

# Murder by Words\*

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The title of this essay comes from Hölderlin's "Remarks on *Antigone*", and the realization that in tragedy the most significant – and dangerous – acts are the words a character utters. After briefly discussing how wars and civil wars have offered the tragic imagination some of its typical materials, the essay examines two extreme cases – Sophocles' *Antigone* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* – that make certain aspects of tragic form particularly clear. In their antithetical ways, Sophocles' dialogues and Shakespeare's soliloquies illustrate the way words accompany the course of action, especially near the turning-points of Antigone's and Macbeth's existence. A brief coda on Büchner's *Danton's Death* will suggest a possible nexus between tragic form and the modern perception of history.

**Keywords:** Tragedy, Civil war, Stichomythia, Poetry, Hegel

1.

My title comes from Hölderlin's "Remarks on *Antigone*", where he writes, with his typical compression, that "[t]he Greek-tragic word is deadly-factual", and finds its logical conclusion in "the actual murder with words" (Hölderlin 1988, 113-14). At times, words kill in the literal sense: they have a coercive power from which death follows inevitably. Creon's order that Antigone be buried alive *is* her death, just as Schiller's Grand Inquisitor *de facto* executes Don Carlos by proving to King Philip that he has the politico-theological

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\* These pages were given as a Zoom lecture for the cycle "Extrema Ratio. Lezioni per questo tempo", organized by the University of Siena in 2020. In translating them, I have tried to preserve the spoken and slightly uncanny feel of that period. The three main texts used in the talk are Sophocles 1998, Shakespeare 1972 and Büchner 2012.

duty to sacrifice his son. Elsewhere, the effect is less direct, as when Pylades, in the single line he is given in the *Choephoroi*, evokes the oracles of Apollo to overcome Orestes' hesitation in front of Clytemnestra, or when Iago beguiles Othello into avenging a betrayal that has never occurred. The strategies differ, but in all cases a harrowing death is accompanied – and usually prompted – by memorable language.

Words kill, because in tragedy they are part of a conflict that becomes rapidly radicalized to the point that death becomes unavoidable. To be sure, not all plays we call tragedies lead to death, nor do all theorists associate tragedy and conflict; in the *Poetics*, for instance, tragedy consists in a “chang[e] from prosperity to adversity”, where the essential point is the shift from one extreme condition to the opposite one rather than conflict as such (Aristotle 1995, 69). The idea becomes truly central only in Hegel's *Aesthetics*:

[D]ramatic action [...] rests entirely on *collisions* of circumstances, passions, and characters [...]. Therefore what we see in front of us are certain ends individualized in living characters and very conflicting situations. (Hegel 1975, 2:1159)

“Conflicting situations”, then. But of what kind?

2.

With a struggle to death, it's almost inevitable to think of war; and, neat coincidence, the oldest tragedy we have, *Persians*, has indeed at its center one of the most famous battles in history – the Battle of Salamis. But by the time the play opens, the war is already over: a messenger reports what has happened to the Persian court, but tragedy lies *in what follows* the battle. *Agamemnon* opens with a servant, on the roof of the royal palace, at night, “like a watchdog”, to see whether a flame flares up; and it does, on Mount Ida, then Lemnos, Mount Athos, closer and closer to Argos. “Fire in the night”: the signal that Troy has fallen (and is of course burning), and that the Greeks are coming home. War – *the* war of antiquity – is over. And now tragedy begins. *Antigone*, the first choral ode:

“Beam of the sun, fairer than all that have shone before for seven-gated Thebes, finally you shone forth, eye of golden day” (Sophocles 1998, 100-4). The long night has ended, the Seven have been defeated, Thebes is saved, war is over – tragedy has already begun. *Hamlet* opens, like *Agamemnon*, at night: a group of soldiers atop a castle, nervous, talking of recent wars and wondering about current threats; a ghost in battle armor appears. But in the next scene the King sends an embassy to Norway, and the war is avoided. An army will eventually cross the stage, but is headed elsewhere. War is close, but is not *inside* the play.

A war that simultaneously *is* there, and isn't. It is there in order to shatter the constraints of ordinary life, unleashing the violence that is necessary for tragic plots. *Macbeth's* double opening: the witches – and the battle that reveals Macbeth's capacity for killing. But they're really the same thing. War is what *liberates the witches*. What was dark and unthinkable comes into the open.

War as a trigger for tragedy, then – but almost never as its core. Because war is usually waged against an external enemy – Persians, Turks, Protestants, the enemies of Brandenburg, whatever – whereas tragedy focuses on *internal* enemies. Civil war. “The war within the family”, as the French classicist Nicole Loraux has called it in a great essay (Loraux 1997): *Seven Against Thebes*, with the two brothers who kill one another in front of their city; Lear's daughters, Nero and Britannicus, Karl and Franz Moor... And then the oedipal thread of children against parents and parents against children – Oedipus, Orestes, Electra, Hamlet, Segismundo, Carlos...

Civil war, then, as the horizon of tragic form; but horizon only, because in the theater all is mediated by a handful of individuals, and the representation of politics is inevitably stylized – the war within *the family*, not within the state. Still, a couple of strong structural parallels exist. Civil wars “don't accept the legitimacy of neutrality”, writes the Italian historian Gabriele Ranzato; there is of course a “grey area' [of] all those who aren't clearly taking sides”, “an area which is usually much broader than that of actual fighters” (Ranzato 1994, xlvi, my translation); but the fighters don't recognize such a choice as legitimate, they want everyone to take sides, and if they don't, they crush them. In *Hamlet*, only Laertes

takes sides between Hamlet and the King, but whoever comes near the two antagonists ends up dead just the same – and in fact neutral characters are the first to die: Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Gertrude, and finally Laertes as well.

Rejection of neutrality; and then, “a violence that completely exceeds the finality of war”, as Ranzato puts it: “social and political contrasts, radical as they might be, are never enough to explain the cloud of violence typical of civil war” (Ranzato 1994, xlv-xlvi, my translation). Same in tragedy. Not just death, but torture, blinding, incest, mutilation, rape, dismemberment, cannibalism: *Bacchae*, *Oedipus*, Seneca, *Lear*, the Jacobean, Lenz’s *Soldaten*, *Penthesilea*, *Lulu*...

### 3.

How does one speak of a literary genre that has existed for twenty-five centuries in half an hour? One solution is to look for the ‘center’ of the genre. “*Tristram Shandy*”, wrote Shklovsky in *Theory of Prose*, “is the most typical novel in world literature” (Shklovsky 1991, 170). You understand Sterne, you understand all novels. Shklovsky was perhaps the greatest literary theorist of the past century, but on this point he was wrong, and I will do exactly the opposite of what he recommends: instead of looking for *the* tragedy that synthesizes them all, I will focus on two extreme and almost unrepeatable cases. (Ideally, I would like to write a book on tragedy entirely composed of extreme cases, as so many signposts for the forces that shape its form.)<sup>2</sup>

First extreme case: *Antigone*. The attack of the Seven has been rejected, Eteocles and Polynices have killed each other, the interim sovereign of Thebes, Creon, has decreed that Eteocles be buried with every honor, having defended the city, while Polynices, who has led the enemy army, is to be left unburied, prey to dogs and birds. Antigone, Polynices’ sister, disobeys and covers the corpse. A guard discovers her and drags her in front of Creon:

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<sup>1</sup> That extreme cases embody the forces that act on a form, and hence help us understand them, is an argument I have developed in “A Passion for Anomaly: Exceptions, Norms, Extreme Cases, Carlo Ginzburg”, forthcoming in *False Movement: On the Quantitative Turn in Literary Study*.

CREON

Do you admit you have done this, or do you deny it?

ANTIGONE

I say that I did it, and I do not deny it.

[...]

CREON

And did you know of the edict that prohibited it?

ANTIGONE

I knew. How could I not? It was clear. (Sophocles 1998, 442-43, 447-48)

Much has been written about the values – political autocracy and family piety – that Creon and Antigone stand for; here, though, I will focus less on what they say than on *how* they say it: that is to say, on dialogue. To us, the use of dialogue in a play seems perfectly natural, but it isn't: as Figure 1 shows, this is not how tragedy began.

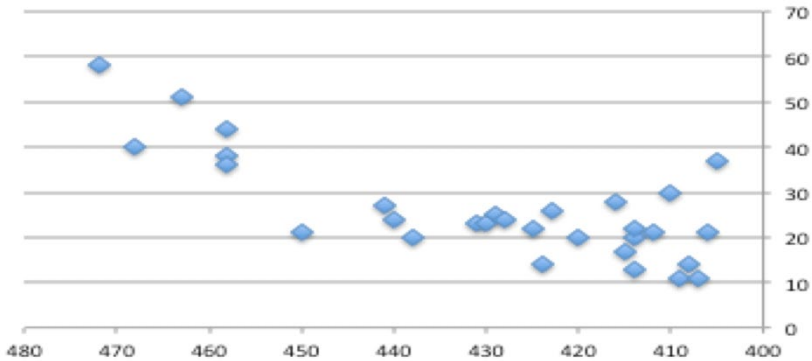


Fig. 1: This chart indicates the percentage of tragic language assigned in Athenian tragedies to messengers and the chorus, the two groups who are *de facto* excluded from dramatic dialogue, as messengers merely report what has happened off scene, while the chorus mostly sings and comments (and its dialogic function is quite *sui generis*). Early on, about half of the text was not in dialogue, though this part drops to 20% or less at the end of the century, while dialogue increases correspondingly from about half to 80-90% of the play.

If dialogue was not the birth of tragedy, it was however the form towards which tragedy quickly evolved, and the reason is simple:

dialogue is *where language and conflict meet*. In its exchanges, conflict is not something that is spoken about, it is *the very way people speak*. Not content, but form. “Alles ist Rede gegen Rede”, “speech against speech”, writes Hölderlin in his “Remarks on *Oedipus*” (Hölderlin 2003, 201). And Hegel:

[T]he completely dramatic form is the *dialogue*. For in it alone can the individual agents express face to face [...] [the] ethically justified “pathos” which they assert against one another [...] in solid and cultivated objective language. (Hegel 1975, 2:1172-73, 1214-15)

A conflict to death, expressed “face to face” (“gegeneinander”, “one against the other”; an adverb Hegel uses in several similar passages of the *Aesthetics*) by antagonists with equally “justified” values. The Greek capacity to have enemies speak to each other is incredible. *Persians*: in the oldest surviving tragedy there isn’t a single Greek: only those who tried to destroy Greece, and almost did. What made possible this readiness to give the enemy strong arguments and to *listen* to them while in the middle of a deadly conflict – what made this possible then and unimaginable now – is, I think, the crux of a political anthropology of tragedy. Unfortunately, I see the problem, but not the solution.

#### 4.

Creon: the sovereign, a man, adult, in power, surrounded by guards. Antigone: a young woman, alone; from the royal lineage, true, but the disproportion is glaring. Dialogue balances their forces. It’s the form by which *a counterpoint to power is created*. Stichomythia, one verse each – according to Adolf Gross, about 40% of *Oedipus the King* was in stichomythia (Gross 1905, 49-51) – is the textbook example:

CREON

Do you admit you have done this, or do you deny it?

ANTIGONE

I say that I did it, and I do not deny it.

[...]

CREON

And did you know of the edict that prohibited it?

ANTIGONE

I knew. How could I not? It was clear. (Sophocles 1998, 442-43, 447-48)

“How could I not? It was clear”. It is (also) this absolute *clarity* that makes *Antigone* a limit case. Human beings fear clarity and hate it, wrote the young Lukács in “The Metaphysics of Tragedy” – and even in tragedy, we will see, clarity isn’t always a given. But in *Antigone*, it’s unmistakable. (With a stroke of genius, Straub and Huillet staged it under the midday sun.) Words kill by burning all the bridges. They are as sharp as an act; they foreground the act. “I did it”: “to do”, “to act” is a key semantic field here. The first time the Guard comes on stage, he immediately says: “I didn’t do the deed” (239). And later, when he returns with Antigone: “Here is the one who did the deed” (384).

In a clash between family and *polis*, one is tempted to think that Antigone’s deed is what any family member would do – that hers is an “immediate” ethical action, as Hegel has it. But it isn’t. The play opens with Antigone and Ismene, Polynices’ two sisters, and the very first line evokes their common bond (which Hölderlin condensed in the spellbinding “Gemeinsamschwesterliches”, “shared substance of our being sisters”) as if to underline that the two sisters are indeed one. But Ismene refuses to do what Antigone does. Antigone’s act is not natural, *it’s a choice*, and to leave absolutely no doubt about it, Sophocles has her bury Polynices *twice*. Repetition is frequent in tragedies – Segismundo ‘dreams’ his freedom twice in Calderón, Herod sentences Mariamne to death twice – because it *eliminates chance*. Tragedy wants *decisions*. “Stop, Herod”, says Mariamne in Hebbel’s play:

You have perhaps

This very instant your fate in your hands

And can direct it wheresoever you please.

The moment comes for every human being

When our star’s charioteer hands over to us

The rein of fate. This only is awful

That we don’t know that moment (*Herod und Mariamne*, III.vi)

Antigone knows the moment. She not only buries Polynices, she *proclaims* it. “I say that I did it” (and she had already announced it to Ismene *before* acting). Saying it aloud makes the act explicit, public. It claims a legitimacy for it. It means *owning* it: “Hades and those below know to whom the deed belongs” (542). Fantastic formulation of the unity of agent and action. Tragic life is that which is condensed in a single act, wrote Lukács in *Soul and Form*, and *Antigone* is the perfect example.

5.

From one extreme case to its opposite. Macbeth, at a banquet, surrounded by the Scottish nobles; he’s about to sit down, when Banquo’s ghost appears:

MACBETH [to the ghost]  
Thou canst not say, I did it. (Shakespeare 1972, III.iv.49)

“I say [...] I did it”: “Thou canst not say, I did it”. Earlier, when Macbeth has just killed Duncan, Lady Macbeth realizes he’s still holding the dagger, and tells him to take it back and smear with blood the drunken guards who will be accused of the murder:

MACBETH  
I’ll go no more:  
I am afraid to think what I have done;  
Look on’t again I dare not. (II.ii.49-51)

“I am afraid to think what I have done”. Instead of being brought into the sphere of language, Macbeth’s is a “deed without a name”, as the witches will mumble (IV.i.49). Unsayable – yet always pressing to come out. Just before the murder:

MACBETH  
If it were done, when ’tis done, then ’twere well  
It were done quickly: [...]. (I.vii.1-2)



The future murder is everywhere here, but hidden in that microscopic “it”: the neuter pronoun, as if to distance it from all that is human. Nothing’s happened yet, but the verb “to do” appears as a past participle, like a sinister toll – “done”, “done”, “done” – that has each time a slightly different sense (“finished”, “executed”, “acted”). Subjunctive, indicative, conditional, subjunctive again: the modes that demarcate the actual from the possible are here so jumbled together that the border between the real and the imaginary is wholly destabilized. And all in three seconds! Thirteen monosyllables, the only slight slowdown coming with that “quickly” (whose meaning is of course the opposite of “slow”). And then, the change of pace:

If it were done, when ’tis done, then ’twere well  
 It were done quickly: if th’assassination  
 [...] (I.vii.1-2)

It’s like a bomb: moral enormity, turned into sound. Theories of tragedy are always uneasy when they have to explain the pleasure we take in them: they’re so horrible, these stories, why do we enjoy them so much? Passages like this suggest a possible answer: we don’t enjoy the ‘what’, but the ‘how’: the pleasure of linguistic creativity, of complexity – of *poetry*. What can we do with words – what can Shakespeare do, anyway?

But... “If it were done, when ’tis done, then ’twere well. / It were done quickly”. When you hear it, it’s not that easy. A couple of scenes earlier, Lady Macbeth reflects on about her husband’s personality:

thou’dst have, great Glamis,  
 That which cries, “Thus thou must do”, if thou have it;  
 And that which rather thou dost fear to do,  
 Than wishest should be undone. (I.v.22-25)

Imagine this in the theater, where words exist for a second, then vanish. Hegel’s theory of tragic conflict required the perfect *clarity* of the clashing positions – as was indeed the case in *Antigone*.

Passages like this show how incredibly *opaque* tragic language can be. Why?

6.

Let me take a step back. Shakespeare's tragic 'poetry' doesn't occur just anywhere in his plays: typically, it's to be found in soliloquies, which are usually reserved to the protagonist. This choice destroys the balance dialogue had created, as can be seen in the histograms of Figures 2-3 that show the distributions of words in *Antigone* and in *Macbeth*.

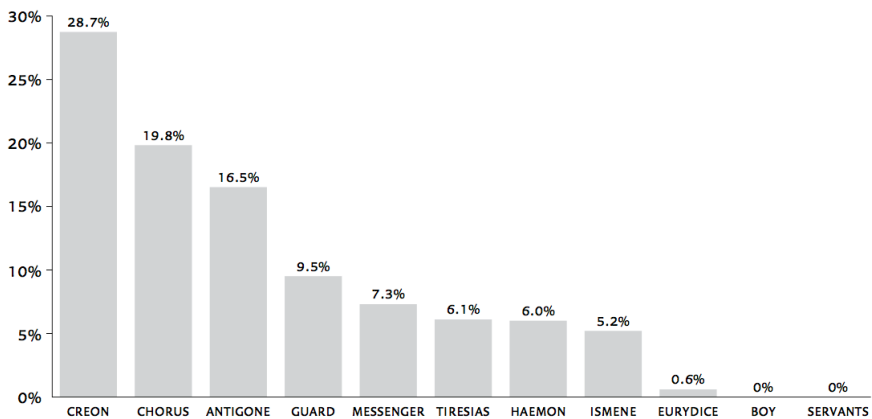


Fig. 2: *Antigone*, characters' percentage of word-space.

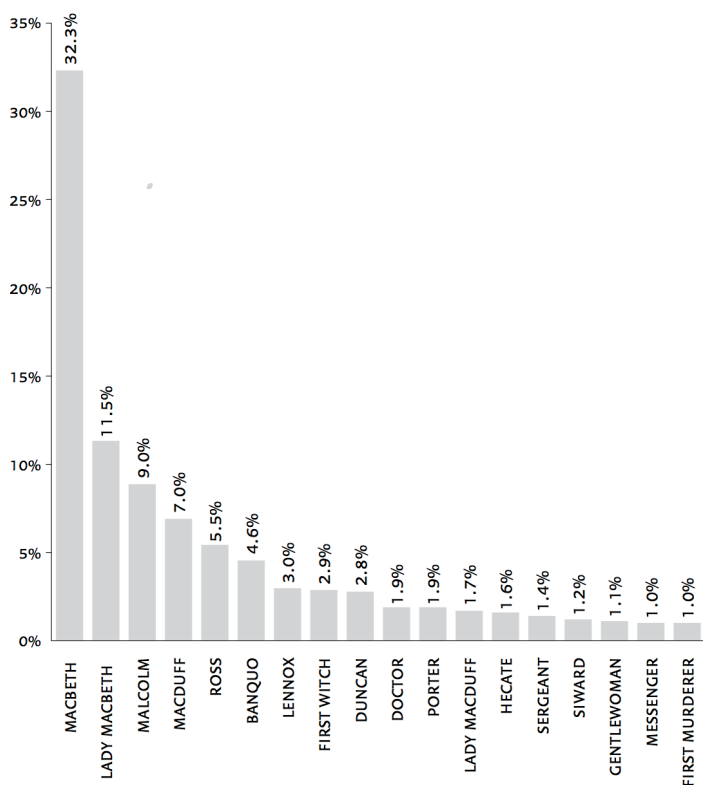


Fig. 3: *Macbeth*, characters' percentage of word-space.

In the transition from one play to the other – from *polis* to court, one is tempted to say – Sophocles' counterpoint to power is replaced by an almost superhuman ruler, made even more charismatic by the poetry he utters. A dark fascination with power envelops the stage – dark, in more than one way. Here is Macbeth, trying to understand why – or perhaps *whether* – he wants to kill Duncan:

I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself  
And falls on th' other –  
*Enter Lady Macbeth.*

How now! what news? (I.vii.25-28)

The “intent” is a horse, “ambition” is a knight, Macbeth is a sort of centaur; more or less one understands, but really only more or less: is ambition a knight that vaults – or a spur that pricks? And what is it that “falls” in the fourth line? For some interpreters, it’s the ambition-knight; for others, the intent-horse. And as both ambition and intent are so clumsy, why proceed at all? There’s something profoundly elusive here, and now that Lady Macbeth has entered the scene it will forever remain so. We’ll never know why Macbeth kills Duncan. Othello, in Desdemona’s room, about to murder her:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul –  
 Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars:  
 It is the cause. (Shakespeare 2006, V.ii.1-3)

For some, the cause is Desdemona’s supposed adultery; for others, the desire to avoid future betrayals or prevent the damnation of her soul. Plus, what really torments Othello seems to be *the mere existence of a cause*: not what Desdemona supposedly has done – but the sheer force of causality in human life. Causality *is* a force in tragedy – especially here, as Iago causes Othello to act in an almost mechanical way, while what causes *Iago* to act remains a mystery – so these words evoke something profound, but they do so in an arcane fashion. It is often said that Verdi’s *Otello* is more logical than Shakespeare’s and it’s true, Iago is given a great aria – “Credo in un Dio crudel” – that explains what Shakespeare does not. But Shakespeare is Shakespeare *precisely because he doesn’t explain*. Why?

7.

The next step along this path was taken by a playwright who would have been the Shakespeare of the democratic age, had he not died of typhus at twenty-four. In Büchner’s *Danton’s Death* – the one great tragedy about revolution – language acquires an extraordinary and sinister power:

SAINT-JUST  
 We will conclude simply and quickly: since everyone was created under the same conditions [...] no one may enjoy privileges, neither

individuals nor larger classes. Each part of this proposition, in realizing itself, has killed its human beings. The 14<sup>th</sup> of July, the 10<sup>th</sup> of August, the 31<sup>st</sup> of May are its punctuation marks. (Büchner 2012, II.vii)

Murder by words. “Each part of this proposition [...] has killed its human beings”. Jacobinism, wrote François Furet in *Penser la Révolution française*, “radicalized the revolution by making it coincide with its discourse, [...] and then brought to power the purest instance of such discourse” (Furet 1978, 98, my translation). Exactly. And while Saint-Just still believes he’s in control of his words, a later scene shows the other side of the story. Danton and his group arrive at the Conciergerie and another prisoner greets them:

MERCIER

The galleries applaud and the Romans rub their hands, but they don’t hear that each of these words is the death rattle of a victim. Try following your rhetoric to the point where it becomes flesh and blood. Look around you: all this you have spoken: here is a visual translation of your words. These wretches, their hangmen, and the guillotine, are your speeches come to life. (Büchner 2012, III.iii)

“All this you have spoken”: language as a magnificent but uncontrollable force. Alienated. This reaches its apex in two night scenes, one with Danton and one with Robespierre, the play’s great antagonists. (Brief parenthesis: *Danton’s Death* is the great tragedy about a revolution, yes, but the conflict is not between revolution and *ancien régime*, it is *within the revolution itself*.) Danton, at the window; he cannot sleep (“Macbeth shall sleep no more” [Shakespeare 1972, II.ii.42]): “September! Who cried this word? [...] As I came to the window something shrieked and cried in all the streets: September!” (Büchner 2012, II.v). September is the massacre of the Paris prisoners in 1792, which Danton, who was minister of justice, allowed to happen. His wife wakes up, “You are dreaming, Danton [...] It was just a child crying in the night [...] you are trembling, Danton...”. “What does that word want from me [...] Why does it stretch out its bloody hands towards me?”. Robespierre, also at the window: “Why can’t I get rid of this thought? With its bloody finger it keeps pointing towards the same

spot" (I.vi). His thoughts are not really *his* any more – "I can't tell which part of me is deceiving the other" – and he ends up repeating the words of the tyrant Philipp in Schiller: "Ich bin allein", "I am alone". "We are all crazy", says Danton at a certain point; there are several scenes of madness in the play, and there will be even more in *Woyzeck* two years later. "We are all puppets", Danton again, "moved around by unknown forces". "What appeared to be most manifest", writes Hannah Arendt about the French revolution, "was that none of its actors could control the course of events, that this course took a direction which had little if anything to do with [their] willful aims and purposes". The result was "a feeling of awe and wonder at the power of history itself" (Arendt 1990, 51).

"Awe and wonder": an echo of Aristotle's "pity and terror" in the *Poetics*. If a historical event had the potential to revive the kind of conflict of *Antigone*, the French revolution must have been it; and Büchner – who co-authored a subversive pamphlet, lived with a rope ladder at his window for fear of being arrested, and, with *Woyzeck*, wrote the first worker's tragedy – was perfect for the task. But in his most inspired moments his revolutionaries echo the great tragic tyrants and feel, like Macbeth, that what they've done is – also – a crime. "I felt republican virtue tremble in the depth of my heart", wrote Robespierre to his brother, as he witnessed the fate of Louis XVI. Büchner's linguistic intensity, and Shakespeare's before him, express the disorientation of great historical ruptures, and wonderfully heighten it – but enfolding it in an inscrutable enigma. Antigone's clarity was a sign of mastery: she did exactly what she meant to do, being fully aware of what the consequences would be. Shakespeare's and Büchner's metaphors, with their breathtaking power, raise the emotional temperature of tragic heroes, and thus precipitate action – but as a leap into the dark. 'Poetry' blinds.

Unfathomable poetry, or agonistic clarity? What is a democratic culture most in need of?

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