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# Introduction

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## Wayne Hugo and Johan Muller

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### Truth, beauty and the sublime

The Pilgrim weeps knowing that his Master must, like Eurydice, return to darkness. Desolation is just and necessary. Revelation supersedes *poiesis*. Now the disciple must graduate to a higher teaching . . .

George Steiner: *Lessons of the Masters*, 2003, p.53.

The first great work on education in the West, the *Republic*, banned poets from the pedagogic endeavor, placing them outside the walls of the city due to their third rate enterprise. Their shortcoming? They made imitations of imitations – their literary creations represented the everyday world of human becoming which itself was only a copy of the pure world of abstract Being. Unlike the philosophers, poets were condemned to twist the pure forms of existence into vague and confused melodramas. We still feel the force of this argument today. A poetics of pedagogy feels somehow surplus to requirements, a surplus that might add a little spice to the writing but cannot replace the hard task of mapping the lineaments of pedagogy proper. It took Plato's best student to disagree and place poetics back within the heart of education. Such is Aristotle's *Poetics* and it is in discussing this foundational work that we will make a start to clarify what a poetics of pedagogy is and could be, and how the contributions to this special edition can be seen to fall within this tradition. More importantly, we will use it as a vehicle for delineating what a poetics can contribute towards thinking about South African education.

The first prominent feature of the *Poetics* is its focus on tragedy. It is salutary to be reminded of it in the current context. For politico-ethical reasons more fully discussed elsewhere, we South Africans have framed our history, and thus the conception of our past, present and future, within a romantic genre. We consider that we live in a time of redemption in South Africa, one that the whole world recognizes and celebrates. The genre rests on a trope that moves from bondage to freedom, from despair to enlightenment, where prisoners break their chains and leave their jails in just triumph. This redemptive myth casts all the communal suffering experienced under oppression as the price to be paid for emancipation. In the larger than life persona of Mandela, the two great modern narratives of emancipation – Christianity and Marxism – fuse.

Balance and order are restored; importantly, there is, or should be, redeeming compensation for all the suffering undergone. Plato's cave, with its trope of moving from darkness to light, hovers in the distance, as do the Rousseauian tales of children destined to discover their true natures as they move through the stages of life's way.

In South Africa we are currently waking up from the romance, and it is with a bad taste in the mouth. So it is with a little more interest that we could note Aristotle's shift in the *Poetics* from the epics of Homer and the romantic philosophy of Plato to the tragedies of Sophocles, for we sense a similar shift in our own sensibility. The romantic code we projected onto our past, present and future is no longer persuasive, and it may be that tragedy is a better genre within which to grasp the post colonial purgatory we currently find ourselves within.

At the heart of tragedy lies a miscalculation, or tragic flaw, that is recognized too late. It is not a tale of good overcoming evil but of human beings awakening to the awful fact of their complicity in events that have taken a wrong turn. They are neither wicked people, nor enlightened; rather, they must face the outcome of an error in judgment made in the well-meaning attempt to act in a contingent world where consequences are more often than not unintended. In the fall of the protagonist there is no redemption or compensation. Tragedy is remorseless, responsibility cannot be evaded, and the consequences are inevitable as is the suffering that ensues. Rather than offering an eventual bright future as does romance, tragedy lifts the veil and provides an insight into the world as it ought not to be, but is. As they watch the tragedy, spectators come to understand the world as one of deep underlying contradictions, steered by well-meaning but flawed individuals, who take us all down with them when they fall.

A tragic action should awake to its consequences only after its execution. It should be done in innocence of its deadly effect. It is clear that the possibility for tragedy increased in South Africa after independence. In the romantic naiveté that suffused the initial phases of our educational reform after 1994 this condition found receptive ground. We are in the new millennium currently stirring to the consequences of our own policies on our own learners that were enacted with the best of intentions. Somehow a reversal has been effected; what was best has become worst, and it is our own complicity we must confront rather than deeds of those who we so roundly condemned from apartheid days.

To read someone who renders our recent educational history within a tragic register should produce a set of complex feelings if we take Aristotle as our guide: a mixture of guilt and pity which can join in cathartic release. The guilt

arises when we recognize our own overweening hopes in the policies that wreck lives. The pity arises when we see good people brought low by the flaw of their misguided good intentions. It dawns on us that the tragedy of South African education has direct bearing on our own lives, that we are caught in the same peculiar knot and its tightening consequences, where there seem to be tragic alternatives no matter which route we take. Such recognition has a peculiar cathartic effect.

But classical tragedy depended also on a belief in the Gods, in a world of numinosity and awe, in manifest destiny. These have been shattered for us by our secular enlightened scientific age. For Steiner, classical tragedy is now dead. As Sylvia Plath puts it in her last (and best) poem, we don't suffer under "the illusion of a Greek necessity" anymore (Plath, 1981, p.272). We might recently have developed a tragic sensibility, but we cannot believe that the tragedy is wrought by implacable forces over which we have no control whatsoever. Tragedy is unable today to provide catharsis, but a tragic sensibility can at least provide an ethical corrective to our romantic hubris. This is all the more so when it is embedded in an analysis of empirical and formal power. It is here that a second way to use the *Poetics* comes into view. In this purview it is not a question of applying the tragic content of the *Poetics* to pedagogy but of learning from the structural performance of the *Poetics*; it is to work with how Aristotle analysed poetry to get to a poetics and to do the same with pedagogy. It is a harder route to pursue for one has to work within the interior of pedagogy and produce its structure and functioning in its own terms. This is what the *Poetics* does in its performative essence. It took the functioning field of poetical works with its many practitioners working intuitively and implicitly and made explicit what its internal structuring mechanisms were for the first time. So it is not only what Aristotle says but how he went about it that provides insight to what a generative poetics might be.

Aristotle's key gesture is to distill from all the concrete manifestations of poetry an inner essence that captures the core. This can only be an exercise in abstraction that delineates the generating principles that underlie poetry. We are familiar enough with this gesture. After all, our academic reputations should rest on its exercise, but it is how Aristotle goes about this process that reveals its complexity as well as the completeness of his early vision. The outstanding feature of his *Poetics* is the vertical or hierarchical manner in which it works with its subject matter. This is apparent throughout. His choice of tragedy rather than the epic as his defining example is due to 'tragedy containing epic but epic not containing tragedy'. This is the first and most obvious hierarchical principle – its asymmetric nature. The higher form (tragedy) includes all the essentials of the lower form (epic) but then goes beyond it with new forms of operation not possible within the epic genre. As

we move into Aristotle's discussion of tragedy we find he works vertically upwards from founding conditions for tragedy into its more complex developments, or vertically downwards from the conceptual essence of tragedy to its more incidental manifestations. At each of the levels within the hierarchy he then produces hierarchies within the hierarchies. For example, at the level of diction, he shows how it is structured from the letter to the word all the way up to a complete action. This display of verticality is performed on what is taken to be the most creative and least structured of all crafts. This is the Kantian judgment in operation. It would have been understandable if he had produced such an account of the Pythagoreans, but to do it for Sophocles is a different order of complexity, as the hierarchical rules of poetry are far more difficult to discern than those of mathematics. This is the deepest reason why Aristotle's *Poetics* speaks to pedagogy. It shows how to work in a formal manner with a field that is weakly structured and has implicit rules of operation.

It is in Ursula Hoadley's article that we see these two aspects of poetics coming out clearly. First, she provides an analytical language that gets to the essence of how pedagogic discourse functions through her use of the concepts of classification and framing. Secondly, she focuses on the tragic manner in which the reproduction of inequality plays itself out in her analysis of a grade three literacy lesson taken from a school in Khayelitsha. This comes out most clearly as she grapples with how formally to analyze a teaching situation in which the absence of pedagogy is so palpable it causes pain to her readers. The teacher instructs her learners to 'Write, write, even though you don't know.' This is not the pedagogic practice of Socratic ignorance; it is a capturing of pedagogic practice as it reaches the nadir of emptiness. Rather than stand back in dismay when confronted with this lack at the heart of her pedagogic investigations, she grapples with how to gain conceptual purchase on this manifestation of desolation in pedagogy.

With Lynne Slonimsky and Yael Shalem the terrain moves to academic practices at university level. If Hoadley makes explicit the conceptual tools needed to analyze pedagogy, then Slonimsky and Shalem make explicit the implicit practices of academic life. The intention is to provide students with insight and access to the conditions of possibility of academic practice by outlining in a clear and principled way what they are. They point to the way in which academics work with hierarchies of abstraction that specialize the discourses used into type-token trees and depersonalize the voice to generate trans-contextual power. The reason behind their explicitness is the insight that 'under-prepared' students need to encounter this type of academic practice in a lived and engaged manner. Academic actions are performative, built up and learnt in a community of practice. To render curricular criteria implicit as a

strategy for accommodating these under-prepared students cuts them off from what academic practices are – the tragedy of far too much academic development – and ironically reinforces the kinds of learning enforced under apartheid. Slonimsky and Shalem argue instead for a more explicit modeling to help these students gain the recognition and realization rules of academic practice. To this end they outline four strands of academic activity: distantiation, appropriation, research and articulation and suggest ways academic practitioners can begin to structure their courses to address the needs of these students without compromising academic standards.

Heidi Bolton's article attempts to provide the structuring rules behind the weakly structured and implicit practices of school Art evaluation. Not only does she perform a similar formal move to that of Aristotle by reaching for the structuring rules that underpin an informal creative process, revealing the judgment within inspiration, but she discovers in the heart of it a set of hierarchical patterns that reveal its generative functioning. Bolton locates her study within a context of impoverishment and the need for social justice. She argues that social justice could be achieved in Art by making clear the implicit criteria used to evaluate art. The elective affinity between Bolton's paper and that of Hoadley, Slonimsky and Shalem should be clear. First there is an abstracting move that attempts to get at the deep principles of pedagogy in a grade three classroom, university lecture halls and art rooms. Secondly there is a diagnosis that calls for more explicit techniques of pedagogy in relation to teacher voice specialization, academic practice or art evaluation. Thirdly, all three accounts are located within a deeply problematic set of forces that result in the reproduction of inequality in South Africa and the burning question of how to interrupt it.

Peter Rule's paper deals with how these issues reveal themselves within a Certificate of Education course on Participatory Development (CEPD). Based on the driving call for increased access to higher education the course recognizes community development experience as prior learning even though students are borderline candidates with limited English and academic exposure. The course sits on the border crossing between how far a university can stretch the definition and practice of academic work to accommodate impoverished communities and the hopes and desires of those caught within these communities to have a chance to study again. It is the most problematic of boundaries for it smudges all the clear lines called for in the previous three papers, yet it is here in the first steps between informal and formal knowledge structures that Rule attempts to gain purchase on how to make the academic practices at this level explicit in such a manner that allows access to continue. In this way he shows how the CEPD negotiates the boundary between the primary speech genres within the community and the secondary speech genres demanded by academic practice. It is the smallest of steps, but those who work

in this area know just how big they look from the inside. Rule understands this but refuses to allow the recognition to prevent a more rigorous structuring and sequencing of course material at this level so as to reach the vertical abstractions demanded of academic work that were so clearly delineated by Slonimsky and Shalem.

In this brief introduction we have introduced two senses in which a poetics could lend itself to the analysis of pedagogy. The first sense has to do with its fearsome tragic potential, the second with its incorrigibly hierarchical nature. Both senses of the term threaten to become overwhelmed in South Africa by the comically grotesque. But there is a third sense of poetics directly bearing on pedagogy that helps us to consider a different ending. We have to shift from Aristotle to the eighteenth century distinction between the beautiful and the sublime to gain purchase on it. This can be approached by asking the following question: if the internal ordering principles of the beautiful – that is, the aesthetic canon – can be revealed by means of an analysis of the rules of its construction, how do we account for the genesis of artistic creation, the production of art that is simultaneously recognizable as art and yet also transcends the very rules that order our understanding of art as art? What this raises is that even if the rule-like properties of a symbolic ensemble like pedagogy or tragedy can be recovered through retrospective recontextualisation, there is no sense in which radical novelty can be said to be rule-governed. How then can we account for it, in the first place, and secondly, by what means can we even recognize it? In other words, so far we have been dealing with the canon of the already-thought or already-imagined; how do we deal with the not-yet-thought? This is the problem that the sublime names.

As Kant recognized, this problem is formally the same for science and other kinds of formal knowledge as it is for art. Each has a burgeoning legion of practitioners eager to make the next breakthrough, yet how is the breakthrough to be effected? Poetics (or more broadly aesthetics) has dealt with this far more directly than science has: it comes from ‘genius’, the ‘je ne sais quoi’, a ‘gift from god’ (or the Gods), the ground of thought (Heidegger), Beckett’s Unnameable and Lacan’s Lack. Contemporary curmudgeonly literary scholar Harold Bloom calls it the ‘anxiety of influence’, the desire to break free from the influence of the valued precursors by producing a text that precisely delineates the silence in the texts of the precursor. If science is the paradigm case for understanding the structure of the already-thought, art and poetics is the model for understanding the genesis of the not-yet-thought. It is poetics which incites us to understand this *libido sciendi*, this lust for a qualitatively superior difference, which is precisely the production of unintended consequences with which this discussion of poetics began, with this difference; here it is a clinamen that augments our knowledge and our sensibilities instead of deforming them, hence the *ethical* sublime. It is in this

sense that poetics assays to grant us an understanding of the foibles of human action, from the terrors of hamartia and tragedy, to the splendours of the canon and the ethical sublime. Pedagogy has much to learn from it.

## References

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