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Wrestling with Aristotle

Abstract
By following the self-reflective process from the inception of the novel The Chivalry of Crime, *in one of the first classes of a MFA program at Columbia, to publication with a New York trade house, the article illustrates and examines how much a historical novel, whose stories are relatively well known to the general public through film, television, novels and literary works can find its own form with reference to classical Greek literary form, whether critical or creative. Greek poets took Homeric stories and recast them through the poet's unique interpretation. This article examines the lessons learned and the tensions experienced after exposure to Aristotle's* Poetics*, when the novelist's previous influences were 'experimental' writers such as William S Burroughs and James Joyce. By examining the process of writing the novel from one-paragraph genesis to publication it is possible to unfold a narrative of struggle with theory, practice, pedagogy, and mentorship, which may be useful both to students and teachers of creative writing as they reflect on their own creative and pedagogical work.*
Keywords: Aristotle, process, mentorship

Back in 1994, at the age of thirty-nine, I became a student in the Master of Fine Arts creative writing program at Columbia University in New York. My reasons for applying to the course may be narrowed to three: a children's novel which was really a collection of short stories; an experimental novel somehow in the style of William S Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (Burroughs 1959); and a coming-of-age novel influenced by the style of James Joyce in *Ulysses* (1969 [1922]); none of which had attracted interest from any agent or publisher. I was anxious to find out why. One of the first classes in which I enrolled was called 'Plot, Characterization and Genre'. The class was taught by Stephen Koch. Koch's first set text was Aristotle's *Poetics* [1], which we were to discuss in the second week. And Koch's first creative exercise was to go away and write a one-paragraph outline of a story that might or might not get written.

I went home that night, listened to the punk rock band The Pogues' version of 'The Ballad of Jesse James' on the album *Rum, Sodomy and the Lash* and decided it would be fascinating to write the story of Jesse James from the point of view of 'the dirty little coward that shot Mr Howard, and laid Jesse James in his grave' (The Pogues 1985). This was the genesis moment for my first published novel *The Chivalry of Crime* (2000). By examining the process from this moment – from genesis to publication – it is possible to unfold a narrative of struggle with theory, practice, pedagogy, and mentorship, which may be useful both to students and teachers of creative writing as they reflect on their own creative and pedagogical work.

That same night, after listening to The Pogues in my apartment on Riverside Drive, I ran off to the Columbia Library and began my research into Robert Ford and Jesse James. The first disappointment that I encountered was that Ron Hansen had written a book called *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Hansen 1983). I read the first page in the library, then put the book down and vowed not to read it until I had finished my own novel. Ten years later, I bought a copy of Hansen's book but I still haven't read any further than the first page. That night in the Columbia library, I did feel that if I was to write my own book it had to be as good as, if not better than, Hansen's. And I knew Hansen was an extremely good writer from having read *Desperadoes* (Hansen 1979) when I was nineteen years old.

I had also read Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), which is the only novel I have ever thought, 'I wish that I'd written that book'. But I couldn't write that book and I couldn't write Hansen's book, so I was going to write my own Jesse James book. I would like to have written a book about Billy the Kid, too, but Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1974), I thought, at that time, was unsurpassable.

So in Koch's second class, we began an in-depth discussion of *Poetics.* I thought that Aristotle might prove to be an inspiration to me at this point because the *Poetics* analyses Greek theatre, and Greek theatre used stories that were already known to their audiences: just as the Jesse James story is well known worldwide and most certainly in the United States. Greek playwrights/poets wrote new versions of known stories, and it was in the writing and performance of the story that the poet was judged in the ancient competitions. Greek tragedy of course was written for the stage, and is of a shorter duration than a novel. The novel has more in common with epic poetry but Aristotle has something to say about that, too, which will be examined below. It became important for me to read *Poetics* closely; and after *Poetics*, the plays of Sophocles and Aeschylus. I was also fortunate at this time because Robert Fagles had just published a new translation of *The Iliad* (Homer 1990) yet another retelling – by a translator – of a story from the origins of Western literature.

Poetics was a source of both inspiration and tension during the writing of *The Chivalry of Crime* and has remained a reference point to me throughout my writing career. So I ask your indulgence as I examine for a moment the fundamental Aristotelian approach, the arguments in *Poetics,* and reflect on their direct and indirect influences on the writing of a first novel, *The Chivalry of Crime*, and the tensions the arguments produced in the unfolding of that creative process.

Aristotle postulated that consciousness has a need to create order out of chaos: drama needs a beginning, middle and an end. And he is very succinct:

> A *whole* is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end. A *beginning* is that which itself does not follow from anything else, but some second thing naturally exists or occurs after it. Conversely, an *end* is that which does itself naturally follow from something else, either necessarily or in general, but there is nothing else after it… Well constructed plots should therefore not begin or end at any arbitrary point, but should employ the stated forms. (Aristotle 1996: 13)

The mind imposes order on the chaos of the universe as we encounter it through the senses. This is dealt with in *Poetics* under the rubrics *Magnitude*

and *Unity* (14-15). We deal with story as a unified event (*Unity)* in a measure of time (*Magnitude*).

But in the initial attempts at writing the novel *The Chivalry of Crime* I could only write in fragments inspired by images around which prose was magnetized. I had a major problem in that I wanted to tell two stories that overlapped in time, which was decidedly un-Aristotelian. The first piece I wrote concerned a sixteen-year-old Jesse James confronting Kansas Jayhawkers, Union guerrillas who effectively evicted the James/Samuels family from their homestead. It felt like a beginning but the rewritten incident ended up on page 105 of the published book.

To jump ahead chronologically – in a non-Aristotelian way – on 24-26 February 1997, David Mamet gave a series of lectures at Columbia entitled *Three Uses of the Knife: on the nature and purpose of drama*. According to Mamet:

> Dramatic structure is not an arbitrary – or even a conscious – invention. It is an organic codification of the human mechanism for ordering information. Event, elaboration, denouement; thesis, antithesis, synthesis; boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl; act one, two, three. (Mamet 1998: 73)

Even when I began to write *Chivalry*, I could see the logic of this but I had no sense of dramatic structure for the 'novel' I was writing.

A number of 'rules' are set out in *Poetics* that point toward the creation of superior art as opposed to mediocre art. I was quite convinced that by following them I could create a piece of superior art, but I still had only isolated incidents for my Western story: a number of possible beginnings or middle sections and no end.

By presenting us with a character with whom we empathise, Aristotle says, and by following his actions, tragic drama engages us in a story that will provide us with a cathartic conclusion that will leave writer and audience psychologically satisfied. But I had three main characters, not one.

In most English translations of *Poetics*, it is said that the aim of drama is to elicit 'catharsis,' or purification, through 'pity and fear.' Even then, on my first reading of Aristotle, I thought that 'pity and fear' was an unsatisfactory translation. Instinctively I felt that 'compassion and awe' would be better translations for the words that I now know are derived from eleos (eleu) and phobos (phobou) (δι' έλέου καὶ φόβου) thanks to an email exchange with poet Sheenagh Pugh on 21 July 2012.

'Pity' suggests an emotional position of superiority, whereas, I would suggest, 'compassion' begins from a sense of empathy, sharing the human condition; while 'awe' can be defined as 'wonder and dread,' that seems to be a more apt description of what the numinous inspires – or what the author seeks to inspire – in the reader than simple 'fear' i.e. wonder at the irresistible power of the motivating forces of any human being's flaws; and dread at the unfolding of the character's or our own inevitable human fate [2].

For Aristotle, tragedy is the highest form of art: through tragedy we participate in a drama that reflects the human condition of powerlessness in the face of overwhelming universal forces that will inevitably overcome us – no matter how successful we may be at some point in time – ultimately through the inescapable natural forces of sickness, old age and death. To quote David Mamet:

> the cleansing lesson of the drama is, at its highest, the worthlessness of reason… we undergo the lesson ourselves, as we have *our* expectations raised, only to be dashed… and that stripped of our intellectual arrogance, we must acknowledge our sinful, weak, impotent state – and that having acknowledged it, we may find peace. (Mamet 1998: 70)

Mamet's guilt-ridden Freudian interpretation may be limited but it does have a certain modern resonance and validity.

The epic – the closest Greek form to the novel – can accomplish catharsis, though for Aristotle not as well: '…clearly then, because it achieves its purpose more effectively than epic, tragedy must be superior' (Aristotle 1996: 48). We may or may not agree with this interpretation of the superiority of one form over another but the difference between great tragedy and great epic would be under the rubric of *Unity*.

'The epic poet's imitation is less unified (an indication of this is that more than one tragedy comes from any given imitation)' though Aristotle does allow that *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* 'could not be improved upon, and they are the imitation of a single action to the greatest possible degree' (Aristotle 1996: 47). So an epic has numerous elements from which many tragedies could be enacted.

The story of Robert Ford and Jesse James had been told innumerable times in print, song and film; and so had the Greek tales, so I had acceptable tragic antecedents for the novel I wished to write but still had too many protagonists. So far, I had three 'heroes': Robert Ford, Jesse James and my own creation, Joshua Beynon. All of their stories were tragic. And I had only written fragments of each of their lives. I had no classic, romantic, modernist or postmodern idea of how to get these fragments into a coherent structure.

My first workshop teacher advised me to ditch the Jesse James project because I didn't know anything about the American West. I was incensed. What I did have was compulsion and obsession, and a project which I had no intention of abandoning. Writing this book was to be my exploration of the roots of American culture – in which I had been living for some eight years at this point – with its gun violence, its sex trade and its drug trade. The novel had contemporary echoes in the Balkans war that mirrored the 'neighbourly violence' of the American Civil War in Missouri and Kansas. Of course I was going to write this story. I continued to write fragments of the Ford/James story, which I didn't show him.

I had a heavy workload: I had one writing workshop and two two-hour literature classes per week for which I had to produce written work. I worked 20 to 30 hours in the construction business to help pay the bills; I didn't sleep very much. *Outlaw Blues* – the working title for the Jesse James/Robert Ford novel – continued to advance in fragments in Stephen Koch's second-semester thesis workshop.

In my second year, I signed up to do a writing workshop with Peter Carey. In addition, I did a class in screenwriting with Loren-Paul Caplin, both of whom were to have a major influence on the writing of *The Chivalry of Crime.*

In his first class, Peter Carey said that we were going to workshop no more than one piece of prose, and no longer than thirty pages, for the whole semester, and if anyone didn't want to do that it would be better to sign up with a different workshop. I wanted to work with him. I'd read *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and *The Tax Inspector* (1991) when I was checking out teachers on offer for my second year.

I presented the first piece of writing for the workshop from the novel that had Robert Ford going on stage at Bunnell's Broadway Theater in New York to do a re-enactment of the shooting of Jesse James. I thought that this might be the opening of the book. It went over quite well but I saw a lot of weaknesses in the piece and still couldn't see how it fitted into the whole. The second beginning I wrote, had Robert Ford on a wagon with his wife and mistress, riding into the town of Weaver, Colorado in 1892 being confronted by a drunk outside one of the many town saloons. The drunk, Ed O'Kelley, fires his pistol but succeeds only in hitting the town clock and then collapses. As if in parody, a boy steps out into the street just as the drunk did:

> A gangly bespectacled boy of about fifteen stepped off the boardwalk from in front of Frazee's General Store. A blue-gray coon hound twisted and squirmed around the boy's legs. The boy stopped just as O'Kelley had in the middle of the street… The boy tipped back a shiny peaked cap, pulled back his pea coat, and hitched his thumbs in the loop of his pants… (Barry 2000: 31)

After this second workshop, Peter Carey encouraged me to develop the boy's story, insisting that I'd discovered a key character who might provide the novel with a unique narrative direction beyond the historical 'facts.' I wrote a third beginning focussing on the boy, a new piece for which I hadn't even written a note. I worked on it until four in the morning of deadline day and when I finished it I had no idea if it was total rubbish, or even just halfway decent, and I thought that if it was no good I was going to drop the whole manuscript in the bin, that piece and the rest of the novel. I handed in the new beginning. That evening I got a phone call at home from Peter Carey.

'I read your piece on the subway going home,' he said. 'Congratulations, you've really cracked it.'

Peter Carey forced me to stretch myself beyond my limits as a writer; and had taken the time to call me at home. The not-so-young graduate student was stunned. In that year's second semester, the Mellon Foundation funded six positions for MFA students to work as research assistants with established writers. Peter Carey was one of the writers. He was working on *Jack Maggs* (1997), his novel that is loosely tied to Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1861). In the first of our workshop classes he'd mentioned that he was researching a coach journey from London to Shrewsbury but couldn't find a lot of information on the route. I asked him why he chose Shrewsbury. He answered it was the right distance from London for a certain amount of time to elapse in the plot. I suggested he use Gloucester because William Cobbett's *Rural Rides* (1830) had a full account of the countryside in exactly the period in which *Jack Maggs* was set. I believe he found Cobbett useful.

I applied for the research post and I got it. The contract required that I do research for his novel and in return he would read and critique mine. Working with him on *Jack Maggs* I saw how he turned research into fiction. I also found out, advised by Stephen Koch, where I could find maps of London from the 1830s at the New York Public Research Library for Peter's novel. I found maps of Kansas City from the 1860s and 1880s for my own.

Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994) had recently come out. Tristan picks up his mother's 'Voorstand First Edition of Stanislavsky from her shelf' (Carey 1994: 102), which informs Tristan that 'when a crowd of thousands is being moved … even a deformed person becomes beautiful' (103). I bought a copy of Stanislavsky's *An Actor Prepares* (Stanislavsky 1980). I was

in the city of Lee Strasberg's Method. I'd heard how Brando and Pacino immersed themselves in their roles. I decided I was going to live as much as possible in the world of the American West. I had already driven through Missouri and Kansas, Jesse James country. I'd bought a pair of Tony Lama cowboy boots in New Mexico. Now, I wore a leather waistcoat, a Pendleton blanket jacket and a wide brimmed felt hat. I was a Western writer. More than anything else though, Stanislavsky, in Chapter 8 of *An Actor Prepares,* insists, along with Peter Carey's advice, that a character is defined by his actions. All a writer needs to do is to keep the character's actions consistent with who he is, and the character will be alive to the reader. And a character's actions are small.

Stanislavsky also points out that a play (like a novel) is too big to deal with in its entirety. He uses the analogy of eating a turkey. It's a big bird. You can't eat the whole thing at once. You have to proceed mouthful by mouthful (Stanislavsky 1980: 105). A play is made up of acts; acts are made up of scenes; and you work on one scene at a time. And each scene is made up of each actor's simple actions. A writer or an actor has to concentrate on one simple act after another, and the audience/reader will stay with the story as long as each single action is accomplished perfectly. Each action for a writer comes sentence by sentence. *An Actor Prepares* is as important to me as *Poetics*.

Parallel to Peter Carey's workshop, I did a course with Loren-Paul Caplin on screenwriting. While working with Peter Carey showed me how to take care of the detail of writing, Loren-Paul Caplin showed me how to pay attention to the overall structure. Loren had the class analyse Hollywood films by taking a stopwatch and noting how many minutes had passed between the start of the first act and the beginning of the second act. Invariably it is around nineteen to twenty-one minutes, when the hero is cast into serious turmoil, and the film has a radical change in location.

The middle of the second act comes at almost exactly one hour when the stakes for the protagonist increase and his (because Hollywood protagonists are generally male) obstacles begin to be increasingly severe. The end of the second act around fifteen minutes from the end of the film is the key to whether the film ends happily or not. If all seems fine at the end of the second act, the hero's fate will be death or disaster. If the obstacles seem completely insurmountable at this stage, then the end will be happy. Most Hollywood films have happy endings. Few commercial films are made without this formula. Thankfully there are still auteur film directors who do not conform to this somewhat depressing stereotype.

But Loren-Paul Caplin had given me a way to crack the structural problem for *The Chivalry of Crime.* It would have a five-act structure:

> 1. The first act would be Joshua's meeting with Ford and would end with Joshua in jail where Robert Ford would tell him the story of the life of Jesse James. The end of this first act would see a big leap in time and space to the second act.
>
> 2. The Jesse James section that would have its own three-act structure:
>
> - Jesse James joins Bill Anderson's guerrillas and his career in the American Civil War.
> - Jesse James and ex-guerrillas form the James/Younger Gang, which is at first successful and then is destroyed at Northfield.

- The forming of the second James Gang with Robert and Charlie Ford that results in Jesse's death.

3. And the final act would be from Joshua's trial and acquittal up to the death of Robert Ford. Aristotle would – more or less – be happy: an epic form where the stories of the three protagonists – Joshua, Robert Ford and Jesse James – were separated into tragedies of smaller magnitude, each with its own unity.

Aristotle might have been at least relatively content with the structure of the book as it was now plotted.

In order to graduate from Columbia, I needed to present one hundred and fifty pages of prose. It took me a further nine months to have a hundred and fifty pages with which I was satisfied.

What was going on in my personal life affected the prose that I was writing. Writing and engaging with Columbia was a refuge from the turmoil in my everyday life. My father had died in the June before I began at Columbia in August and I was still in a state of shock and grief. It wasn't until I had finished writing *The Chivalry of Crime* that I realised the whole of the Joshua Beynon section was a way of expressing grief over my father's death.

When I graduated from Columbia, my wife and I had to leave our apartment. I took another five months to finish my book. In December 1997, I left the Upstate cabin and moved to Jersey City where I put the finishing touches on the book. I sent it to Amanda Urban at ICM in January 1998. On Friday, February 13th, 1998, I had a book deal with Little Brown.

The question that we set out to examine concerns the usefulness of, and tensions produced by, Aristotle's approach in the *Poetics* in the creative practice of the writing of a novel. The lessons to be drawn from this particular creative enterprise called *The Chivalry of Crime* with reference to Aristotle's *Poetics* for the author are that:

- It is very difficult to plot a novel with constraint to any kind of preconceived rule, and if this is the reading given to Aristotle's *Poetics* that it is a set of preconceived rules, the author of *The Chivalry of Crime* couldn't adhere to them.
- The unruly imagination does not necessarily produce work in a chronological order.
- Applying the rules of *Poetics* to material after the initial drafts can give a classical shape to the novel even if it bears more relation to the epic form than it does to the tragedy.
- At least for this author, the tragic form does produce catharsis and a sense of satisfaction at the completion of a unified story.

After signing a contract, it took two years for the published novel *The Chivalry of Crime* to find its way onto the shelves of bookshops. When *The Chivalry of Crime* came out, the reviews were very positive. A year later, Jonathan Cape bought the rights and the book came out in the UK to more acclaim. It won two prizes from the Western Writers of America: the Medicine Pipe Bearer Award in the category Best First Novel of the American West; and a Spur Award in the category Best Novel of the American West. The novel certainly wasn't a best seller, but whatever success it had, it owed no small debt to Aristotle's *Poetics.*

Notes

[1] The version used in this class was from Aristotle, Horace and Longinus, *Classical Literary Criticism*, translated by TS Dorsch (Aristotle 1965), while in the present essay all quotes are from Aristotle 1996 *Poetics*, translated by Malcolm Heath. return to text

[2] The etymological argument is further explored in *Athens Dialogues* E-Journal, in an article by David Konstan and Stavroula Kiritsi, 'From Pity to Sympathy: Tragic Emotions across the Ages' (Konstan & Kiritsi 2010). return to text

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