

Lenz

Georg Büchner

Translated by Michael Hamburger



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Introduction

LENZ IS THE ONLY STORY KNOWN TO HAVE BEEN WRITTEN by Georg Büchner, the author of *Danton's Death* and *Woyzeck*. The story is based on factual evidence. Büchner's sources were a diary kept by Oberlin in 1778 and a French biography of Oberlin, both of which were published by friends of Büchner's in 1831.

Though *Lenz* was left unfinished when Büchner died in 1837 – at the age of twenty-three – he wrote it in Strasbourg in 1836, certainly before *Woyzeck*, possibly before *Leonce und Lena*. Apart from a single gap which we can fill in from Büchner's sources, it is unlikely that he would have substantially changed or amended this story. The unusual narrative style, with its repetitions, ellipses and colloquialisms, is wholly in accordance with his general principles and with the peculiar subject of this story, a subject wholly beyond the scope of contemporary writers of fiction. Among other

things, Büchner was a brilliant scientist; but his interest in Lenz was not so much scientific as sympathetic. The aesthetic principles of Lenz – and other writers of the *Sturm und Drang* school – link up with Büchner’s own innovations, but especially with his creation of a poetic realism which combines the accurate documentation of facts with an imaginative interpretation of character. The aesthetic theories propounded by the Lenz of Büchner’s story are adapted from the theoretical writings of Lenz himself, such as the following from his *Anmerkungen zum Theater*: “...But since the world has no bridges and we have to content ourselves with the things that are there, we do at least feel an accretion to our existence, happiness, by recreating its Creation on a small scale.” Büchner’s Lenz says almost the same thing in slightly different words: “I take it that God has made the world as it should be... our only aspiration should be to recreate modestly in His manner.” Büchner applied the same principle to *Lenz*; but in spite of his modest ambition to recreate, rather than to invent, he invariably improved on his material.

Jacob Michael Reinhold Lenz, the subject of this story, was born in 1751 in the Baltic province of Livonia. His

father was a Lutheran pastor, and he himself studied theology at Königsberg. After two years of rather lukewarm study, he gave up to become private tutor to the two young Barons von Kleist. In 1771 he travelled with them to Strasbourg, where he met Goethe. When Goethe left for a journey with one of the Kleist brothers, Lenz was introduced to Friederike Brion, Goethe's friend, and fell in love with her. He became notorious as "Goethe's ape".

Five years later, in March 1776, he arrived in Weimar, where Goethe had now settled. Goethe did his best to be kind to him, but Lenz behaved so eccentrically that he was asked to leave in December of that year. He then visited Goethe's brother-in-law at Emmendingen, moved on to Colmar, where he stayed with G.C. Pfeffel, and then to Switzerland. There he stayed with Christoph Kaufmann from November 1777 to January 1778, and suffered his first attack of insanity. Kaufmann sent him to Oberlin's vicarage in the Steintal and later visited him there with Lisette Ziegler, his fiancée. This is the period of Büchner's story. Although Lenz's mental state gradually improved after his removal to Strasbourg, he was

taken back to Lithuania in 1779, fell into obscurity and died near Moscow in 1792.

Büchner's material provided him with all the facts and some of the circumstances; but all the descriptions of landscapes – landscapes seen through the eyes of Lenz – and of Lenz's thoughts and feelings are Büchner's contribution. This synthesis of fact and imagination is characteristic of Büchner's work; for he hated Idealism in philosophy and Romanticism in literature. His alternative to these two dominant trends of his time was so disturbingly individual that his works were not appreciated until more than half a century after his death. Since then they have been admired by writers of every school, from the Naturalists to the Symbolists and Expressionists. Some of the finest German prose of this century – such as Hofmannsthal's *Andreas* fragment – shows the unmistakable influence of *Lenz*.

M.H.

Chronology

- 1813 Born on 17th October at Goddelau near Darmstadt, the son of a doctor.
- 1831 Matriculated as a medical student from Strasbourg University and moved to the University of Giessen.
- 1833 Secret engagement to Minna Jaeglé, daughter of his landlord in Strasbourg.
- 1834 Ill with meningitis and went home to recuperate. Began revolutionary activities in a Society for Human Rights. Wrote revolutionary pamphlet *Der Hessische Landbote* with Pastor F.L. Weidig. This pamphlet was seized by the government and his fellow revolutionaries were arrested. Pastor Weidig was tortured and committed suicide.
- 1835 Wrote *Dantons Tod* to raise money for his journey to Strasbourg, where he fled without his father's knowledge. A warrant was issued for his arrest. Lost interest in active politics. Translated *Lucrece Borgia* and *Marie Tudor* by Victor Hugo. Wrote *Lenz*.

- 1836 Presented his thesis on the nervous system of the barbel to the *Société d'Histoire Naturelle* and was awarded his doctorate. Wrote *Leonce und Lena*. Moved to Zürich and became a lecturer on the comparative anatomy of fishes and amphibia. Probably wrote *Woyzeck* at the end of the year.
- 1837 Died 19th February of typhus aged twenty-three.
- 1850 Edition of his works.
- 1879 Edition of his works.
- 1902 First performance of *Dantons Tod*.
- 1911 First performance of *Leonce und Lena*.
- 1913 First performance of *Woyzeck*.

One other play, *Pietro Aretino*, has been lost, probably destroyed by his fiancée after his death.

Lenz

ON THE 20TH OF JANUARY, Lenz went across the mountains. The summits and the high slopes covered with snow, grey stones all the way down to the valleys, green plains, rocks and pine trees.

It was damp and cold; water trickled down the rocks and gushed over the path. The branches of the pine trees drooped heavily in the moist air. Grey clouds travelled in the sky, but all was so dense – and then the mist rose like steam, slow and clammy, climbed through the shrubs, so lazy, so awkward. Indifferently he moved on; the way did not matter to him, up or down. He felt no tiredness, only sometimes it struck him as unpleasant that he could not walk on his head.

At first there was an urge, a movement inside him, when the stones and rocks bounded away, when the grey forest shook itself beneath him and the mist now blurred its outlines, now half unveiled the trees' gigantic limbs; there was an urge, a movement inside him, he looked for something, as though for lost dreams, but

he found nothing. All seemed so small to him, so near, so wet. He would have liked to put the whole earth to dry behind the stove, he could not understand why so much time was needed to descend a steep slope, to reach a distant point; he thought that a few paces should be enough to cover any distance. Only from time to time, when the storm thrust clouds into the valley, and the mist rose in the forest, when the voices near the rocks awoke, now like thunder subsiding far away, now rushing back towards him, as if in their wild rejoicing they desired to sing the praise of earth, and the clouds like wild neighing horses galloped towards him, and the sunshine pierced in between and came to draw a flashing sword against the snow-covered plains, so that a bright, dazzling light cut across the summits into the valleys; or when the gale drove the clouds downwards and hurled them into a pale-blue lake, and then the wind died down and from the depths of the ravines, from the crests of the pine trees drifted upwards, with a humming like that of lullabies and pealing bells, and a soft red hue mingled with the deep azure, and little clouds on silver wings passed across, and everywhere the mountain tops, sharp and solid, shone and glittered

for miles – then he felt a strain in his chest, he stood struggling for breath, heaving, his body bent forwards, his eyes and mouth wide open; he thought that he must draw the storm into himself, contain it all within him, he stretched himself out and lay on the earth, dug his way into the All, it was an ecstasy that hurt him – he rested and laid his head into the moss and half-closed his eyes, and then it withdrew, away, far away from him, the earth receded from him, became small as a wandering star and dipped down into a roaring stream which moved its clear waters beneath him. But these were only moments; then, soberly, he would rise, resolute, calm, as though a shadow play had passed before his eyes – he remembered nothing.

Towards evening he came to the highest point of the mountain range, to the snow field from which one descended again into the flat country in the west; he sat down on the top. It had grown calmer towards evening; the cloud formations, constant and motionless, hung in the sky; as far as the eyes could reach, nothing but summits from which broad stretches of land descended, and everything so still, so grey, lost in twilight. He experienced a feeling of terrible loneliness; he was