Writing Sample: Polyphony and Peculiar Consciousness in Büchner's *Lenz*

Note: This writing sample is excerpted from my 20,000-word honors literature thesis: "The Voices Awakened on the Rocks": An Explication of Polyphony & Peculiar Consciousness in Georg Büchner's Lenz. My analysis attends to how the fragmented and interwoven narrative voices structurally reflect Lenz's disintegrating ontological boundaries. It demonstrates that, instead of privileging an investigation of the conditions that create the desire for transcendence as many Romantic-period writers do, Büchner's Lenz breaks from Romanticism by causally connecting the desire for transcendence to a hostile fragmentation of consciousness and thus ought to be read as a precursor to modernism and its crises.

Georg Büchner's *Lenz* begins with a typical scene in Romantic literature, even hackneyed by this point in literary history: a protagonist journeying through nature, likely seeking the sublime. The novella's first eight lines describe the mountains and the protagonist's dispassion for his particular route until, as the 1988 translator puts it, "without warning, comes a sentence almost like a blow" (Rappolt 49). It states: "He felt no fatigue, except sometimes it annoyed him that he could not walk on his head" (Büchner 3).[1] The phrase immediately ruptures the novella's realm of possibilities by expressing a desire to literally and figuratively flip it on its head. It foregrounds that, unlike Samuel Taylor Coleridge's speaker in the Romantic poem "The Eolian Harp," for instance, who uses the poetic imagination—and its higher reason—to experience "the one Life within us and abroad," Lenz will somehow subvert, or invert, the Romantic dynamic between artist, artistic sensibility, and divinity (Coleridge 27).[2] While the Coleridgean speaker feels like an instrument of God as the wind-struck eolian harp, Lenz's orientation towards the natural setting he is in does nothing but irritate and unsettle him. In "The Meridian," poet Paul Celan claims that, as one who walks on his head, Lenz experiences the heavens as an abyss below him, revealing a world no longer whole, stable, or certain (Celan 46).

Following the opening of this abyss, Lenz hears how "voices awakened on the rocks, like far-echoing thunder at first and then approaching in strong gusts, sounding as if they wanted to chant the praises of the earth in their wild rejoicing, and the clouds galloped by like wild whinnying horses…" (Büchner 5). Hearing voices in nature that praise and rejoice the earth clearly has Romantic undertones. Moreover, the setting of an incoming storm suggests Lenz could be on the verge of a sublime experience. But the sentence does not end on that hopeful sentiment; it goes on for nineteen more lines, each of which grows increasingly darker and unsettling as multiple narrative voices describe how the storm's phenomenal voices disturb and isolate him.[3] The portrayal of Lenz's increasing turmoil in

[1] "Müdigkeit spürte er keine, nur war es ihm manchmal unangenehm, daß er nicht auf dem Kopf gehn konnte" (Büchner 2).

[2] Jacob Michael Reinhold Lenz, the titular character and protagonist, is not fictional, but fictionalized by Büchner. Lenz was a 17th-century writer about whom pastor Johann Friedrich Oberlin penned a nonfictional account Kafkaesquely titled "Mr. L…" In the novella, Büchner blends fact and fiction by employing narrative voices that are partially a textual interpolation of Oberlin's text and partially his own fictional creation.

[3] In this paper, I use the word phenomenal exclusively as an adjective for phenomena/on.

this twenty-five-line sentence beginning with "Only sometimes when" moves through over thirty clauses before the adverbial phrase finds its predicate, Lenz, and:

> he would feel something tearing at his chest, he would stand there, gasping, body bent forward, eyes and mouth open wide, he was convinced he should draw the storm into himself, contain everything within himself, he stretched out and lay over the earth, he burrowed into the universe, it was a pleasure that gave him pain; or he would remain still and lay his head upon the moss and half-close his eyes and then everything receded from him, the earth withdrew from him, it became as tiny as a wandering star and dipped into a rushing stream whose clear waters flowed beneath him (Büchner 5-7).

This long and jagged sentence illustrates Lenz's first dissociative episode wherein he loses his sense of the boundaries of his self. The ambiguous word choice of "something" when "he would feel something tearing at his chest" shows that Lenz fails in identifying what tears at him. "Something" stands in for the undefined pronoun *"es"* in German, which most closely relates to the English "it," an equally vague description as "something" regarding what tears at him. The vague pronoun suggests that it could be his emotions figuratively tearing at his sense of self, it could be the force of the wind physically hurting him, or it could be that he simply cannot identify that *he* is, in fact, tearing at himself. Given these equally plausible possibilities, it is evident that Lenz cannot distinguish what belongs to him and what does not, an ontological confusion reflected also by his conviction that "he should draw the storm into himself, contain everything within himself" (7). The form also mirrors its content because this sentence violates grammatical boundaries in both German and English by putting many full grammatical beings—sentences without conjunctions or proper punctuation—into one run-on space. This depiction of a distorted version of transcendence begins the text's subversion of the ideals of the Romantic dream.

Indeed, the imagery illustrating Lenz's loss of self can easily be read as an ironic version of a transcendental experience, and its alienating result demonstrates how, from its first scene, the novella presents an anti-Romantic ideology. The image of Lenz tearing at his chest—the heart symbolizing both the life-bringing center of the body and the self's emotional locus—ironically mimics the Romantic desire to be emotionally moved by the natural world's beauty. Similarly, his desire to contain everything emulates the Romantic dream to be in harmony with the world and "feel the sublime," the capacity of which, according to German Romantic Friedrich Schiller, is "one of the most glorious dispositions in human nature" (qtd. in Moland 2.3). His desire to take the storm and its voices within himself echoes the image of the artist as the embodiment of the voice of Nature/God found in the wind that was extremely popular in 19th-century Romantic writing: Coleridge uses the image of the eolian harp; Shelley requests the wind to "Make me thy lyre" (Shelley 57); and Wordsworth employs the wind as a symbol for the presence of God, whose spirit brims over with hope and inspiration for the poet as divine vessel (Wordsworth 43). Albeit an artist, Lenz feels not moral beauty, inspiration, and harmony, but "a pleasure that gave him pain" (Büchner 7). Lenz succumbs to his sensations, which the German Romantics decidedly censure, as demonstrated by Schiller's claim that when pain threatens humans to act against reason, humans' ethical nature and higher faculties ought to resist (Moland 2.2). Moreover, the desire to become one with nature manifests itself in a rather grotesque

image when he "burrowed into the universe" (Büchner 7). So, unlike a transcendental interaction with the sublime induced by using the higher intellectual faculties of reason in conjunction with imagination that produces aesthetic and moral beauty, the source that induces the emotional movement in Lenz is ambiguous, and the result is violent isolation. Thus, while Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey" claims that "Nature never did betray / the heart that loved her" (Wordsworth 48-49), the novella demonstrates that precisely *because* Lenz seeks oneness and fails to achieve it, he feels alienated as "everything receded from him, the earth withdrew from him" (Büchner 7).

This sentence also instantiates the interwoven structure of Büchner's narration: it uses both free indirect discourse and indirect discourse as well as third-person omniscient narration between them, the distinctions of which easily become confused. When the narrator describes how Lenz "feels" invisible forces tearing at his chest, he recounts Lenz's thoughts without dialogue and uses the reporting verb of 'feel,' making that part of the sentence indirect discourse. Then, within the same sentence the narration states that "he burrowed into the universe, it was a pleasure that gave him pain," arguably an instance of *free* indirect discourse, for it describes his imagination, that he "burrowed into the universe," and his psychological sensations of fused pleasure and pain without reporting verbs (7). Through these discourses, Lenz's internal voice becomes infused with the narrator's, linking the extra-diegetic world of the narrator and the protagonist's diegetic world. The narration uses these interthreaded narrative voices to discuss how phenomenal voices, those that awakened on the rocks, cause Lenz to lose his sense of the boundaries between what is internal and external to him. By enacting this metalepsis—wherein the world of the teller and the world of the told blur into each other—the sentence further links form and content (Genette 236).

Additionally, the various tenses in the sentence obfuscate who is speaking. In a sentence where the consistent use of past simple suggests a single continuous instance, the subjunctive use of "would" when he "would feel something tearing" and "would remain still and lay his head upon the moss and half-close his eyes" intimates repetition or cyclicality, temporally fracturing the scene (Büchner 5, 7). The resultant uncertainty in narrative perspective puts readers in the same position as the protagonist––not knowing which phenomena are part of the shared world and which belong to the subject's interiority. Of course, the entire vocal chaos of the novella also necessarily occurs within readers' minds when they give voice to the text by reading it, involving another voice and interiority in the already complex mix. Thus, from its opening scene, the text subverts the Romantic dream, and its narrative construction brings attention to the voice as a means by which one can observe the complexity of conveying the fullness of human consciousness in a textual medium.

The text repeatedly produces the conditions that set up the possibility of transcendental experiences that would put Lenz in a noble Romantic mindset, especially as an artist, to whom that would appeal and be meaningful. Büchner's employment of a multivocal narrative structure to recount a speculative biography of Lenz can perhaps be read as a return to the origins of the idea that a 'text,' stems of *texĕre*, to weave, braid or fabricate. While in "Mr. L..." Oberlin tells *his* story of Lenz, Büchner uses the interwoven narrative voices—including Lenz's own—to tell Lenz's story in a way that both recreates his state of consciousness and reveals deeper aspects of reality by way of that re-creation. The narrative structure emphasizes how the voice's role in the production and reproduction of texts provides a clear

way to see the utter transience and vulnerability of the mind and how humans communicate themselves or fail to do so. Consequently, I contend that it shows that to fully represent reality, a text must conjure and reproduce the inherent instability of the systems on which it is built—to recognize the decentralizing forces of language and consciousness as Büchner does in *Lenz*. As such, to study texts is to understand the origins, patterns, and interstices of the existential threads, and the voice, in its written and oral mediums, provides the avenue of this study in *Lenz* and in life because of its similarly ambiguous nature. In turn, readers can realize the multiplicity of text, tradition, as well as individual and collective consciousness, and find that, instead of turning the world upside down, a walk on one's head may reveal its true, modern nature as no longer whole, stable, or certain.

[full sample available upon request]

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