Big Punning, Large Troping and Huge Riddling: Why and how Macbeth and other narrative texts are important and how to deal with them

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Abstract

In William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* the narrative takes place at the interface between the auto/biographical and the social. The story is focused on the level of the state and polis, but also on a human level, and Macbeth's conflict with the idea of society as a static model is a social act. The usefulness of the literary for sociology is emphasised in Macbeth's narrative and its moves from minor to major. The sociological study of literature connects important proto-sociological insights to sociology more formally: narratives are everywhere, pervasive in sociology as a discipline as much as in literature, and more strongly society is based on the literary in the sense that narratives provide a route into collective and frequently political processes. It is not just that 'the play's the thing', as Shakespeare wrote, but more generally that the text - the text of any document - though a close analysis of its structure, organisation, tropes, characterisation, plot developments and so on, is important in opening up for analytical scrutiny a particular viewpoint on social mores. Tilly's emphasis is on material realities, but literary ideas and tools are highly relevant to accomplishing his aims for sociology. Looking from sociology to literature to society and back again is a huge comparison, fantastical but metaphorically real; and in the case of Macbeth, the textual means and moralities by which persons engage with the polis provides insights into such matters outside, as well as inside, the text.

Keywords: *Sociology of Literature, Cultural Sociology, Textual Analysis*

Introduction: On Tillification and the text

1.1 The ideas of Charles Tilly (1929-2008) should be interesting to sociologists when thought about in connection with literary texts, the focus of my discussion. His *Big Structures Large Processes Huge Comparisons* (1984) is adamant about the importance of storied narratives, albeit critically so. The vision of society which is championed is grounded at the human level, seeing the major and the minor as mutually constitutive: 'In tracing the encounters of individuals and groups with the big structures and large processes, we make the necessary link between personal experience and the flow of history' (Tilly 1984: 64). Stories are seen to be integral to human narrative as devices through which a cultural position is located. In these terms, the condition of being at the end of a story is not only a release but also a moment of anxiety. To be at the end of a narrative, from where there is nowhere in particular to go, is to go from point to point and back again (Bhabha 1994: 1). Consequently an over-arching narrative is necessary for human understanding - a need which is emphasised in Tilly's (2002) *Stories, Identities and Political Change*: 'For reasons that lie deep in childhood learning, cultural immersion, or perhaps even in the structure of human brains, people usually recount, analyze, judge, remember, and reorganize social experiences as *standard stories* in which a small number of self-motivated entities interact within a constricted, contiguous time and space. Although prior and externally imposed conditions enter standard stories as accidents, fatalities, and constraints, all meaningful action occurs as consequences of the designated actors' deliberations and impulses' (Tilly 2002: 8). Characters, and character as such, are all-important. Stories are moral tales, fables even if told or performed by other means. The action may be focused on individuals, but their action is illustrative of what the abstract individual should do, and thus of social conventions and idioms. The fable as literature is in effect a conduct manual: 'Brief, incongruous, effective: a miniature story representing graphically a familiar truth' (Blackham 1985: xii). When people are unsure of what to do, a simple story is socially instructive.

1.2 The sociology of literature is a vibrant field. Most recently, the 'status and possible future' of the sub-

discipline has been discussed in Jonathan Eastwood's critique of Pierre Bourdieu's usage of the novelist Gustav Flaubert. In Eastwood's view, Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* was seen in Bourdieu's terms as a field of power, and the characters as agents in social space (Eastwood 2007: 150, 154). In this lens, the literary text is a laboratory for experiments in social thought, in which social change is caused by the inter-relationships of fictional characters. Yet, as literary writers are not sociologists, literary texts are written in excess of sociological models and may well be challenging as well as complementary for the sociologist. Usually, the object of the literary text is not how things happen, but what it would mean for something to happen in a particular way. In tragedy, the important question is what it would mean for things to happen in the wrong way - and this is one of the major questions in Tilly's sociology. One of his pleas was for the recognition that the world was not controllable in the simplistic manner in which at least some sociologists had become accustomed. Sociology, he proposed, was in need of 'historically grounded models of large social changes as substitutes for the timeless, unhistorical models sociologists commonly apply to the same changes'; and the present was not its own master but potentially a prisoner of the past, because 'we live in history and cannot escape it by assuming it away; when something happens, what has happened before shapes how it happens, and with what consequences' (Tilly 1981: xiii). Towards the end of Tilly's career, this insight was turned in a more philosophical direction. Sociology was a tragic discipline as sociological abstractions were often foiled by circumstances: 'Both personal experience and professional studies of social processes, after all, had led me to think that people rarely accomplish exactly what they consciously plan, and constantly find events unrolling differently from what they had anticipated' (Tilly 2006: ix). This view of sociologists at a distance from events is resonant with the thoughts of his close contemporary Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) on the disappointed spectator at the end of the game: 'It is complete, he says. / And yet: he regrets that it does not roll along as it should roll along. As it should have rolled along if he, himself, had been holding the string. / Or all the strings' (Derrida 1987: 314). There is a sense of powerlessness here, that events always exceed what they are predicted and expected to be. Tilly's point is that sociologists are not the ones pulling the strings. Rather than pulling society along, sociologists are bystanders pulled by the larger historical forces of social change.

1.3 My later discussion of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is an exemplar for a wider argument. In tragedy, things roll back to where they were. Tragedy is a fantasy in which the errors are wiped clean by death. The world is turned upside down and then destroyed in readiness to be turned over once more, but this time the right way up. The ultimate correction is an excuse for a flight of fantasy, where the vision of social life is far in excess of what would be normally be conceivable (Hall 1997: 125). This creative position is the fantasy of Derrida's sociological spectator, safe to play with ideas in the knowledge that the starting point will be available again: 'How would he, himself, have played with the kind of yo-yo that is thrown in front of, or beneath oneself, and which returns as if by itself, in other words in order to *let it return*' (Derrida 1987: 314).

1.4 In Tilly's understanding of social structure, this elasticity of order is functional in the real life of society as a process of return. The core of social life is a set of processes that are recurrent: 'The practice of social scientists depends on a close analogy between the social behaviour under study and the operation of an idealized market. / Yet just as real markets consist of shifting, constructed social relations among limited numbers of actors, other social structures begin with interactions among persons. When we discover that some of these interactions recur in approximately the same form, we can reasonably begin to speak of social structure' (Tilly 1984: 27). Even when the grand narrative of a period is over, the memory of its social interactions may be ongoing.

1.5 This was the response of Tilly, along with Derrida, to the revolutions in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s (Derrida 1994: 10). The first sub-heading in Tilly's *European Revolutions, 1492-1992* is 'Revolution's Return' (Tilly 1993: 1). Moments of revolution are always in the background, as social break-ups are part of social structure's cultural imagination. Violence is an ever-present threat - a threat situated firmly within social life, after 9/11, in Tilly's (2003) *Politics of Collective Violence*. His preface about the process of writing this book is equally applicable to his sense of the social order: 'Human life is one mistake after another. We make mistakes, detect them, repair them, then go on to make more mistakes. Errors and error correction fill our days. If we are lucky, smart, or surrounded by helpful critics, error correction outweighs error, so that competence and knowledge actually improve - at least for a while' (Tilly 2003: xi). There is always a fall, but also always a return, however temporary.

1.6 At the conjuncture of feminism and poststructuralism in the mid-1980s, the big structures of society were viewed as major bodies which were heavily muscular but also vulnerable to a fall. The process of 'giving meaning to the world' was regarded as a network of multiple possibilities, and some of those on the margins were seen as a possible alternative to the inequality in the ruling systems (Weedon 1987: 35). This concept of the discursive field as an open space with the potential for liberation was akin to Tilly's emphasis on the molecular relations between individuals and groups (1984: 12). The localised places of practice at a distance from the routine oppression of the political machine were perceived as enclaves with the power to resist: not to overthrow the mastery by becoming authoritarian in its place, but to unravel the big structures of opposition through alternative forms of practice (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 26-7).

1.7 *William Shakespeare* by the literary critic Terry Eagleton, a commentary on the playwright's work, was a product of this intellectual moment. In Eagleton's view, *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (the first play to be analysed in his text) is about a realm of non-method, 'of non-meaning and poetic play' at the margins, 'which has its own kind of truth' (Eagleton 1986: 2). Eagleton's critique was against the regime of truth which was established in the information revolution of the eighteenth century, a process which is characterised in Thomas Osborne's historical analysis as 'the emergence of a new, loose-knit corps of authorities who saw themselves speaking in the name of a universal reason' (Osborne 1998: 13). In the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, these self-appointed guardians of truth are simply new churches. The science of method is not truth; truth is not reducible to science. Universal judgment is yet more prejudice: 'The overcoming of all prejudices, this global demand of the enlightenment, will prove to be itself a prejudice [...] Reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms, ie it is not its own master, but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates' (Gadamer 1979: 244, 245).

1.8 My series of tropes in discussing *Macbeth* follows Gadamer's notion of a 'circular structure of understanding' which 'is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle' but in which 'is hidden a positive possibility' (1979: 236). Apprehensions are undermined productively. Prejudices are there to be brought into play and exposed, sometimes painfully; language is a web of experiments in formulation; dialogues are encounters in which strange views are absorbed; their horizons come into play and expose each to new ways of seeing beyond what can be perceived from a single vantage point; and their universals are challenged with negation as modified universals are brought into play, to be overturned in turn.

1.9 The aim of my discussion of *Macbeth* is to find a place for this conceptual framework, 'to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves' [...] (which, in the case of the literary critic, are meaningful texts, which themselves are again concerned with objects)' (Gadamer 1979: 236). In Hayden White's terms, the relationship between content and form is mutually constituting. The conceptual structure is imposed to elicit more from the text 'by its revelation of the deeper meaning of the events that it depicts through their characterization in figurative language' (White 1978: 115). As the pseudo-historical narrative of Macbeth's story is adapted conceptually, 'the figurative element in the discourse is brought to the surface of the text, formalized by abstraction, and treated as the 'theory' that guides both the investigation of the events and their representation' (White 1978: 115). As certain scenes are interpreted in deliberate fashions, this theoretical form influences 'not only the manner, but also the matter and meaning' of the text, re-shaping the discursive content into a fresh cut (White 1978: 115). In my theoretical narrative, the subject is thrown back on itself by its own deeds.

Prejudices and the play's the thing

2.1 In Shakespeare's tragedy, Macbeth is a noble in medieval Scotland during a civil war. In Act 1 Scene 2, the King and his loyalists are told on the field of battle by a sergeant that Macbeth has been true to their cause, having killed the rebel Macdonald, slicing him navel to jaw: 'For brave Macbeth - well he deserves that name - / Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel / Which smoked with bloody execution, / Like Valour's minion carved out his passage / Till he faced the slave - / Which ne'er shook hands nor bade farewell to him, / Till he unseamed him from the navel to the chaps, / And fixed his head upon our battlements' (Shakespeare 1990: 97 1.2.16-23).

2.2 This scene establishes the play as a story of the 'authentically human' (Eagleton 1986: 3). Macdonald's evil is conjured in the nightmarish form of the beast, a stinking insect-man covered in flies. The in-authentically human is seen as derivative of the non-human (Guignon 2004: 81). In his fetid state this Beelzebub is 'Worthy to be a rebel, for to that / The multiplying villainies of nature / Do swarm upon him' (Shakespeare 1990: 96 1.2.10-12). Macbeth's character, onto which the self-image of the loyalist campaigner is projected, is the embodiment of the clean-cut action hero, the saintly crusader. His violence is glamorised: His sword is 'his brandished steel / Which smoked with bloody execution', and his 'bloody execution' is carried out as a performance of justice. Macdonald has been penetrated like a slaughtered animal, and his wickedness - the inhumane obscenity which is seen on the inside - has been exorcised, cast out into the netherworld at a stroke. As in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, the fear of otherness is quenched with a violent purge. In the communal recollection of the graphic details, the taking of a life is 'like a long, satisfying drink' (Golding 1954: 105).

2.3 Macbeth's conception of authentic humanity is the constancy of feudal obligation in his 'hierarchical allegiance' to the system, and not the betrayals of 'transgression' in which the father-figure, and the state, is placed in jeopardy (Eagleton 1986: 3, 4). Macbeth's filial obedience is articulated in his words to the King in Act 1 Scene 4: 'The service and the loyalty I owe, / In doing it, pays itself. / Your highness' part, is to receive our duties; / And our duties are to your throne and state, / Children and servants, which do but what they should / By doing everything safe toward your love / And honour' (Shakespeare 1990: 109 1.4.22-8).

2.4 The tragedy of Macbeth is that, in the remainder of the play, the disobedience at the margins is destined to penetrate his consciousness and expose the capitalistic 'private ends' which are behind his attachment to authority (Eagleton 1986: 4). This wilfulness is there to push the sensitive soul to a new, disturbing account of itself in which the evil inside the self is acknowledged (Nietzsche 1997: 12 §9). The presupposition at the outset is that our side is fair and the other is foul: yet 'we cannot hold blindly to our own fore-meaning of the thing if we would understand the meaning of another. [...] All that is asked is that we remain open [...] placing the other meaning in a relation with the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in a relation to it. [...] [T]his type of sensitivity involves [...] the conscious assimilation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices' (Gadamer 1979: 238). The dominant view of existence is there to be put on trial.

Languages: who speaks and how

3.1 Meanwhile, in Act 1 Scene 3, we have seen Macbeth walking across the heath with his comrade Banquo. Their conversation is casual, making light of the battle (Macbeth: 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen.' / Banquo: - How far is't called for? -' (Shakespeare 1990: 102 1.3.38-9)), but their path is blocked by the appearance of three witches: - 'What are these, / So withered, and so wild in their attire, / That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth / And yet are on't?' (Shakespeare 1990: 102 1.3.39-42). The witches' purpose is to communicate a prophecy that Macbeth will one day be the father of the kingdom - 'All hail Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter' - and that Banquo will one day be the father of such figures: 'Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none' (Shakespeare 1990: 103 1.3.50; 67).

3.2 Macbeth's immediate disquiet is noted in Banquo's remarks: 'Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?' (Shakespeare 1990: 103 1.3.51-2). The truth is that to become king is Macbeth's latent ambition, which is enflamed by the witches' prophecy. Even when stressing his fidelity in conversation with the King in Act 1 Scene 4, his thoughts are wandering from his piety. His aside is an admission that his respect has become a façade which can be seen through: 'Stars hide your fires, / Let

not light see my black and deep desires' (Shakespeare 1990: 110 1.4.51-2). The old narrative of authentic humanity is coming to be disrupted in his mind.

3.3 Whereas in Act 1 Scene 1 his 'bloody execution' was highly-prized, now, in Act 1 Scene 7, its capacity to 'return' is feared. His hope is 'that but this blow / Might be the be-all and the end-all – here' (Shakespeare 1990: 117 1.7.4-5), but the risk, he tells himself, is that his act may come back to haunt his future self, in 'that we but teach / Bloody instructions, which being taught, return / To plague th'inventor' (Shakespeare 1990: 118 1.7.8-10). His tendency for brutality is mutating from a positive attribute of loyalty to the King into some other, terrifyingly murderous alter-ego which is taking over his subjectivity. His awareness of the birth of evil within his consciousness is felt as a sudden loss of youthful innocence, threatening baldness and palpitations: '[W]hy do I yield to that suggestion / Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs / Against the use of nature?' (Shakespeare 1990: 107 1.3.135-8).

3.4 The formulation of the incredible deed in Macbeth's consciousness is butchering his self-image: 'Language [...] overwhelms and dismembers the body [...] When language is cut loose from reality [...] the result is a radical fissure between consciousness and material life' (Eagleton 1986: 7). Until the anticipated act is performed, Macbeth's capacity for making material his inner wishes is clouded: 'My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, / Shakes so my single state of man, that function / Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is / But what is not' (Shakespeare 1990: 107 1.3.140-3). Everything in his head is unborn, yet to be carried into being, as his ends are divorced from his 'function', his means to those ends.

3.5 This interior state of 'surmise' is paradoxically the essence of language. Words are not an apparatus of ends, but the medium in which life is lived: 'The process of communication is not a mere action, a purposeful activity, a setting-up of signs, through which I transmit my will to others. Communication as such, rather, [...] is a living process in which a community of life is lived out' (Gadamer 1979: 404). The witches are ambivalent about their ends in communicating the destiny of the crown, and are inactive in bringing their prophecy to fruition, but their intervention is impregnating Macbeth's thoughts with potential actions. Macbeth's desire for knowledge of their purpose is frustrated by their enigmatic roguishness: 'Say from whence / You owe this strange intelligence, or why / Upon this blasted heath you stop our way / With such prophetic greeting? Speak, I charge you' (Shakespeare 1990: 104 1.3.75-8). There is no response ['*Witches vanish*']. Without answers from the external world, the historical logic of origins and reasons is displaced by the interpersonal dynamic of communication.

Dialogues: who talks to whom

4.1 In Act 1 Scene 5, the King and his retinue are due to stay at the Macbeths' residence, and Macbeth's wife, Lady Macbeth, convinces him to kill his guest. Her instruction is Eagleton's 'radical fissure between consciousness and material life', a duplicity in which the sunny countenance is divorced from the creepy mind: '[T]o beguile the time, / Look like the time, bear welcome in your eye, / Your hand, your tongue - look like th'innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't' (Shakespeare 1990: 114 1.5.62-5). Her intervention is the unscrupulous voice of the 'bourgeois individualist, for whom traditional ties of rank and kinship are less constitutive of personal identity than mere obstacles to be surmounted in the pursuit of one's private ends' (Eagleton 1986: 4).

4.2 In Act 2 Scene 1 Macbeth does so the deed, after an internal dialogue in which he hallucinates about his dagger, and talks to himself and to the dagger. The hand, being good, is unable to grasp the weapon which is grasped in the mind's eye: 'Is this a dagger which I see before me, / The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee. / I have thee not, and yet I see thee still' (Shakespeare 1990: 124 2.1.34-6). His bloodiness, having formerly been expressed outwardly, is internalised, drenching his consciousness: 'Mine eyes are made the fools o'th' other senses, / Or else worth all the rest. I see thee still; / And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood, / Which was not so before. There's no such thing, / It is the bloody business which informs / Thus to mine eyes' (Shakespeare 1990: 124 2.1.45-50).

4.3 Banquo's consciousness is also disturbed by suspicion that 'bloody business' is afoot. When Banquo discovers the murder, he calls a conference to 'question this most bloody piece of work, / To know it further' (Shakespeare 1990: 138 2.3.130-1). Earlier that night, he calls out to the gods to buttress his nature against the forebodings in his own soul: '[M]erciful powers, / Restrain in me the cursèd thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose' (Shakespeare 1990: 122 2.1.8-10). His prior misgivings are made clear in his conversation with Macbeth a few lines later in the same night. Macbeth, sensing that Banquo is suspicious, attempts to placate him by insinuating that it may be worth Banquo's while to remain his ally when he (Macbeth) becomes king: 'If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis, / It shall make honour for you' (Shakespeare 1990: 123 2.1.26-7). The premise is a society in which, underneath the supposed loyalties, noblemen are 'individual entrepreneurs of the self' interested in the promise of 'political power' in 'linear time' (Eagleton 1986: 4).

4.4 However, Banquo makes it clear he is not prepared to risk his honour for the benefits of being in cahoots with Macbeth: 'So I lose none / In seeking to augment it, but still keep / My bosom franchised and allegiance clear, / I shall be counselled' (Shakespeare 1990: 123 2.1.27-30). If Macbeth's state of mind has been perverted by his unconscious, Banquo's is seen in Macbeth's eyes as a conscience. When Macbeth has killed the King and realises that Banquo's inside knowledge is a threat to his position, Macbeth, in Act 3 Scene 1, orders hitmen to dispose of Banquo - along with Banquo's son, who, even more than his father (with whom Macbeth has enjoyed a youthful comradeship), is the incarnation of the innocent youth which Macbeth now wants to purge. The outcry against Macbeth's murder is coming from the decency within his own being. The force by which his desire for mastery in his head is opposed, namely his own 'bourgeois superego or censorship', is projected into the presumed objections of Banquo, which are endowed in Macbeth's imagination with 'the utmost representable density' so as more surely, and more forcefully, to be overcome (Jameson 1981: 174).

4.5 In Act 3 Scene 3, Banquo is dispatched but his son escapes. Macbeth learns of this partial failure in Act 3 Scene 4: The innocent youth, not yet purged, is still at large and Macbeth is now a prisoner of his own forebodings about the reproachful son, 'cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears' (Shakespeare 1990: 154 3.4.24-5). In the 'dark carnival' of Macbeth's 'deranged' fever, his own 'appetite' for power is projected back onto the innocent youth, whose return to become king is to be feared (Eagleton 1986: 5). The conversations with others and with the otherness inside the self are disturbances in which firm direction is dissolved: 'As against the solidity of opinions, questioning makes the object and all its possibilities fluid' (Gadamer 1979: 330).

Horizons: who is where and with what result

5.1 Later, in Act 4 Scene 1, the play cuts back to the witches around a cauldron. Macbeth, worried about Banquo's son, comes and asks, 'What is't you do?' (Shakespeare 1990: 172 4.1.63). The witches summon apparitions from the boiling pot ('Come high or low: / Thy self and office deftly show' (Shakespeare 1990: 173 4.1.81-2), and Macbeth listens to their voices. His enquiring attitude is the openness to the strange insights of the other which is necessary in the task of questioning:

If a person is trying to understand something, he will not be able to rely from the start on his own chance previous ideas, missing as logically and stubbornly as possible the actual meaning of the text until the latter becomes so persistently audible that it breaks through the imagined understanding of it. Rather, a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something (Gadamer 1979: 238).

Prejudice is discarded, and the message of the spirit world is revealed in its 'gentleness' but also as 'a shock negating the I' (cf. Levinas 1969: 150).

5.2 So it is with Macbeth and the witches. He is ready - perhaps even too eager - for a new paradigm: - Tell me, thou unknown power- (Shakespeare 1990: 173 4.1.83) The first apparition tells Macbeth to 'beware Macduff' (Shakespeare 1990: 173 4.1.85), and the second, to '[b]e bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn / The power of man; for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth' (Shakespeare 1990: 174 4.1.93-5). The third shows Macbeth a vision of all of Banquo's royal progeny [*'A show of eight kings, the last with a glass in his hand, and Banquo'*], and Macbeth is aghast at the temporal perspective which is outlined in their speculation of the future dynasty: 'What, will the line stretch out to th' crack of doom' / Another yet? A seventh? I'll see no more- / And yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass / Which shows me many more [...] now I see 'tis true, / For the blood-baltered Banquo smiles upon me, / And points at them for his' (Shakespeare 1990: 176 4.1.132-5, 137-9).

5.3 The humiliating event of understanding is made possible by the humility of Macbeth's horizon: 'The concept of the "horizon" suggests itself because it expresses the wide, superior vision that the person who is seeking to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand - not in order to look away from it, but to see it better within a larger whole and in truer proportion' (Gadamer 1979: 272). When Lady Macbeth had fantasised aloud to Macbeth about being a queen in Act 1 Scene 5, her rapture had brought the anticipated profit into the immediate term. Macbeth's possibilities had 'transported me beyond / This ignorant present, and I feel now / The future in the instant' (Shakespeare 1990: 113-4 1.5.55-7). The necessity of the passage of time and of the numb future of death had been forgotten. In the end, however, the 'larger whole' and 'truer proportion' acquired by Macbeth is an awareness of his mortality, and of the life beyond.

Universals: what they are and for whom

6.1 Macbeth is agitated but guided by what he has learnt. He is bloody. In Act 4 Scene 2, his assassins kill Macduff's defenceless wife and son in spite as Macduff has fled to England. As a direct result, however, ambition is turned on Macbeth as, in Act 4 Scene 3, Macduff (who is guilty about having left his family unprotected and, like Macbeth, is unable to live with his guilt) resolves to come back and kill Macbeth: 'Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself, / Within my sword's length set him - if he scape, / Heaven forgive him too' (Shakespeare 1990: 193 4.3.233-5). In Act 5 Scene 7, the last scene of the play, Macduff confronts Macbeth and, when Macbeth reveals his belief in his own invulnerability to men 'of woman born', Macduff reveals that he was born by caesarean section:

Macbeth:

Thou lovest labour- [...]

I bear a charmed life, which must not yield

To one of woman born.

Macduff:

Despair thy charm,

And let the angel whom thou still hast served

Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb

Untimely ripped

(Shakespeare 1990: 208 5.7.38, 42-6).

6.2 Macbeth is appalled by the independence from the female sex in Macduff's unnatural birth: 'Accursèd be that tongue that tells me so, / For it hath cowed my better part of man' (Shakespeare 1990: 208 5.7.47-8). Yet nonetheless, even while reminded of his feminine side, he resists the disempowerment and fights on without the certainty of his victory: 'I will not yield [...] / And thou opposed, being of no woman born, / Yet I will try the last' (Shakespeare 1990: 209 5.7.57, 61-2).

6.3 Macbeth's recourse to the law of the spirits is frustrated, even without their rule being disproved, and he is thrown back on his own efforts. Yet his 'ultimate mastery [of the self] [...] will never come', as the 'unconscious' is 'dangerous' and 'is always likely to return' (Eagleton 1986: 4). The returning Macduff is Macbeth's alter-ego, turning in on itself, as Macbeth's death is the satisfaction of his own suppressed desire to have his mastery taken away and to return to nature and the feminine through death. The big whole is open to the swirling influx of feeling, the remainder of the self which escapes self-identity. The 'self-knowledge' which is supposed to impart 'protection and certainty' against 'the ultimate incomprehensibility of life' is always set against the "frightful countenance" of a nature that is not 'an intelligible whole' (Gadamer 1979: 211-2). Intense organisation falls off into a confusion of broken pieces which is, beyond the horizon, a new beginning.

Conclusion: How and why the text is the thing

7.1 Macbeth is an individual nobleman at the maturity of his political apprenticeship whose idea of finally making good is self-defeating. Yet his failure is a lesson for the whole kingdom. The most loyal servant of the crown is capable of throwing the whole system into anarchy, paradoxically through his conformity with its ideology. Macbeth is betrayed by his desire for power, caught in the contradiction between making a killing (literally and figuratively) and not breaking the law. Through the sudden intervention of the three witches, who appear when Macbeth is most at ease, Macbeth is driven to succeed. Yet when the narrative from minor to major is set in motion, the old self-image of youthful heroism is destroyed. In its aftermath, the stage is set for a narrative which is tempered by experience.

7.2 The discussion of Macbeth's failure should be instructive for sociologists as a narrative enquiry through which a literary text is explored. The story is focused on the level of the state, but also on a human level; a parallel is made between the contemporary and the historical; Macbeth is other to the selves of us as readers, but nonetheless is someone who is identifiable as one of us in his desire for power. In summary, his life is representative not only of himself as an individual but also of a collective structure of feeling (and of course, this was what underpinned Bourdieu's (1993 and 1996) interest in Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*). His conflict with the idea of society as a static model is a social act. Ultimately, his life-world is redefined when the conventional idea of culture and society as a finished product is made problematic - and then blown apart - by his initiative.

7.3 Macbeth's resistance to the lineage of his society is consonant with Raymond Williams' literary critique of sociology's 'past tense': 'What is defensible as a procedure in conscious history, where on certain assumptions many actions can be definitively taken as having ended, is habitually projected, not only into the always moving substance of the past, but into contemporary life, in which relationships, institutions and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes' (Williams 1977: 128). Macbeth's narrative imagination as a character is the narrative thrust of the text. His life is going somewhere, but is dragged unexpectedly in a different direction when he attempts to force his destiny.

7.4 The usefulness of the literary for sociology is emphasised in Macbeth's narrative from minor to major. As is pointed out in Eastwood's analysis, the sociological study of literature is 'a bridge connecting the important proto-sociological insights to sociology more generally' (Eastwood 2007: 168). The approach is not so much a history of ideas as an analysis of the psychic life of power; the attention is turned not so much to the powerful author as to the flawed characteristics of their characters. The tragic hero is exemplary as a conscience turned back on itself by the social value-system. Conscience is social, 'a mental activity that not only forms various psychic phenomena, but is itself *formed*, the consequence of a distinctive kind of internalization' (Butler 1997: 63). Narrative is crucial to the internalisation; literary characters are swimming in the narratives of their society. Narratives are everywhere, pervasive in sociology as a discipline as much as in literature (Richardson 1990: 121). Society is pervasive in the literary, as 'narratives are inherently collective processes, they pertain exactly to representations, and they frequently are political' (Maines 1993: 21). The polis is brought together by its stories as well as by its story.

7.5 And of course, as has been implicit so far, it is not just that 'the play's the thing', as Shakespeare wrote, but more generally that the text - the text of any document - though a close analysis of its structure, organisation, tropes, characterisation, plot developments and so on, is important in opening up for analytical scrutiny a particular viewpoint on social mores. As I pointed out in my Introduction, in literary (but not only literary) texts the action may be focused on individuals, but their action is illustrative of what the individual person should do, and thus opens up social conventions and idioms to inquiry (Belsey 2002: 94). In the shape of a document, established forces are confronted with their alternatives. The overcoming of tensions in textual form is indicative of whether a society's modes of being are sustainable, or whether change is necessary.

7.6 The upshot provides insight into Tilly's ideas about the big and the small. Despite Tilly's emphasis on realities, literary ideas are relevant to his sociology. His point about 'the inter-connectedness of ostensibly separate experiences' is exemplified by the sociology of literature. Looking from sociology to literature is a huge comparison, fantastical but metaphorically real. Literary texts can be engaged with the same real-life questions of modernity which are emphasised in Tilly's nod to 'the two interdependent master processes of the era: the creation of a system of national states and the formation of a worldwide capitalist system.' Those huge processes are represented symbolically through the life-stories of characters whose failings

are those of systems, but whose fate is also illustrative of the flexibility of those systems' response mechanisms. Though the literary is wayward as an approach to the large-scale movements of society, paradoxically its contribution is all the greater for its suggestiveness. The outcome is one answer to the 'trap of despair' that opens its doors when the generalist is confronted by the possibility that synthesis is impossible (Tilly 1984: 147). With big punning, large troping and huge riddling, the grand idea is deferred to the kingdom of metaphor.

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