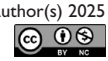
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Interpenetration and the town and gown divide: A systems theoretical reading of *Porterhouse Blue*

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Abstract

This article offers a novel exploration of the relationship between 'town' and 'gown' through the theoretical lens of interpenetration within the context of Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems. My analysis is interdisciplinary in character and transdisciplinary in methodology. For illustrative purposes, Tom Sharpe's fictional work, *Porterhouse Blue*, is analysed in a conventional fashion of literary criticism as a point of departure to advance my argument on satire as an entropic force, typified in the novel by Sharpe's portrayal of absurd events and larger-than-life characters. I then apply Luhmann's theoretical concepts to observe Sharpe's representation of absurdities in *Porterhouse Blue*. By employing second-order observation, these hyperbolic portrayals can be interpreted as manifestations of entropic force that arise during the process of interpenetration between social systems such as organisation and society, or gown and town, communicating values of tradition and modernisation, respectively. Although these fictional events are overexaggerated for dramatic and comedic impact, they are not entirely improbable in the real world, reflecting the inherent unpredictability of complex systemic interactions that characterise modern society. This transdisciplinary study therefore demonstrates the wide applicability of Luhmann's theory of modernity across a range of social domains such as higher education institutions. The theory of interpenetration can yield particularly fruitful outcomes when used to analyse the deeper and more complex interconnectivity of societal systems in the age of globalisation.

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Introduction

The relationship between a higher education institution and its host town has long fascinated researchers across a range of disciplinary areas. For example, Foley (2016) conducted a case study to better understand the attitudes of the residents of Glassboro in New Jersey towards the only higher education institution in the town, Rowan University. Data collected from door-to-door survey was analysed to shed light on the relationship between the 'guest' and their 'host' in the following areas: interactions with students; property and public safety; and interactions with university officials and interactions with university-organised events. An earlier study of a similar nature seeks to determine the principle factors and forces that drive the interrelationships between Oberlin College in a small town of the same name in Ohio, USA (Zorbaugh, 1936). In addition, Steinbach (2023) took a phenomenological approach to shift the perspective from the locals' to that of the institutional members by focusing on professionals employed by universities to manage the relationship between town and gown. The author analyses interview data to ascertain any mismatch between professional perceptions of their liaising tasks against practitioner literature. The analysis is used to address differences in the professionals' perceptions and experiences based on their structural placements within the organisations. This research is designed in part to identify the optimal organisational placement that engenders effective relationship management.

As opposed to the above empirical studies from the United States of America, other scholars have directed their attention to offer a historical account of the evolution of the relationship between some ancient seats of learning and the towns in which they inhabit such as *Town and gown: the 700 years' war in Cambridge* (Parker, 1983). A more comprehensive study of the evolution of universities in Europe connects the institutional structures of modern European universities to their shared medieval model (Stichweh, 2024) at a time when social stratification was the norm. The author argues that the university, as a collective of intellectual endeavours and bureaucratic organisations, is 'the most instructive institution that combines a precise localization at a specific place and belongingness and impact in the cities where the universities are established with an invaluable global relevance' (Stichweh, 2024: 424). The recognition of universities as a transnational educational institution marks a radical departure from methodological nationalism to a systems theoretical analysis of the 'new relations of reciprocal observation in the global university system' (Pfeffer and Stichweh, 2015: 152).

Common across existing studies of the relationship between town and gown is the shared assumption of an invisible boundary that severs the two entities. The dichotomous categorisation forms an instantly recognisable binary guiding distinction (Roth et al., 2025) that can generate further distinctions through the process of applying the same principle to either side of the demarcation. The result can uncover more complex social realities when, for example, race, gender and class intersect (Roth et al., 2025: 1). In the

context of the evolution of western universities from the high Middle Ages to post-industrial modernity, the complexity of the interconnectedness between 'quad' and 'square', between 'cloisters of knowledge' and 'corridors of power', between 'sombre robes' and 'pinstriped suits', between 'elite' and 'hoi polloi', and between 'exclusion' and 'inclusion', imagined or otherwise, becomes an intriguing subject matter for sociological research. Against the diverse genres and methodological treatments outlined above, this article offers a unique perspective to explore a fictional representation of Cambridge, a higher educational institution *par excellence*, at a pivotal moment in the 1970s' Britain that witnessed radical social changes in the process of modernisation. This article highlights the inextricable link between the communities of town and gown which are highlighted by the 'situatedness' (Stichweh, 2024: 424) of a higher education institution within the town where it finds its existence. The fictitious College, Porterhouse, in Tom Sharpe's *Porterhouse Blue* (2011) is the subject of this article's investigation within the framework of Luhmann's systems theory.

Second-order observation and the town and gown relationship

Borrowing Heinz von Foerster's terminology, Luhmann explains that in second-order observation, 'one has to observe not simple objects but observing systems – that is, to distinguish them in the first place' (Luhmann, 2002: 99). We can therefore infer that when an observer is observed, 'both observed and observer can be a psychic or a social system' (Brunczel, 2010: 45). In the context of this article, the initial distinction between town and gown as disparate systems is made to be a two-valued form of modernity (town) versus tradition (gown) to indicate a system/environment distinction Both town and gown serve as each other's system environment as objects of their reciprocal observation. Further complexity arises when individual psychic systems are accounted for in this tripartite interaction.

This article proposes to scrutinise the dynamic relationship between town and gown as two meaning-constituted autopoietic social systems (Luhmann, 1990: 2) by employing a Luhmannian second-order observation. For the analytical purpose of this article, the term, 'town', is considered as society *vis-à-vis* 'gown' which is, in turn, perceived as an organisation. Employing fiction as a medium to illustrate the idea of second-order observation follows Luhmann's example of using a painting, purportedly by the 17th-century Dutch painter, Johannes Vermeer. The painting depicts a domestic scene in which 'a woman brings a letter to her husband at the desk' (Luhmann, 2013: 113). The literal description denotes a first-order observation. By adopting the strategy of observing an observer (Luhmann, 2013: 111) that describes second-order observation, what is painted here becomes 'the act of seeing that there is no necessity for looking at something' (Luhmann, 2013: 113). The husband can 'see' the letter without 'looking at it' purely by observing his immediate surroundings. In other words, we, the observer, observes how the husband observes the arrival of his letter, delivered by his wife. His first-order observation of his surroundings is guided by a series of distinctions based on his intimate knowledge of his domestic situations: the space, the timing of the action and the family members' routines, etc. This process of observing how the observer observes in the painting becomes a second-order observation.

Adopting the same principle, this article attempts to observe how *Porterhouse Blue* observes the multicontextual and multifaceted relationship between town and gown by applying Luhmann's concept of interpenetration (discussed in more detail in section 'Interpenetration and social systems'). Another advantage of using fiction as empirical data is the generalisability of the characters. Characters in fiction are not real people even though they can be relatable, and their circumstances resonate with their reader. In a sense, this quality can be attributed to the claim that 'the behaviour of characters in novels is code-oriented, i.e. they tend to animate the code rather than expand upon it' (Luhmann, 1986: 11). In this sense, they give abstract concepts a tangible presence. In this sense, they represent structural or/and constitutive elements in autopoietic systems according to the social positions or roles in organisations for example. These elements can be essential, desirable or dispensable. Their existence and termination are also contingent, depending on systemic conditions and requirements when restructuring and regenerating occur.

The contemporary perception of 'town and gown' indicating two distinct communities, the 'locals' and the 'students', can be linked to Plato's Academy (c. 387) that was regarded by the Athenian public 'as a *hetaireia*, a politically dubious and socially exclusive club' (Kalligas et al., 2020: 73). If we were to understand the starting point of Luhmann's systems theory to be the difference of the system/environment distinction (Baraldi et al., 2021: 236), then such schema of 'them and us' distinction is based on a basic operation of self- and other-observations. The distinction is the result of self- and hetero-referential communications 'that are recursively produced and reproduced by a network of communications' (Luhmann, 1990: 3). In plain English, the scholastic community of the modern era constructs its own systemic identity through a recursive process of self-referentiality by observing not only what belongs to but also what does not belong to that community via communication media such as curricula, degrees, monastic rituals, religious law, academic regalia and even its own lingo. Likewise, the host community, that is the town, consolidates its own self-referential system through constant self-observation that differentiates itself from its environment that is the community of scholars through the communication media of its own such as trades, commerce, the secular law, municipal governance, and at times, its vehement resistance to the perceived encroachment by its guests, the gown.

Intriguingly, a second-order observation of the town and gown distinction also reveals fascinating dynamics in the interactions between the two communities susceptible to, and mediated by, wider societal factors such as religion, economy, politics, scientific and technological development, and even environmental changes. Stichweh (2024) goes further to emphasise the inherent coupling structure that characterises European universities since early 13th-century, outlining two distinctive phases of their transformation. During the first phase the university represented 'the third universal power of Christianity, beside empire and papacy' (Stichweh, 2024: 425). The tight coupling with religion could be observed through the ways in which ecclesiastical knowledge was produced, taught and examined (Stichweh, 2024: 425). It can be argued that the degrees awarded not only acknowledged the students' mastery of the subjects, the opportunity of becoming masters/teachers themselves also contributed to the reproduction of the same elements that sustained the systemic longevity and autopoiesis. The next phase from the 1500s

witnessed the expansion of the influence of the university following the rise of world empires and the migration of European colonisers and settlers who introduced their monastic orders and practices, including their universities across land and sea to other parts of the world. The university acquired an elevated status as a world organisation. New institutions were established in North and South Americas and parts of Asia (Stichweh, 2024: 425). Indeed, following the independence of former colonies, the exporting of organised learning coupled with religious teaching of a distinctively Eurocentric worldview to indigenous lands has become the subject of critical debates in the wake of decolonising higher education (Fomunyam, 2019).

Here, we gain a glimpse of the increased and still increasing complexity of the co-evolutionary relationship between the subsystems of 'town and gown' synchronically and diachronically, paralleling the evolution of universities and their host towns from the medieval society in Europe organised in the manner of centre/periphery distinction to late modernity that is based on functional differentiation (Luhmann, 1995: xxxvi). Though a feature of modern society, systemic intersections can be observed in the shifting definitions of 'town and gown' as two subsystems to other social systems. Each period observes its own distinctions, for example although town and gown represented two contrasting strata in medieval Europe, both were structurally embedded in the same locality. Tension and conflict became inevitable when secular normality and religious privileges collided, culminating in the notorious St Scholastica's Day in Oxford in 1355 and the Peasants' Revolt in Cambridge in 1385. These social tumults resulted in considerable destruction to both civil and academic communities (Droucopoulos, 2021; Parker, 1983). Observed from the standpoint of late modernity, the line dividing 'town and gown' becomes blurred. The guiding distinction dissolves into new distinctions. Roth (2025) reformulates the four basic forms of social differentiations (segmentation, centralisation, stratification and functional differentiation) from 'cross-tabulation of the two distinctions – similar/dissimilar and equal/unequal' (p. 3). When the Equal column intersects with the row of Dissimilarity, we can locate functionally differentiated social systems based on the principles of equality, such as economy and politics. When the Unequal column intersects with the same Dissimilar row, we find stratified social systems such as class, castes and estates which are based on the principle of inequality (Roth, 2025: 3). This cross-tabulation is particularly relevant in this article's analysis of the intersystemic interpenetration when modernisation (equality across different systems) clashes with traditions (inequality of treatment based on dissimilar social status). These potential causes for tension and conflict underline the increasingly more complex nature of interconnected social systems, all occupying the same geographical space, forming a polycontextual nexus of emerging paradoxes and contradictions.

The formation of the respective subsystems, town as well as gown, over the centuries follow a basic code of operational logic that allows the constant duplication of the elements within systems, a self-generation process already bearing the hallmarks of systemic autopoiesis. Operational closure is a key concept in Luhmann's systems theory that is inspired by biologists Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela's study in the autopoietic process of organic systems (Luhmann, 2013: xi). Regardless how far from the stereotypical image of a studious scholar of the medieval Cantabrigians who often engaged in activities that aligned them more closely to boisterous rioters, students of Cambridge

consolidated their identity by their routine clashes with the townsfolk (Parker, 1983). Observed from systems theoretical perspective, these conflicts can be construed as part of the generalised symbolic media of communication. Street brawls carried as much semantic significance in developing an enduring sense of self-image as did the studies of the seven liberal arts. Fashioning an enduring and stabilised self-image as a signifier, however diverse the image is in its appearance, behaviour and manners, it always contains the imprint of the fundamental 'them and us' distinction; it always follows the same code of operational logic – to be a student is to transgress societal expectations and their normalising power, and to be a local is to resist the belligerent trespasses from the students and teachers. The actions, or self-referential operations, of both parties are always informed and guided by their respective cultural memories.

From this starting point of a binary, relational opposition, Luhmann offers another perspective and suggests 'a specific way systems within a system's environment contribute to system formation' (Luhmann, 1995: 213) that is interpenetration. This article takes a transdisciplinary approach to subject a piece of literary work to a sociohistorical analysis from the systems theoretical perspective with a particular reference to interpenetration. Following the guiding distinction of town and gown, the author has chosen Tom Sharpe's (2011) *Porterhouse Blue* for its satirical treatment to the theme of dysfunctional academe. Satire, as defined by Linda A. Morris, 'is understood to be work that relies upon humor to expose both human and institutional failures' (quoted in Marshall, 2013: 2). Not dissimilar to Luhmann's choice of 'second- and third-rate literature' (Luhmann, 1986: 11) as empirical data to formulate his theory in *Love as Passion*, I have also, in Luhmann's words, 'allowed myself to be guided by a very subjective principle in selecting the quotations, namely that of stylistic elegance' (Luhmann, 1986: 11) from *Porterhouse Blue* to construct my argument. Except in Sharpe, one finds razor-sharp observation that provides an acerbic critique in matters concerning the preservation and abuse of traditions.

Porterhouse Blue*: satire as an entropic force*

Originally published in 1974, *Porterhouse Blue* satirises the story of a fictional Cambridge College caught at a time of extraordinary political and social upheaval (Ward, 2024). Reflecting the turmoil in the outside world, Porterhouse is facing a wave of sweeping reforms introduced by the new Master, Sir Godber Evans. The way in which the appointment was made not only defies the College tradition, it but also foreshadows the disruptions that are to follow. However, such external pressure is met with hostile resistance. The Head Porter, Skullion, spearheads the retaliation. After a series of highly dramatic and violent turns of events, the novel concludes with yet another preposterous plot twist that witnesses the appointment of Skullion as Porterhouse's new Master, seemingly improbable but totally logical from the perspective of the College system.

Porterhouse Blue embellishes the literary genre of campus novel that typically depicts the uncouth underbellies of the otherwise lofty academic existence. Like David Lodge and Kinsley Amis, Sharpe chooses satire to highlight the absurdities in the academia, drawing attention to the other side of the distinction of respectability. Deviance therefore brings into focus the blind spot of the normative operation of modernity's self-observation. Observing

the destructive relationship between the only research student, Zipser, and his 'bedder', Mrs Biggs, for example within the theoretical framework of Bakhtin's grotesque realism exposes the prevailing propensity of advocates of progressivism to 'turn a blind eye' to the unsavoury aspects of modernity. If Sharpe's fiction holds up a mirror that shows the reflection of contemporary society, it is not a 'distorting mirror' (Głowala, 2012: 114). On the contrary, it reflects precisely the infinitely probable scenarios of absurdities of modernity that evade the self-referential operations that are oriented around the positive side of systemic preservation over extinction. Within the context of Sharpe's fictional world, the character, Sir Cathcart D'Eath, provides the reader with a grim glimpse into the seedy dealings that help prop up the façade of upper-class respectability.

To explore the potential catastrophic consequences resulting from entropic energy in the process of interpenetration between system and environment, this article focuses on the key characters to explore their systemic significance in illustrating some of the points in Luhmann's theory of interpenetration. The notable antithetic pairing comprises of Skullion, the Head Porter of Porterhouse College and Sir Godber Evans who has arrived as the new Master of the College. It can be argued that Skullion can be seen essentially as a typical 'gown' in his organisational role from the perspective that he acts as the ultimate gatekeeper, literally and metaphorically, to uphold the College traditions. On the contrary, Sir Godber is viewed with deep suspicion by the academics of Porterhouse as a member of townie who represents social modernisation and introduces external 'elements' into the college system of Porterhouse.

The initial interpenetration relationship is set up in an antagonistic fashion to foreshadow the inevitable and (mellow)dramatic devastations to befall the College and its occupants. Other characters such as the senior members of the College, including the Senior Tutor and the Dean, can be regarded as the systemic mechanisms to resist external influences. Two other pairings are also noteworthy. The love affair of the graduate student, Zipser, and his 'bedder', Mrs Biggs, helps illustrate the problematic interpenetration between the psychic system of an individual and the social system of the College. Another pairing is Sir Cathcart D'Eath, one of the influential Old Porterhousians, 'OPs' (Sharpe, 2011: 120), and Lady Mary Evans, Sir Godber's feminist wife. While Sir Cathcart can be seen as the link between Porterhouse and the external institutions who is entrusted by both Skullion and the senior members of the College to possess the power to save the College from the sweeping reforms proposed by arguably Lady Mary via her former civil servant husband, Sir Godber. Finally, intriguingly, the former Porterhouse student-turn-television presenter helps to broadcast the scandal of 'Skullion's Scholars' to the entire nation on live television. This farcical scene exemplifies the crucial role the mass media plays in the communication of systemic interpenetration.

Interpenetration and social systems

Conceived as a two meaning-constituting autopoietic systems, one societal (town) and one organisational (gown) under the broader term, 'social systems' (Luhmann, 1990: 2), we turn our attention to the shifting nature of their relationships from the systems theoretical perspective of interpenetration. It is useful to take one step back to ascertain what Luhmann has suggested about inter-systemic penetration. According to Luhmann, penetration takes

place when 'a system *makes* its own *complexity* (and with it indeterminacy, contingency, and the pressure to select) *available for constructing another system*' (Luhmann, 1995: 213, emphases in original). The chapter on interpenetration in *Social Systems* (Luhmann, 1995: 210–254) is fundamental to appreciate the complexity of Luhmann's systems theory. It sheds light on how systems manage complexity, interact with each other, and evolve, while maintaining their distinctiveness and operational closure. This concept is essential for analysing the dynamics of modern, functionally differentiated systems and their structures. It is suggested that interpenetration is rooted 'in the early anthropology of the bourgeoise revolution (1650 – 1750)' (Luhmann, 1977: 42). This article argues that the contemporary concept of 'the town and gown divide' belies a more complex, interdependent relationship that can be traced even further back to the establishment of the ancient European universities. This article proposes to analyse such an interconnected relationship by employing the theoretical framework of Luhmann's concept of interpenetration.

Luhmann introduces interpenetration as a process that occurs when two or more systems exchange complexity, allowing each system to operate based on the complexities introduced by the other(s) (Baraldi et al., 2021: 117; Luhmann, 1995: 213). Unlike structural coupling, which describes the stable interaction between systems while maintaining their respective systemic boundaries, interpenetration involves deeper mutual influence and is more dynamic by means of integrating elements from one system into the operation of another. Such interpenetrative process results in a higher level of complexity and mutual influence. Furthermore, Luhmann ties interpenetration closely to his concept of autopoiesis, which describes systems as self-producing and self-maintaining entities. Interpenetration does not undermine a system's autopoiesis; on the contrary, it enhances it by allowing the system to incorporate external complexity in a way that strengthens its self-production.

Luhmann cannot emphasise enough the central feature of his conception that 'the interpenetrating systems remain environments for each other' (Luhmann, 1995: 214). This concept provides a useful framework for analysing complex societal issues, such as the interplay between economic, legal, and political systems in modern societies, showing how these systems are interdependent but maintain their operational boundaries and remain environments to each other. It is worth noting that Luhmann also suggests 'interhuman interpenetration' (Luhmann, 1995: 223) in the form of *intimacy* (Luhmann, 1995: 224). Luhmann concludes the chapter by emphasising the importance of interpenetration in maintaining the functional differentiation of society. It allows systems to borrow complexity from one another without losing their distinctiveness, which is crucial for the stability and evolution of complex social structures. Luhmann also reiterates: 'For social systems, human beings and things are important, being the environment comprising cognitions and motives and the environment comprising resources' (Luhmann, 1995: 254). *Porterhouse Blue* offers its reader a glimpse into the dynamic interpenetration across different systems.

One example that Luhmann uses to explain interpenetration is the relationship between legal and political systems. The law provides a framework for political decisions, while political processes influence the development of the legal system. In the context of *Porterhouse Blue*, we can see how this interpenetrative relationship is played out through the interactions between characters who can be perceived as media of

different systemic communications. For example, the new Master, Sir Godber, can be recognised as a communicative element introduced from the political system into the organisation system of Porterhouse College. Through interpenetration, each system incorporates the complexity of the other, enhancing its own capacity to manage complexity. One example that this article focuses on is the relationship between the psychic and social systems. The psychic system (individual consciousness, thoughts) and the social system (communication) interpenetrate each other: human consciousness can only develop through social communication, while communication processes rely on the psychic systems of individuals (Baraldi et al., 2021: 117; Luhmann, 1995: 215). The concept of interpenetration is crucial for understanding how different systems can coexist and interact within a larger societal context. It explains how systems remain distinct yet deeply connected, allowing them to maintain their identity while simultaneously evolving through their interactions with other systems. By the same token, this article argues that in the case of the interpenetration between town and gown, further complexity is caused by the interpenetration between psychic systems and the respective social systems of town and gown.

Crucially, Luhmann highlights the potentially disruptive nature of interpenetration in so far as that the process can inject disorder into order into the reproduction of structure formation of a system (Luhmann, 1995: 214). Luhmann explains: 'Even if one imagined systems to be completely determined, interpenetration would infect them with disorder and would expose the unpredictability in how their elemental events come into being' (Luhmann, 1995: 214). As we shall see in the case of Porterhouse College that has enjoyed a long history of seemingly stable reproduction of its communication structure according to its organisational hierarchy that outlines a distinct delineation of privileges and duties from the Fellows to the students, from the domestic servants to kitchen staff. Interpenetration in the form of the appointment of its new Master by the Prime Minister based on alleged political calculations to rid himself of 'a liability' (Sharpe, 2011: 14) introduces new, potentially destablising, political complexity into the established order of an archaic educational system.

It can be argued therefore that Sir Godber's role is central to driving the communication of change within Porterhouse College. Sir Godber actively challenges the status quo and disrupts the self-referential pathways of the college system. Through the lens of interpenetration, Sir Godber's actions 'beneath the banner of social justice' (Sharpe, 2011: 3) are a clear example of how the external environment can penetrate a closed system and force it to adapt. His reforms, while met with resistance, push the college towards a more complex and integrated system that must reconcile its traditions with modern societal expectations. Sir Godber's interactions with figures such as Skullion, the Senior Tutor, and the Bursar highlight the tensions between maintaining the traditions of the college and incorporating external societal changes. These interactions are rich examples of interpenetration, as the college is compelled to negotiate between internal stability and external demands. His character exemplifies the process by which an organisational system (the college) is forced to evolve by integrating societal influences. The eventual outcomes of his efforts – whether successful or not – demonstrate the challenges and potential for transformation within such a system.

To exemplify such interpenetrative ramifications, this article observes Luhmann's notion of disorder as conflict that has profound entropic potentials to destabilise closed systems by analysing some of the most absurd episodes within Sharpe's *Porterhouse Blue*.

Entropy and systemic self-reproduction

A systems theoretic conceptualisation of entropy suggests: 'For an observer, a system is entropic if information about one element does not permit inferences about others. The system is entropic for itself in the process of reproduction, thus in the replacement of elements that have passed away, any possible successive element is equally probable' (Luhmann, 1995: 49). The concept indicates that 'the system reproduces itself out of itself purely by chance' (Luhmann, 1995: 49). Furthermore, external influences are perceived by self-referential systems as triggers for their own self-determination, essentially becoming information that alters the internal conditions of self-determination. However, these external factors do not disrupt the core principle that the system must independently handle the consequences of its own decisions. Thus, information acts as an event that limits randomness (entropy), but without fully determining or restricting the system's behaviour.

Intriguingly, when the probability of any given chance is affected by the integration of foreign complexity through systemic interpenetration, the situation becomes more complex and unpredictable, in other words, delimited. In the context of *Porterhouse Blue*, the succession of Sir Godber as the new Master is purely accidental as a result of his predecessor's failure to nominate his replacement while suffering a fatal Porterhouse Blue – 'a stroke' (Sharpe, 2011: 34), even though his installation does not 'eliminate the structural principle that the system must come to terms on its own with everything that ensures from that self-determination' (Luhmann, 1995: 68). Within the context of systemic reproduction, the communication structure of nomination itself is limited by virtue of entropy when 'information about one element does not permit inferences about others' (Luhmann, 1995: 49). Nevertheless, the nomination is a matter of pure conjecture, subject to contingency. No one can predict whose name will come out the mouth of a dying Master. In Luhmannian terms, the fact that we cannot see into each other's thoughts is termed 'double contingency' when '[e]ach is a black box for the other' (Baraldi et al., 2021: 75). Paradoxically, a formal structure that is designed to reduce randomness in systemic self-reproduction (Luhmann, 1995: 284–285) can inadvertently undermine such desire for order when one element fails to meet its expectations and cause unforeseen increasing systemic entropy. This kind of information can be an event that destabilises systemic order, illustrated by the ensuing events in the story.

Tellingly, like the contentious appointment of Sir Godber at the beginning of the novel, the election of Skullion at the end is another absurd circumstance of miscommunication whereby Sir Godber utters the name of the Head Porter to implicate him as his murderer, and yet this piece of crucial information uttered in such an improbable circumstance where his delirium due to a head trauma is mistaken for drunkenness because of the presence of a whisky bottle. This episode is reminiscent of the painting about a husband's deduction of the arrival of a letter, delivered by his wife. Except, on this occasion,

it can be argued that it is a case of preserved inference. Both cases concerning the succession of College Masters are 'shrill demands for action that cannot be ignored' (Luhmann, 1995: 284). In terms of their functional role as the Master of the College, both Sir Godber and Skullion may be considered as 'equally possible entropy' in the context of the structural maintenance to ensure systemic self-reproduction. Such structure formation 'is a precondition for the *observation and description of a system*, indeed, for observation (or description) from without as well as for self-observation (or description)' (Luhmann, 1995: 285, emphasis in original).

Parson suggests that adaptation 'can be increased only by differentiating corresponding subsystems and by being brought into agreement with other systemic functions and their increase' (Luhmann, 1995: 349), Luhmann concludes therefore that '[i]ncrease of functional differentiation, not adaptation, is the historical law governing the structural development of action system' (Luhmann, 1995: 349). In Luhmann's view, even if we turn to a theory of self-referential systems, the concept of adaptation still holds its operational significance, despite its being of secondary prominence. Our question focuses then on semantics: 'With which semantics does the system determine the distinction between system and environment' (Luhmann, 1995: 349) on the on hand. On the other hand, one also asks 'how does this semantics affect the processes of information processing and what necessities of adaptation appear in consequence against the backdrop of the system' (Luhmann, 1995: 349–350)?

One could attempt to answer above questions by considering the following. Within the context of Porterhouse as a self-referential system, the stabilising semantics is tradition. It drives the relentless operations of drawing such a self-referential guiding distinction. In another respect, the semantics of tradition affecting the ongoing information process can be observed in the reactions of the senior members of Porterhouse, including particularly the Head Porter, Skullion, the Senior Tutor and the Dean in their attempt to protect traditions and to ensure the continuity of the established order. Luhmann highlights the importance of language in helping us understanding the system/environment difference. Indeed, the language – directly or indirectly evoking deeply entrenched ideas about, and sentiment of, '[t]he old order' (Sharpe, 2011: 38) – giving meaning to the semantics of tradition is pervasive in the conversations and thoughts of these traditionalists of Porterhouse. For example, the guiding distinction of traditional/modern features prominently in a private conversation between Sir Godber as the new Master and the Bursar. While the new Master describe the College Fellows as being 'less contemporary' (Sharpe, 2011: 38), the Bursar replies: 'We are a very traditional college, master' (Sharpe, 2011: 38). Sharpe describes both protagonists in a canine analogy: 'Like two elderly dogs they circled warily in search of the odour of agreement, sniffing each hesitation for the nuance of complicity' (Sharpe, 2011: 38). Who is going to break this circularity? The answer is, Luhmann tells us, 'time and he who acts first' (Luhmann, 2013: 237).

Against the backdrop of the irritated system of Porterhouse, what are the necessities for adaptation? Necessities, as we can see, are necessary actions designed to preserve the traditions, however arbitrarily they are perceived to be. And it is because of the contingent nature of the actions arisen because of double contingency, the adaptation required does not necessarily yield the desired outcome. On the contrary, explosive catastrophes ensue. Before we explore the randomness of violence as a probable consequence of

failed adaptative measures, let us consider first of all the issue of conflict as an entropic force that underlines the interpenetrative dynamics between the College system and its environment that is the political system of the time.

Interpenetrative conflict and entropy

Conflicts, considered as social systems and closely associated with double contingency (Luhmann, 1995: 390, 2013: 237), can be considered as a possible consequence of systemic interpenetration. Conflict therefore functions also as the catalyst of entropic amplifier. The entropic opposition is set up right from the start when Sir Godber announces emphatically that 'Porterhouse will change' (Sharpe, 2011: 11). In the context of double contingency, he creates an asymmetry by exerting his political power. When the language of reform from the political system is introduced via the element of human being, here in the case of *Porterhouse Blue*, Sir Godber, into the system of Porterhouse College, it instigates another level of self-referential operation in the self-observation and other-observation of the College system. In that the College system draws on institutional memories as an act of re-entry of the tradition/modern into the system/environment distinction as a recursive self-reflection to arrive at a consolidated new meaning to an old semantics. Sir Godber and his radical reforms can be conceived as environmental irritations to the College system as information that is given a specific meaning of being a serious threat to the College traditions, so much so that such threat has to be dealt with immediately (like a fire alarm). As a result of this emerging complexity within the organisational system of Porterhouse College, the structure of systemic communication undergoes drastic alterations to respond to such communicative urgency on the one hand. On the other hand, the boundaries of communication also must be adjusted contingently (Luhmann, 1998: 47). Both types of alterations are contingent in the sense that they can be formal and planned such as official meetings held within the College authorities, or they can be spontaneous and improvised as illustrated by Skullion's eavesdropping of the heated debates between Sir Godber and the Follows in a College Council meeting from the boiler-room under the Council Chamber.

From a systems theoretical perspective, Luhmann's conceptualisation of conflict is not limited to the antagonistic oppositions such as Porterhouse College's refusal to the reforms formulated in the political system and introduced into a new system. Such situation in Luhmann's theoretical framing is only one possibility of the 'destructive power of conflict' (Luhmann, 1995: 390). Significantly, however, Luhmann explains that such power 'does not lie in itself, still less in the damage to reputation, potential for action, affluence, or life that it inflicts on participants' (Luhmann, 1995: 390). He points out that 'it lies in a relationship with the system in which the conflict found an occasion and outlet' (Luhmann, 1995: 390). Indeed, the novel is littered with occasions of conflict that finds outlets in personal confrontations. These altercations can be of prejudicial, ideological and political nature such as the clash between Sir Godber's progressive reforms against an enclave of conservative traditions. Interestingly, these conflicts find their outlets in both public and private realms. In the context of interpenetration, Sharpe's observation seems to suggest a much more volatile and combustible relationship between conflict and interpenetrative systems. It seems to suggest an inherent incompatibility

between system complexities. A second-order observation renders such systemic incongruity visible. It is interesting to note that Luhmann conceives the relationship between conflict and any social, living, or psychic system as being 'parasitic' (Luhmann, 1995: 390). The consequence of such toxic relationship is that parasitism 'tends to draw the host system into conflict to the extent that all attention and all resources are claimed for the conflict' (Luhmann, 1995: 390). The situation at Porterhouse exemplifies such all-consuming nature of an invasive toxicity of an antagonistic relationship with the system itself, so much so that the systems risks collapsing from within as it is suggested by the leitmotif of mortal demise in the novel.

Luhmann also indicates: 'Conflicts too are subject . . . to a natural tendency to entropy, to attrition, to dissolution in view of other interests or demands' (Luhmann, 1995: 392). What is interesting in the case of *Porterhouse Blue* is the heightened sense of destructive relationship between conflict and systems. Sharpe exaggerates the level of absurdities that occur because of systemic interpenetration. In the absence of a more imminent conflict, instead of a tendency to equilibrium, the system of Porterhouse moves from low to high entropy due to the initial perturbation that is the all-consuming conflict introduced through the confrontation between the College authorities, the Head Porter and the new Master. The entropic surge continues to build until it reaches an explosive point.

Catastrophes as catalysts to entropy

On the simplest term, Luhmann explains what a failed adaptation can look like from a traditional sociological perspective. If it can be assumed that 'the environment's turbulence is created by systems (in the environment of the respective system of reference) attempting to adapt to it, then one can anticipate increases in turbulence and flexibility that can lead to catastrophe – catastrophe understood as a different, quicker way to entropy' (Luhmann, 1995: 349). Two explosive episodes in the novel perhaps can help illustrate such fiery incidents.

The first incident concerns the illicit affair between the only 'research student' (Sharpe, 2011: 23) at Porterhouse College. Zipser has always felt isolated like an outsider in Porterhouse and treated as exactly so, particularly by Skullion who seems to regard him as 'an interloper' and deals with him in an abusive and insulting manner 'reserved for tradesmen' (Sharpe, 2011: 24). Interestingly, Skullion points out to Zipser that Porterhouse is 'a gentleman's college' (Sharpe, 2011: 24). The distinction is drawn by indicating that Zipser is a 'marked man' (Sharpe, 2011: 24) that is outside of the system of 'gentleman', inside and outside of Porterhouse. Zipser is an environment filled with explosive potentials, like his unresolved sexual urge, a metaphorical time bomb within the 'anachronistic' (Sharpe, 2011: 24) system.

Being an environment to the system of Porterhouse, Zipser's predicament is not restricted to the antagonism and belligerence from Skullion, his freedom is curtailed by being housed in 'an exceedingly expensive suite of rooms in Bull Tower and forced to follow the regime of an undergraduate' (Sharpe, 2011: 23–24). His humiliation is coupled with his insatiable but unrequited sexual desire for his 'bedder', Mrs Biggs. The asymmetrical interpenetrative relationship between the psychic system of Zipser as the environment to the system of the College is underlined by the system's inadequate

adaptation to the environmental turbulence (Luhmann, 1995: 349). The absurd scenario of the explosive culmination of the sexual promiscuity of Zipser and Mrs Biggs brings us back to consider the questions posited by Luhmann beyond the scope of a first-order observation of adaptive failure on the part of the system. With which semantics does the system of Porterhouse determine the system/environment distinction? In what way does such semantics affect the information process and what necessities of adaptation take place as a result against the backdrop of the intransigent system?

To the first question, the semantics can be inferred from Skullion's contempt for Zipser's being an interloper, an outsider, an imposter, an invader, an intruder, and worst of all, not a gentleman. Zipser is marked by Skullion's demeaning and belittling lexis that denotes a systemic rejection of this particular environmental blight. On the semantic level, Skullion's derogatory language connotes an inherent resistance to change, even on the most basic level such as accommodating the sexual urge of a young student in an all-male institution by allowing them with more freedom of movement and socialisation. The urge to protect the century-old traditions is so hard-wired into the systemic thinking that any environmental demand for adaptation fails to translate into necessary adjustments. In this sense, despite overwhelming evidence of necessities, the urgent need to adapt fails to communicate. The cause of the explosion by gas-filled condoms stuck in the chimney of Bull Tower, the symbol of Porterhouse's medieval past, may appear to be extremely absurd and improbably, however, such accident is by no means impossible. It is believable within the context of internal logic of the system. The scene is one of dramatic intensity, graphic in phallic imagery:

> The chimney pot at the top was shaking. The brickwork silhouetted against the morning sky appeared to be bulging. The rumbling stopped, to be succeeded by an almighty roar as a ball of flame issued from the chimney and billowed out before ascending above the College. Below it the chimney toppled sideways, crashed on to the roof of the Tower and with a gradually increasing rumble of masonry the fourteenth-century building lost its entire façade. (Sharpe, 2011: 147)

If the demise of Zipser and Mrs Biggs – as an environmental turbulence to the inflexible system of the College – is depicted as a scene of rain of fire and brimstone behind a locked College gate and hidden from public view, the next explosive episode is, in sharp contrast, broadcast live to the nation in front of probing cameras under scorching spotlights. It involves the interview of Skullion by a former Porterhouse student-turned- 'TV personality' (Sharpe, 2011: 190). Cornelius Carrington is described to exude with a sour air of superficial superiority and intellectual snobbery. He inhabits a 'soft world, fuzzy with private indecisions masked by the utterance of public verities, which gave him the appearance of a lenient Jeremiah' (Sharpe, 2011: 192). Carrington is a popular presenter who appears 'at irregular but timely intervals throughout the year and bringing with it a denunciation of the present, made all the more acceptable by his approval of the recent past' (Sharpe, 2011: 192).

Like Zipser, marked for being an outsider with 'first-world problems', Carrinton is another 'marked' man as an outsider for being gay. Skullion despised Cornelius Carrington as an undergraduate and approved of the 'ducking' of Carrington in the

College fountain for being a 'poofter' (Sharpe, 2011: 258) and one of the 'queers' (Sharpe, 2011: 269) among the undergraduates. Given the personal animosity between the two characters, coupled with the ripping tension underpinning the interpenetrative relationship between Skullion (as a psychic system) and the College (as a social system), even before the live interview on *The Carrington Programme* commences, conditions for potential catastrophes are already set in motion with a palpable undercurrent of explosively entropic energy. Unlike the previous scandal which is shielded by collegiate privileges, harking back to their medieval special dispensations from Papal degrees (Skullion even refuses the fire crew entry into the College gate to rescue the victims), the unfolding controversy of Porterhouse's 'installation of a contraceptive dispenser in the College for the use of the young gentlemen' (Sharpe, 2011: 267) is beamed to the living rooms of the entire nation.

Paradox of transparency and mass media: 'Skullion's scholars' as an interpenetrative time bomb

The two explosive revelations do not just show the conflict that damages the reputation of the ancient institution of education in the eyes of the public. As Luhmann indicates, damage to reputation may be a valid consequence of conflict resulting from the incompatibility between system and environment, it belies the self-referential operations that underscore the dynamic relationship between conflict and systemic adaptations in the face of environmental changes. The conflict between Skullion and Porterhouse is therefore underpinned by the interpenetrative relationship between two autopoietic systems: a psychic system (Skullion) on the one hand and an organisational system (Porterhouse) on the other. Each observes its own operations (self-reference) and how it is referred to by external observers (other-reference) in the manner of operational closure. Each follows its own operational logic. Out of his operational logic of survival, each one of Skullion's thoughts is connected to the next that is always orientated towards the safeguarding of Porterhouse traditions which in turn relies on the reinstatement of Skullion as the gatekeeper, literally and metaphorically. As the College system's environment, Skullion's demand to be reinstalled as Head Porter has not been granted by the Master, Sir Godber, who is the symbol of the ultimate political power of the Porterhouse system that is in a flux of communicative entropy brought about by the conflict between the communication of reform (politics) and the communication of tradition (organisation). By contrast, Skullion's grievance against Porterhouse becomes a public spectacle, gaining extensive exposure and alarming transparency with the aid of the mass media.

Luhmann remarks: 'The mass media may not have an exclusive claim on constructing reality. After all, every communication contributes to constructing reality in what it takes up and what it leaves to forgetting'. (Luhmann, 2000: 103). By the same token, every communication contributes to constructing reality in what is being taken up and what is being left to forgetting *by both its sender and its receiver*. Reality construction is also vulnerable to manipulation of the information in the first place such as Carrington's week spent on 'editing the film and adding his commentary' in order to present a programme that 'he had fully concocted' (Sharpe, 2011: 254). Reality is also susceptible to

misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the difference between information and utterance. What follows after the fiasco on television is a candid interview in the (in)appropriately named 'the entertainment room' (Sharpe, 2011: 276) by a journalist from a national newspaper, *The Observer*. In this interview, Skullion admits to the 'normal procedure' (Sharpe, 2011: 276) of the College to effectively sell degrees by ways of a subscription to an euphemistically named 'Endowment Fund' (Sharpe, 2011: 276), however morally and ethically questionable this corporate behaviour appears to outside observers. In terms of reality construction by the public, the verdict reflects Luhmann's assertion. Sharpe reports: 'Whatever the merits of *The Carrington Programme*, it has certainly provoked a public reaction against the dismissal of Skullion. Porterhouse may have been blackguarded but it is Sir Godber who takes the blame' (Sharpe, 2011: 309).

The public bias is evident. The information of Porterhouse's treatment to its employees and its insidious practice of acquiring financial resources is unequivocally aired via live television and printed Sunday broadsheets. The aftermath is devastating. A catastrophe has stuck. The headline of *The Observer* splashes out: 'CAMBRIDGE COLLEGE SELLS DEGREES. PORTER ALLEGES CORRUPTION' (Sharpe, 2011: 278). It is a dysfunctional institution. And there is only one person who is entirely to blame.

Paradoxically, it is precisely this seemingly unmitigated full disclosure by Skullion that keeps the College's more sinister secrets hidden, away from the prying spotlight. When the public is fed with the incriminating insight from the whistle-blower, the reader is allowed into the seedy world of backdoor dealings conducted by the Fellows of the College. In Luhmannian terms, society's self-observation suffers from its inherent blind spot where public attention turns to the marked space that is the alleged corruption of the College, such self-observation cannot observe the blind sport of the unmarked space that is supposed to be screened off. It requires a second-order observer to indicate the existence of the unmarked space as part of the unified form. In this sense, Sharpe is not only an astute social critic, but his fictional perspective also offers a second-order observation in his portrayal of the aptly named Sir Cathcart D'Eath, 'Death' stylised in a pseudo French form by capitalising the second letter with an apostrophy separating it from the first letter as D'Eath. The audacious cultural appropriation embodied in the aristocrat's name suggests pretension and pomposity. When recognised as 'Death', the name denotes termination and destruction (of honesty and integrity) which is ironic, considering his mission is to save Porterhouse from reform.

Sir Cathcart's character can be viewed as a figure who brings the hidden mechanisms of Porterhouse's tradition to the forefront. Yet he maintains his intimate affinity with his old College as 'the President of the OPs' (Sharpe, 2011: 120). While Porterhouse prides itself on an idealised image of tradition and stability, Sir Cathcart represents the disturbing realities that lie beneath this pristine illusion. His actions such as inviting Cornelius Carrington up to Cambridge to produce a programme of celebration of Porterhouse's medieval heritage and sporting prowess as a thinly veiled attack on the perceived threat introduced by Sir Godber. In an earlier incident, the immediate reaction of the College authorities to Sir Godber's announcement of reforms comes from the Dean who has arranged a meeting with Sir Cathcart in an attempt to pressurise the new Master to resign (Sharpe, 2011: 120). His character reveals how the College's traditions are not merely about preserving the past but are also about maintaining power structures that resist any

form of modern interference such as the Dean's plan to use the Extraordinary Meeting of Porterhouse Society to pass a resolution to call for the resignation of Sir Godber 'for the dictatorial attitude he has adopted in his dealings with the College Council' (Sharpe, 2011: 120). In Luhmannian terms, the perpetuation of systemic integrity relies on a high degree of controlled interpenetration across interdependent systems.

Interestingly, the dark side of the College politics is only brought into light through the introduction of Sir Cathcart. From the perspective of distinction and indication that every system has blind spots – areas that it cannot observe or acknowledge – it can be argued that Sir Cathcart embodies these blind spots within Porterhouse College. Symbolically, his country residence, Coft Castle, suggests just such a hidden location, in other words, unmarked (e) state, that is severed from the marked state of Porterhouse, yet it takes both sides to from the unified 'perfect continence' (Luhmann, 2020: 26; Spencer-Brown, 1969: 1). His presence forces the system (the College) to confront, and to observe, its own contradictions and the unsavoury means by which it sustains itself. By engaging with these blind spots, Cathcart inadvertently becomes a vehicle for interpenetration, bringing external realities (the darker, often unethical practices) into the internal operations of the system (the College).

Furthermore, Sir Cathcart's involvement in college affairs is always initiated by current members. First, Skullion expresses his dismay of the new Master's innovative ideas to bring Porterhouse to the modern world. In this incident, we learn about the extent of the interpenetrative potentials across systems. The General, Sir Cathcart is described to have 'influence in high places and Royalty came to stay at Coft Castle' (Sharpe, 2011: 62). Besides, he is also deeply implicated by his being 'one of Skullion's Scholars' (Sharpe, 2011: 62). Then the Senior Tutor and the Dean decide on a joint effort for one final desperate attempt to use the list of 'Skullion's Scholars' as a direct intervention to force a dismissal of Sir Godber during Sir Cathcart's birthday celebration (Sharpe, 2011: 307). The invisible network between 'quad of trust' and 'corridor of power' cannot be more acutely suggested by Sharpe's intricate plot.

From a systems theoretical perspective, this pattern of invitation can be understood as a form of controlled interpenetration where the college's internal system invites an external element, in this case of Sir Cathcart as an actor to intervene in a way that is intended to preserve the system's integrity, however antiquated and dysfunctional it is when observed from the perspective or progressive values and ideals of the 1970s' Britain. Despite its careful calculation, however, even controlled interpenetration cannot guarantee a desired outcome. Operational closure makes sure of contingency (Luhmann, 2013: 84), and autopoietic systems 'operate blindly' (Luhmann, 2020: 54). Even the most thoughtful intervention opens the door to unforeseen consequences, as Cathcart's actions reveal the very flaws the system seeks to conceal such as his personal involvement in the story of 'Skullion's Scholars' – a list of past Porterhouse students whose degrees are the direct result of their parents' subscription to the College's Endowment Fund.

The extent of the corruption is not known until the Dean reveals to the Senior Tutor and intends to use it to 'nudge' the Prime Minister into dismissing Sir Godber from his position of Master of Porterhouse College. The Dean confesses conspiratorially to the Senior Tutor: 'I have the names and the dates and the sums involved . . . I have the names of the graduates who wrote the papers. I have some examples of their work' (Sharpe, 2011: 309–310). The list of names includes 'one or two of [the Prime Minister's]

colleagues' (Sharpe, 2011: 310). In total, the Dean explains: 'I have some eighty name . . . some eighty *eminent* names (emphasis in original)' (Sharpe, 2011: 310).

The Dean's admission concurs with the narrator's account of Skullion's involvement in the scheme. It is a staggering revelation: 'Skullion never forgot his Scholars. . . . They owed him too much. It had been Skullion who had arranged the transactions and had acted as intermediary' (Sharpe, 2011: 62). Perhaps, unsurprisingly, Sir Cathcart has been Skullion's beneficiary. The narrator continues with more damning detail: 'On the one hand idle but influential undergraduates like the Hon. Cathcart and on the other impecunious research graduates eking out a living giving supervision and grateful for the baksheesh Skullion brought their way' (Sharpe, 2011: 62). The most disturbing disclosure is the College's turning a blind eye to blatant cheating in informal assessment and formal examinations. Large sums of money have changed hands:

> The weekly essay regularly handed in and startlingly original for undergraduates so apparently ill-informed. Two pounds a week for an essay had served to subsidize some very important research. More than one doctorate owed everything to those two pounds. And finally Tripos by proxy, with Skullion's Scholars lounging in a King Street pub while in the Examination School their substitutes wrote answers to the questions with a mediocrity that was unexceptional. . . . [H]e had assured the graduate substitutes to allay their fears before slipping five hundred, once a thousand, pounds into their pockets. And no one had been any the wiser. (Sharpe, 2011: 62–63)

Porterhouse College is described as being 'unique' for its 'intractable conservatism' (Sharpe, 2011: 4). Sharpe observes: 'No other Cambridge college can equal Porterhouse in its adherence to the old traditions and to this day Porterhouse men are distinguished [sic] by the cut of their coats and hair and by their steadfast allegiance to gowns' (Sharpe, 2011: 4). The invitation to Sir Cathcart also suggests that the college's traditions are not maintained purely through benign rituals or adherence to the past, but through active, sometimes sinister, interventions. Cathcart's role in orchestrating and facilitating these interventions illustrates how the system actively seeks to manipulate its environment (human beings) to sustain itself. This manipulation can be considered as a form of interpenetration where the system draws on external resources (Cathcart's influence, power, and actions) to reinforce its internal operations. This network of inter-systemic connection is elsewhere illustrated by Sir Cathcart's birthday party which requires his guests to dressed as animals. In addition to his disguising as a horse, the partygoers include:

> Her Royal Highness the Princess Penelope [who] sought anonymity as a capon and deceived no one. A judge from the Appellate Division was a macaw. There was a bear, two guns, and a panda wearing a condom. The Loverley sisters sported dildos with stripes and claimed they were zebras and Lord Forsyth, overzealous as a Labrador, urinated against a standard lamp in the library and had to be resuscitated by Mrs Hinkle, who was one of the judges at Cruft's. Even the detectives mingling with the crowd were dressed as pumas. (Sharpe, 2011: 307)

This menagerie of social influencers serves as a nexus of social reciprocity, facilitating interpenetrative connections across various social systems from the aristocratic to the legal, from the juristic to law and enforcement. The significance of such gatherings lies

not primarily in their excessive debauchery or idiosyncratic revelry, but rather in the opportunities they provide for expanding and advancing one's social network into broader, more diverse systemic horizons.

In this context, Cathcart's actions serve to strip away the illusion of the College as a bastion of noble traditions, revealing instead a system that is deeply invested in self-preservation at any cost. This reality is made possible through interpenetration with external forces that are willing to do the College's dirty work. In this sense, Cathcart is not merely a tool of tradition but a crucial part of the system's operational strategy to maintain its status quo. Cathcart's involvement highlights how interpenetration can lead to systemic corruption. By relying on external actors to sustain its operations, the college becomes complicit in morally dubious activities. This complicity is not an aberration but a structural necessity for the system's survival, thus showcasing the darker side of interpenetration.

By contrast, as someone deeply embedded in the College system, Skullion's rise to the position of Master is one of the most ironic outcomes in the novel, representing the unintended consequences of modernising efforts. Sir Godber's reforms, intended to bring Porterhouse into the modern age, inadvertently create a situation where the least likely candidate – a porter – ends up at the helm of the College. This outcome reflects the chaotic energy that can be unleashed when systems interpenetrate, leading to outcomes that defy both logic and expectations. On the surface, Skullion's ascendency to the pinnacle of the College hierarchy through the internal mechanism of an organisation may conform the ancient tradition of succession. It is only superficial. This absurd situation highlights the vulnerability of an inflexible system that lacks an adaptive programme that can be activated in the event of irregular or exceptional circumstances such as irreconcilable conflicts. Furthermore, Skullion's promotion makes a mockery of access to positions of authority through legitimate claims and/or credentials. From the perspective of second-order observation, Sharpe's campus satire observes an awkward co-existence of societal organisations from different historical traditions in the process of transformation from stratified society to a functionally differentiated one.

Chaos, contingency and multicontextuality

When considering entropy in systemic stability, it can be suggested that the college, a symbol of tradition, becomes destabilised not through external force such as Sir Godber's reformist ideas but from within (as demonstrated by the drastic decisions (irritations) taken by various members by elevating an individual who embodies everything the traditional elite despises and seeks to avoid. Skullion's appointment is not just ironic; it is a clear manifestation of entropy, where the interpenetration of modernising influences creates a state of disorder that upends the established hierarchy.

Wherever there is disorder, a return to order is also possible. The ending of the novel also suggests an ultimate irony of Skullion's unlikely succession into the Mastership of Porterhouse after all the tragedies that have happened as a result of the resistance to the reform programme introduced by Sir Godber. The irony that is hidden to other characters is perhaps, as advanced by Romanticism that 'knowledge has its source in darkness, or in an indeterminate mix of light and dark, and that therefore the structure of irony informs

the structure of all meaning' (Rasch, 2000: 67). Considered in this light, Sir Godber's utterance on the night of his attack 'is infused with the possibility of its own incomprehensibility, and none more so than those utterances that attempt to come to terms with the nature of irony itself' (Rasch, 2000: 67). The information imparted in Sir Godber's seemingly unintelligible utterance is therefore made comprehensible in the most ironic manner possible. Equipped with the tacit knowledge of the mechanism governing the selection of new Masters, the Dean and the Senior Tutor naturally jump into the logical conclusion that Sir Godber *must be* nominating his successor, in accordance with tradition, rather than naming his assailant in his dying breath.

Observed from a second-order perspective, human element that is Skullion from a gatekeeper of traditions to the Master of the most traditional College of Cambridge underlines a central characteristic of autopoietic systems. Self-referential systems such as psychic, societal and organisational systems are meaning-constituted systems. In meaning-constituted systems negation is also possible. The ending of *Porterhouse Blue* therefore poses some systems theoretical questions. Does Skullion's appointment as the next Master (following the tradition of his name being uttered by Sir Godber, though his accusatory information is completed misconstrued as being instructional and acted upon accordingly) marks a severance of an interpenetrative connection between the traditional Porterhouse from the modern world, hence a withdrawal to a self-referential operation orientated around the semantics of medievalism and traditions?

A contingent outcome in a systems theoretical sense but a welcome accident by design, nonetheless, is Skullion's changed status (and state) also a double negation of his meaning system? Skullion is essentially a 'townie' who is employed by Porterhouse since 1928 for some 40 years as the guardian of the College tradition, an outsider and insider at the same time (Skullion lives out of College on Ryder Street). The meaning of his new status as Master is in a state of flux and indeterminacy because of his inability to speak and move, following his stroke upon receiving the news of his new job. Lacking the medium of language except the thoughts inside his head, Skullion's situation is a particularly tragic one. Frustrated and exasperated by his conditions and the treatment that he receives, Skullion is unable to change his situation. He may be a Master of Porterhouse, but the meaning of his position is systemically undetermined and vulnerable to arbitrary indication of the distinction that guides the meaning constitution of a traditional College such as Porterhouse. The College's self-referential communications will always oriented towards one side of the distinction, the side of aristocracy, nobility and ancient traditions signified by the College's medieval insignia. Ultimately, a profound sense of superiority and snobbery guides the marking of distinctions along the lines of being of an aristocratic birth or a commoner.

Skullion's lamentable condition as an invalid and effectively a puppet manipulated by the College authorities are mercilessly teased by the Dean: 'He may not have been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, but by God he's going to die with one' (Sharpe, 2011: 327). Significantly, the metaphor of 'silver spoon' functions as a signifier of aristocracy and nobility. The Dean's snobbish comment illustrates how social stratification is baked into traditional institutions in the modern era and distilled into the collective consciousness and daily practices as a form of organisational memory. The juxtaposition of past and future that is made distinguishable for observation by Skullion's current state echoes

strongly what Luhmann specifies about the role of re-entry in the meaning-making process of both social systems (through communication) and psychic systems (through living experiences). The distinction between past and future is re-entered into the meaning-making process of Skullion to become a new distinction of servant and aristocrat (however contentious this claim might be). The paradox is also suggested by his name. Skullion, as perhaps deliberately chosen by Sharpe for most of his characters, has at least two contrasting meanings. When taken as a variant from 'scullion', it means a kitchen servant from lower classes that denotes his past. Or if considered as being based on the Irish surname, 'Scolláin', it then indicates a descendant of a scholar which connotes an air of social superiority that his new role of the College Master affords. Skullion straddles the town and gown divide, precariously oscillating between commonplace and prestige, between shadow and light, between silence and voice, and ultimately between lies and truth.

The idea of paradox pervades the concluding scenes of *Porterhouse Blue*. The novel's cyclical structure is reminiscent of Luhmann's own description of his social theory being 'circular' (Brunczel, 2010: 20) that suggests the concept of re-entry. As Luhmann explains: 'The reentering distinction [tradition/reform] is the same, and it is not the same [survival/extinct]' (Luhmann, 2002: 83–84). In Skullion's case throughout the whole experience, coupled with his memory of the past and knowledge of the present, the re-entry has transformed the original distinction of fight/flight to pride/humiliation. Where does one draw the line between the marked and unmarked states? What it means to be Skullion is much at the mercy of his former superiors still.

Through Shapre's observation, we witness how '[i]n his corner by the fire the Master was seen to twitch deferentially at this joke at his own expense, but then Skullion had always known his place' (Sharpe, 2011: 327). Being wheelchair-bound, Skullion is pushed, literally and metaphorically, into the margin or onto a centre stage as situations dictate. From the observational position of the College system, the meaning of his existence 'has to face its future as a succession of marked and unmarked states or self-referential and hetero-referential indications. It needs, in other words, to be prepared for oscillating between the two sides of its distinctions'. (Luhmann, 2002: 84). Tragically for Skullion, as a psychic system caught in the crossfire of the competing systems of society geared towards modernisation and organisation striving to reassert its medieval traditions, the meaning-making operations are in fact controlled by his observers who determine whether or not, or when, such complex, self-referential system 'can preserve and reproduce itself as a form, that is, as an entity with a boundary, with an inside and an outside, and it can prevent the two sides from collapsing into each other' (Luhmann, 2002: 84). From the systems theoretical perspective, Skullion becomes the negation of his own negation through the collapse of distinction and designation in self- and other-referential operations. In Skullion, we observe a communication cul-de-sac, a meaning black hole. Skullion is the Master Servant and Servant Master. His inability to fulfil a 'meaningful' role as the new Master whose removal of his predecessor, Sir Godber, as a reformist seems to have rendered the whole absurd saga redundant. In this sense, as Luhmann suggests: 'Negation is a reflexive (and a necessarily reflexive) process form of experience. It can be applied to itself, and this possibility of the negation of negation is indispensable in any experience that can negate at all' (Luhmann, 1990: 28).

Conclusion

The above analysis demonstrates the versatility, applicability and, dare I say, fun, of the theoretical framework of interpenetration in Luhmann's theory of social systems. Sharpe's *Porterhouse Blue* – in all its gloriously hyperbolic portrayal of institutional absurdities – can be considered as a particularly illuminating representative of the complex challenges facing higher education in the age of globalisation. These challenges can be expressed in a form of guiding distinction between 'the deinstitutionalization of its rooted policy and values framework and the parallel institutionalization of the new ones' (Vaira, 2004: 485). While universities are situated in specified geographical locations as visible local landmarks, they are still deeply rooted in their medieval European traditions, expected to fulfil their educational functions in a global ecosystem of radical socio-political changes against the backdrop of increasing economic competitions for scarce resources. Luhmann's theory of second-order observation allows observers of the relationship between universities and their host community and, by extension, the international community through the lens of intersystem interpenetration. These relationships are by no means stable and subject to contingent forces that constantly undermine their stability and sustainability. In this context of contingency of functional systemic prominence, Roth (2021) posits a multifunctional approach to underpin 'the role of context in the determination of function-system priorities' (p. 542), warning that 'default theoretical focus on political and economic issues is likely to lead to caricatures of organisations that systematically exaggerate the significance of these two subsystems and ignore or underestimate the importance of all others' (p. 542). This assessment seems reminiscent of Sharpe's satirical depiction of Porterhouse College.

In *Porterhouse Blue*, the institutional existential crisis reflects the multicontextual complexities observed through the lens of intersystemic interpenetration. While the 'town and gown divide' is historically grounded, as reflected in the entrenched positions of characters such as Skullion and the Fellows of Porterhouse, the very existence of these tensions drives the College system to evolve and adapt to the modernising demands. Through interpenetration, Porterhouse does not merely resist external influences but rather absorbs and transforms them, leading to a more dynamic and complex coupling between the academic institution and broader society – with unexpected consequences for dramatic impact. This dynamic reflects Luhmann's idea that systems, through interpenetration with other systems in their environment, become more complex and require adaptive programmes to new challenges.

Individual characters' emotional and psychological realities like the combustible mixture of Zipser and Mrs Biggs influence and are influenced by the broader social system of the College, thus reinforcing the co-evolution of town and gown within a unified, yet complex, system. On the other hand, Sir Godber embodies the influence of external societal norms, pressures, and reforms (the 'town') on the insular academic environment of Porterhouse (the 'gown'), functioning as a kind of entropic energy. He arrives at the college with a clear agenda to modernise and reform it – armed with the moral and practical support of his wife, Lady Mary Evens – which puts him in direct conflict with the traditionalists within the College such as the Head Porter, Skullion, and the College's Fellows such as the Dean and the Senior Tutor. As such, Sir Godber is a primary agent of interpenetration, introducing external complexities such as egalitarian ideals, gender equality,

and modernisation into an essentially medieval guild system that has migrated into the aggregates of organisations that play the natural host with their hierarchical structure. His efforts represent the attempts by the academic institutions to absorb and integrate these external forces, a challenge that faces the higher education in modern society.

Contrasting Sir Godber's activism is Sir Cathcart's somewhat more passive role to protect the old order of Porterhouse with no less damaging consequences for the reputation of his *alma mater*. Together with his symbolic role as the designation of the dark side of the otherwise prestigious institution, both Sir Godber and Sir Cathcart are readily recognisable and relatable by observers and analysts of organisational systems intending to unravel the multifactorial decision-making process in institutions that are compelled to introduce complexities of other systems in the manner akin to Luhmann's theory of interpenetration.

The novel uses the entropic events such as the successions of Masters, the explosion of Bull Tower and Skullions televised accusation of institutional corruption to comment on the fragility of social systems that seem robust on the surface but are riddled with internal contradictions. Sharpe's satire observes the absurdity of attempting to maintain traditional systems in the face of modernising pressures, highlighting how entropy is a natural outcome of systemic interpenetration and a reflection of the unpredictable nature of social evolution. In this analysis, the symbolic significance of entropic force in *Porterhouse Blue* is suggested by these absurd yet totally believable events. The literal and metaphorical explosions, whether of physical structures or of institutional integrity, underscore the novel's critique of the illusion of stability in the face of systemic interpenetration and the inevitable chaos that follows.

Sharpe's *Porterhouse Blue* offers a sharp observation of the complex and dynamic interactions across different social strata. Its satirical treatment of his characters and their actions provides sociohistorical observers an opportunity for interpretation of the conflict between the old and the new, tradition and innovation, conservatism and progressivism. From the perspective of systemic interpenetration in a Luhmannian sense, the ostensible divide of town and gown belies a far more complex integration across systems in the way that they make available their own complexities for the system formations of each other. As far as the outcomes of such interpenetrative influence, as events in *Porterhouse Blue* suggest, anything is possible. Those possibilities can include the most absurd of all absurdities.

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Author biography

Vincent Wen-Shan Lien is a PhD student in the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. His research adopts a transdisciplinary approach to explore issues concerning inclusive education to promote social justice. He work draws on Niklas Luhmann's theory of society.

Résumé

Cet article propose un nouveau regard sur la relation entre « town and gown » (les habitants de la ville et la population universitaire) à travers le prisme théorique de l'interpénétration dans le contexte de la théorie des systèmes sociaux de Niklas Luhmann. Mon analyse est de nature interdisciplinaire et méthodologiquement transdisciplinaire. À des fins d'illustration, je pars de l'œuvre de fiction de Tom Sharpe, *Porterhouse Blue*, analysée selon la méthode conventionnelle de la critique littéraire, pour avancer mon argument sur la satire en tant que force entropique, caractérisée dans le roman par la représentation par Sharpe d'événements absurdes et de personnages hors du commun. J'applique ensuite les concepts théoriques de Luhmann pour observer la représentation de l'absurde par Sharpe dans *Porterhouse Blue*. En utilisant l'observation de second ordre, ces représentations hyperboliques peuvent être interprétées comme des manifestations de la force entropique qui intervient dans le processus d'interpénétration entre des systèmes sociaux comme l'organisation et la société, ou

« town and gown », qui transmettent respectivement des valeurs de tradition et de modernisation. Bien que ces événements fictifs soient exagérés à des fins dramatiques et comiques, ils ne sont pas totalement improbables dans le monde réel, ce qui illustre le caractère fondamentalement imprévisible des interactions systémiques complexes qui caractérisent la société moderne. Cette analyse transdisciplinaire démontre ainsi en quoi la théorie de la modernité de Luhmann peut largement s'appliquer à toute une série de domaines sociaux, tels que les établissements d'enseignement supérieur. La théorie de l'interpénétration peut être particulièrement utile lorsqu'elle est utilisée pour analyser l'interconnectivité plus profonde et plus complexe des systèmes sociaux à l'ère de la mondialisation.

Mots-clés
Cambridge, enseignement supérieur, histoire sociale, interpénétration, milieu universitaire, Porterhouse Blue, satire, théorie des systèmes, *town and gown*

Resumen
Este artículo ofrece una exploración novedosa de la relación entre la 'ciudad' y la 'toga universitaria' a través de la perspectiva teórica de la interpenetración en el contexto de la teoría de los sistemas sociales de Niklas Luhmann. El análisis es interdisciplinario en su carácter y transdisciplinario en su metodología. A modo de ejemplo, se analiza la obra de ficción de Tom Sharpe, *Porterhouse Blue*, desde la perspectiva de la crítica literaria convencional como punto de partida para desarrollar mi argumento sobre la sátira como una fuerza entrópica, tipificada en la novela por la representación que Sharpe hace de eventos absurdos y personajes descomunales. Posteriormente, se aplican los conceptos teóricos de Luhmann para observar la representación que hace Sharpe de lo absurdo en *Porterhouse Blue*. Mediante el empleo de la observación de segundo orden, estas representaciones hiperbólicas pueden interpretarse como manifestaciones de la fuerza entrópica que surge durante el proceso de interpenetración entre sistemas sociales como la organización y la sociedad, o la toga universitaria y la ciudad, que comunican valores de tradición y modernización, respectivamente. Aunque estos eventos ficticios se exageran para lograr un impacto dramático y cómico, no son del todo improbables en el mundo real, lo que refleja la imprevisibilidad inherente de las complejas interacciones sistémicas que caracterizan a la sociedad moderna. Por lo tanto, este estudio transdisciplinario demuestra la extensa aplicabilidad de la teoría de la modernidad de Luhmann en diversos ámbitos sociales, como las instituciones de educación superior. La teoría de la interpenetración puede producir resultados especialmente fructíferos al utilizarse para analizar la interconectividad más profunda y compleja de los sistemas sociales en la era de la globalización.

Palabras clave
academia, Cambridge, ciudad y toga universitaria, educación superior, historia social, interpenetración, Porterhouse Blue, sátira, teoría de sistemas