man who, after his confrontation with Caesar, and rather than accepting the political tyranny of his adversary and vanquisher,

decides to place a life of freedom before any other form of life. If we hearken to the words of Büchner, the analogy with the *Numancia* is manifest.

Der Weltball lag in Roms Banden, alle Völker waren Sklaven, frei allein der Römer. Doch als auch dieser endlich seinem Geschicke erlag, als das Heiligtum der Gesetze zerrissen, als der Altar der Freiheit zerstört war, da war *Kato* der *einzig*e unter Millionen, der *einzig*e unter den Bewohnern einer Welt, der sich das Schwert in die Brust stieß, um unter Sklaven nicht leben zu müssen [...]; diese Freiheit hatta *Cäsar* zerstört [...]. *Kato* hatte einen andern Weg eingeschlagen, noch den letzten großen Dienst seinem Vaterlande zu erweisen, ja sein Selbstmord war eine Aufopferung für dasselbe. Wäre *Kato* leben geblieben, hätte er sich mit Verläugnung aller seiner Grundsätze dem Usurpator unterworfen, so hätte dieses Leben die Billigung *Cäsars* erhalten, hätte er dies nicht gewollt, so hätte er in offenem Kampf auftreten und unnützes Blut vergießen müssen. Hier gab es *nur einen* Ausweg, er war der *Selbstmord*. Er war die Apologie des *Kato*, war die furchtbarste Anklage des *Cäsars* ("Rede zur Verteidigung des *Kato* von Utika," 1999: 31-32).

It is even more explicit if we fit this into the context of his early writing "Über den Selbstmord" [On suicide], whose reading can be contrasted with Cervantes' *Numancia*, and the justification of suicide within the tragic experience. This same text must also be related to Büchner's story "Helden-Tod der vierhundert Pforzheimer" [The Heroic Death of the Four Hundred Citizens of Pforzheim] (1829).

Prior to Romanticism suicide was considered an act against the natural and moral order. It is a human and individual act that confronts the natural order established by a transcendent reality. The council of Trent condemned suicide and it prohibited the appearance of suicidal characters in literary and theater works. Melibea commits suicide, the Numantines commit suicide...; this is a form of moral rebellion against transcendent reality. Büchner's conclusion regarding suicide is clear: "Only through suicide can a human being conserve, in the middle of the quagmire of life, true dignity" (p. 62). ["Welcher dem Menschen allein im Schlamme des Lebens die wahre Würde bewahren kann," p. 38].

An interpretation of his own theories on suicide is offered by Büchner in his story "The Heroic Death of the Four Hundred Citizens of Pforzheim" (1829). It is one of Büchner's earliest writings. Of an elevated romantic ideology, it praises the freedom and the patriotism that

characterized the citizens of Pforzheim in their fight against English troops, led by the general of the French army François Dumouriez, in alliance with the Dutch military. Büchner's text details, essentially, the siege that the inhabitants of Pforzheim undergo, and his post-romantic valuations are in a certain way very similar to the interpretations of the Cervantine *Numancia* made by German Romanticism:

Erhaben ist es, den Menschen im Kampfe mit der Natur zu sehen, wenn er mit gewaltiger Kraft sich stemmt gegen die Wut der entfeselten Elemente und, vertrauend der Kraft seines Geistes nach seinem Willen die Kräfte der Natur zügelt. Aber noch erhabner ist es den Menschen zu sehen im Kampfe mit seinem Schicksale, wenn er es wagt mit kühner Hand in die Speichen des Zeitrades zu greifen, wenn er an die Erreichung seines Zweckes sein Höchstes und sein Alles setzt ("Helden-Tod der vierhundert Pforzheimer," 1999: 17).

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