Deakin University

Alison Burns and RA Goodrich

Re-encountering Christina Stead: Why read 'Workshop in the Novel'?

Abstract
Despite waves of interest in the work of Christina Stead, one aspect of her writing life has been largely neglected. From September 1943, she taught three series of extended writing workshops in New York and in the process left more than three hundred pages documenting her teaching. The question motivating this paper is: Why should we, as writers and teachers of writing, read her writing workshop notebooks nowadays? This paper will place Stead's workshop in the context of the development of institutional teaching of novel writing and her emergence as a major writer. It will briefly examine how the notebooks have previously been understood and offer a closer analysis than has been made to date of the notebooks and their content and of the key issues raised by them. In particular, we shall explore her pedagogic focus upon workshop participants developing a rigorous, analytical approach to crafting novels and her extensive use of Georges Polti's Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations to achieve this. That, in turn, will enable us to assess what the notebooks independently reveal about her beliefs regarding the novel and its purpose.
Keywords: Christina Stead, Writing Workshops, Georges Polti

Christina Stead's most famous novel, *The Man Who Loved Children*, was written over seventy years ago, yet writers are consistently drawn to the psychological penetration of her experimental writing. Her more recent resurgence has been championed by such writers as Angela Carter (1982) and Jonathan Franzen (2010). Despite waves of interest in her novels, one aspect of her writing life has largely been neglected. From September 1943, she taught three series of extended writing workshops in New York and in the process left more than three hundred pages documenting her teaching. Her workshop notebooks illuminate Stead not as a writer, but as a teacher of writing. The question motivating this paper is: Why should we, as writers and teachers of writing, read her writing workshop notebooks nowadays? Can they provide a new area of enquiry to complement existing examinations of Stead's novels?

This paper will investigate Stead's workshop notebooks in an effort to disclose her approach to teaching the novel and her conception of the novel. While the notebooks may cast light upon her novels, it is beyond the scope of this paper to do so. This paper, it should be added, arises from a larger project in conjunction with Ann McCulloch and Adrian Alder, the Christina Stead New York Writing Workshop Project, aimed at producing a critical annotated edition of *Workshop in the Novel*. This critical edition will include both the pedagogical and the literary dimension of the notebooks.

Contextualising the notebooks

There is a long history of writers writing about writing, especially of novelists writing about the novel as anthologised by Miriam Allott (1959) amongst others. However, as detailed by DG Myers (1993; 1996), the history of the actual practice of writers teaching writing, whether under the label of Composition or Creative Writing, is far shorter. In fact, the formal institutionalised teaching of creative writing in the United States through colleges and universities began with novelists such as Barrett Wendell at Harvard in 1890s, Hughes Mearns at the Lincoln annexe of Columbia Teachers' College in the 1920s, and Norman Forster at Iowa State in the 'thirties. Eventually, what first appeared as isolated programs became systemic features of tertiary education by the late 1940s.

Therefore, Stead's workshops from 1943/1944 are positioned in the transitional development of North American mass teaching of creative writing. Immediately beforehand, the creative writing program at Princeton was founded by poet and essayist Allen Tate in September 1939 who made annual appointments of writers such as John Berryman during his three-year residency, a pattern continued ever since at Princeton. Under the direction of Paul Engle, poet and novelist, the Iowa Writers' Workshop from 1941 set the pattern for tertiary-based programs in the US. Writers he attracted to teaching at his workshops included Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Kurt Vonnegut; its students included Flannery

O'Connor and Raymond Carver. During this stage of the institutionalisation of writing programs at tertiary level, the teaching of writing was built around recognised or acclaimed practicing writers.

Following the publication of the acclaimed *The Man Who Loved Children*, Stead taught *Workshop in the Novel: A course in method – and professional attitudes* two hours weekly as part of New York University's twelve-week extramural program – repeated from March 1944 and again before leaving New York in December 1946. Her initial planning for the 1943/1944 workshop included sessions devoted to choosing subjects and finding themes; initiating drafting through schemes and plans; exploring different kinds of novels and plots; animating characters and heroes; constructing scenes and dialogues; investigating a novelist's attitude to society and self; and related topics. She dedicated a significant portion of the workshops to Georges Polti's analysis of dramatic situations and their application to novel writing. Constantly added to these topics are her notes to self on exercises and workshopping. While not a complete record of the workshops, many crucial aspects of Stead's pedagogy and reflections upon writing practice are revealed.

If the recent hypothesis of Mark McGurl (2009) on the development of formal writing programs holds, then distinctive pedagogies emerged: the experiential ('write what you know') especially in the 1920s as exemplified by the novelist Thomas Wolfe, based at New York University and the crafted ('show, don't tell') notably in the 1950s as exemplified by short story writer Flannery O'Connor with close connexions to Georgia State College and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. A third pedagogy, the creative ('find your own voice'), became prominent from the 'sixties as exemplified by the novelist Toni Morrison, then based at Yale University and Bard College. By this reckoning, Stead is positioned between the first two pedagogies and provides a detailed early example against which later teaching can be compared.

Stead's *Workshop in the Novel* actually comprises 317 mainly typed pages, first assembled from nine yellow-covered notebooks between September 1943 and January 1944 with some page insertions and handwritten adjustments from subsequent workshops. In total, the notebooks contain approximately 87,500 words. Without suggesting that the notebooks are a polished work, we are certainly dealing with a substantial document. Because it has yet to be published, access to it has been through the public archives of the National Library of Australia in Canberra where it was deposited by Stead's then literary executor, RG Geering, in October 1986 (MS 4967, Box 11, Folder 84).

Contextualising Christina Stead

The creative writing movement of the 1940s was dominated by males; indeed, Stead appears to be the first female writer of note to conduct extensive workshops and the first to have kept extensive records of them. Yet she is an unusual figure for one of our earliest substantial records of the teaching of writing. As documented by her biographers, Chris Williams (1983) and Hazel Rowley (1993), Stead is an Australian, expatriate, experimental novelist who led a tumultuous life over three continents. Teacher-trained in Sydney and increasingly fluent in French, she secured work in a bank initially in London where she met her future life-partner, the politically radical Jewish American Bill Blake (né Blech), before they moved to Paris. By October 1940 when *The Man Who Loved Children* was published in New York, where Stead and Blake had moved five years earlier mixing amongst left-wing, anti-fascist intelligentsia, both were published novelists and occasional contributors to the Marxist magazine *New Masses*. Blake, a committed Marxist, left New York in November 1946 in the face of intensifying political repression for a war-ravaged Europe, Stead following him a month later.

Rowley's comprehensive biography provides a detailed context of the decade leading to the notebooks, but only mentions them in passing. Much attention is fixed upon Ralph Fox, with whom Stead 'would remain obsessed ... for the rest of her life' (1993: 225), without mentioning other influential writers and teachers of, say, scriptwriting who figure in the workshops such as George Pierce Baker (1919) or Lajos Egri (1942). What we can cull from Rowley are snippets of information that help contextualise different aspects of the workshop notebooks. For example, why do plays figure on an equal footing with novels? Might this have something to do with Stead's fleeting career as a scriptwriter in Hollywood? Why do lists – lists of characters and conflicts, situations and plots – constantly re-appear in the notes, especially those taken from Georges Polti (1894)? What intellectual and practical use is made of Fox's posthumously published writings? Rowley informs us that Stead was initially tempted to script a play as a quicker means of earning money (Rowley 1993: 190); that she found Polti's taxonomy of plots 'a great inspiration' and specifically asked for her 1924 French copy of his *Les Trente-six situations dramatiques* to be mailed shortly after first arriving in New York in August 1935 from which she made 'copious notes' (Rowley 1993: 190 & 585, n 29); that her forlorn attempts in January 1937 to write a novel for the then newly formed Left Book Club revealed her tendency 'to think of people as types'; indeed, 'her liking for taxonomy' came to the fore (1993: 235); and that the views of Fox (Fox 1937: 109-112) were views congenial to Stead's own practice. Fox was opposed to the 'scarcely disguised political tract' of doctrinaire writers who failed to grasp that '[t]he one concern of the novelist is, or should be, the question of the individual will in its conflict with other wills on the battleground of life' (cited in Rowley 1993: 255). Neither Fox nor Stead ever upheld the call by Andrei Zhdanov in August

1936 to adhere to Stalin's injunction for writers to become ideological 'engineers of human souls' under the label of 'socialist realism'.

Early Encounters with the notebooks

No comprehensive analysis of Stead's notebooks has been undertaken, although passing allusions to the New York writing workshop can be found easily enough. For example, Chris Williams notes that New York University had no records forty years later of Stead being contracted to lecture (Williams 1983: 161 & n 61). Lorna Sage (1990; 1993), in two widely disseminated contributions to *The Times Literary Supplement* about biographies of Stead, only mentions that she 'taught a writing course' at the time 'she produced most of her best work' (Sage 1990: 85), namely *For Love Alone* in 1944 and *Letty Fox: Her Luck* in 1946. Ann Blake, to take another example, while overtly probing Stead 'at work', mentions that, preparatory for a workshop on 'novel writing ... she put together a notebook' and only cites from it once from an early entry conducive to her article's argument:

> Draw your characters from people you know very well... Live with them not only in your heart and mind but actually in life... (Blake 1997: 12)

There is only limited reference to the notebooks by Rowley. Only after recounting Stead's return with Blake to an apartment fringing Greenwich Village in February/March 1943, and then detouring into the publication in October 1944 of *For Love Alone* and its reception, does Rowley finally turn to the 1943/1944 workshop which drew upon Stead's 'thorough knowledge of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European literature as examples of narrative techniques' (Rowley 1993: 315). Yet, even here, we find Rowley drawn to what many currently regard as Stead's credo, namely, her espousal not of the 'delicacy of literature,' but of 'passion, energy and struggle' of 'the creative act' which aims for 'an intelligent ferocity,' voiced in her letter of the 6th April 1942 to Thistle Harris (cited in Rowley 1993: 316). After pursuing various ramifications of Stead's literary style, Rowley returns to the workshop notebooks with the question, 'How did Stead go about her writing?' (1993: 319). Understandably, when readers are treated to two or three citations mixed with snippets from later interviews, these are solely directed at accounting for Stead's own writing processes.

In sum, biographers and academics have focused on specific aspects of the notebooks which confirm what they already know of Stead's life, often ignoring major elements that Stead emphasized herself.

After listing the original twelve sessions planned in Autumn 1943, Lever is not beyond speculating about their subsequent modifications, for instance, that the missing notes for Session Eight on the hero were 'undoubtedly based on Ralph Fox's ideas' (Lever 2003: 84). Sessions One, Two, and Four on authorial motivation, models, and characterisation respectively receive the bulk of Lever's annotated references to left-wing writers and intellectuals informing Stead's notes. Passing acknowledgement is made of Polti, Baker, Egri, and Konstantin Stanislavski (1936), with particular emphasis upon plot deriving from conflict amongst characters and upon the need to place characters within their social and emotional circumstances attributed to Polti and Stanislavski respectively (Lever 2003: 88). The foregoing leads Lever to the contention that:

> Through all her practical advice, Stead stressed the need for students to understand their own position in relation to their characters, and their characters' positions in relation to the social world. (2003: 88)

That claim, in turn, is followed by Lever looking to the way in which Stead's later novels implicitly criticized any adherence to the hackneyed or formulaic socialist realist depiction of characters and their socio-political world. Lever then concludes by portraying Stead's method as a sophisticated form of the 'scientifically Marxist':

> She wrote from life, as part of this Marxist project, analysing in detail the historical, social and sexual circumstances of her characters. She collected archetypal plots and situations, and she adopted methodical approaches to art from dramatic theorists... (2003: 90)

The 'logic' by which Stead transformed 'models' taken from 'life' is anchored in Lever's reading of her 1939 lecture (Stead 1939), not her workshop notebooks (2003: 90). While Lever does identify several crucial features of the notebooks such as the focus upon playscripts and upon Polti's situational analysis, she does not pursue them.

There remain a range of significant factors about the New York workshop notebooks that have not been examined to date. This may be because the notebooks illuminate Stead as a teacher of writing more than Stead the novelist. The notebooks make no direct reference to her literary writing or research. Yet they might well prove a rich resource, revealing Stead's ideals about what novels should be and what they

should aim to achieve. This paper will now explore the depth and range of their content and the ramifications they have for our understanding of Stead as a teacher of writing.

Exploring the notebooks

On encountering the notebooks, we found the twelve sessions of her writing workshop course, each session separated by yellow covers, immediately reveal marked shifts in the way Stead worked: at times overtly lecturing, at other times workshopping participants' drafts and giving practical exercises; at times adding amendments in the form of ongoing reflections, at other times, adding insertions or new materials for the revised course. On the one hand, Stead takes for granted conventional categories such as character, plot and setting. On the other hand, her insistent exploration of the nature of situation and extensive use of a generative taxonomy developed by Georges Polti marks her teaching as radically different. The notebooks also show her focus on relentless criticism of workshop pieces, especially those lacking an underlying, unifying proposition. This contrasts with her openness to different forms and content. Rather than précis each of the twelve sessions, we shall briefly examine some of the principal inter-related factors emerging from the notebooks diagrammatically presented as follows:

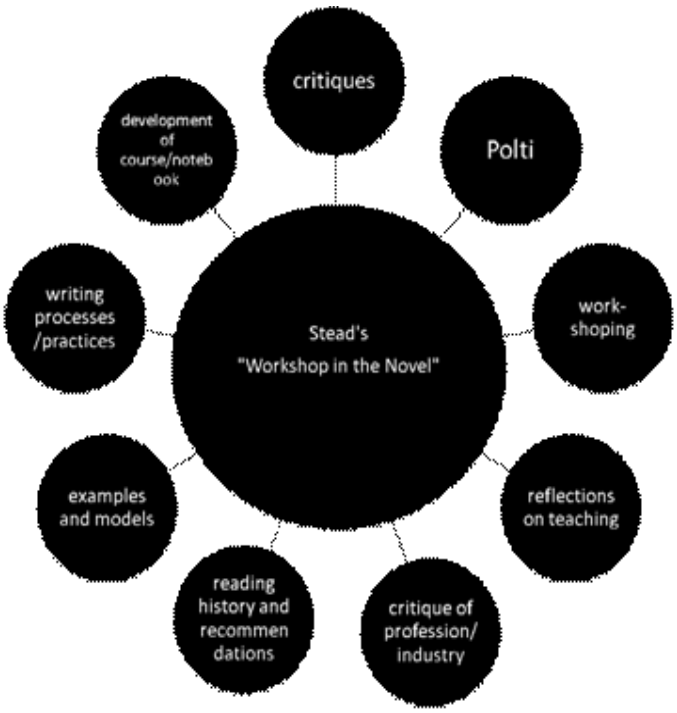

Figure 1: Key Factors in Stead's *Workshop in the Novel*

As revealed here, the *Workshop in the Novel* notebooks include elements giving us insight into, as well as Stead's commentary upon, her experience as a writer, her ideas and ideals about fiction, her beliefs about her craft and its teaching. To illustrate the richness and relevance of these notebooks, we shall now detail each major factor by way of three broadly inter-related groups: (i) teaching; (ii) examples, reading and critiques; and (iii) reflections on writing and teaching.

Teaching

1. Elements of writing

The notebooks are divided into sessions, each covering an element of novel writing. Stead prepares notes that read like mini-lectures exploring the complicated relationship between situation, character, plot and message throughout the sessions, particularly in the first half of the notebooks. Of these, situation lies at the centre of the enterprise, linking character and plot. Stead defines situations as configurations of relationships between characters, independent of context or setting. Multiple situations may interact to develop the plot. Situation's connection with other elements need to be unravelled if her workshop participants are to gain any insight into what then needs to be done in acts of writing:

> Compare your novel for a moment to ballet dancing: the various movements, or relations of dancers in the parts of the dance, are your situations. As soon as you

> learn to recognize situation at a glance, your entire writing is clarified, you can pick plots up everywhere by yourself. (Session Four: 85)

Plot is construed as a series of situations rather than a linear or a concrete series of actions or events, and is closely tied with message. Stead adopts a causal notion of plot which requires a message or what she subsequently terms, following Egri, a proposition.

> But the PLOT of a novel is in a sense the novel itself, the story, with its complications, with causality cause and effect, the cause of this crisis, the effect of accidents of personality, of nature, of acts of God: it should never be pasted on, it is the book itself. (Session Four: 89)

Message – the point, significance, or reason for telling the tale – is related to theme. However, it appears clear that message or theme is less a detachable intellectual proposition than the unifying artistic idea embodied in and shaping the drafting of an actual text. Writers need to be able to reflect and define their message in order to have conscious control over the crafting of their plot. For Stead, therefore, situation and message are the building blocks of story, one combining to form plot and the other shaping its purpose:

> In a story of this kind, the background the setting comes first, the message after: but the message must be there, otherwise no plot. In a sense plot, message crisis are inextricably mixed but we must untie them, to understand what we are doing. (Session Three: 67)

2. Writing processes and practices

Stead frequently discusses writing processes, especially research and reflection. She discusses research sources in detail. She encourages students to conduct research beyond their social sphere through deliberate observation of strangers, records of court proceedings and the like. She encourages them to move beyond purely personal perceptions and experiences and take broader social issues into account. Despite being a writer who was notoriously regarded as drawing upon her own life experiences for character and situation, she is critical of this tendency in her students:

> 1. Where to get your material.
> Law court cases are very good. Records of the police, of criminal cases, investigations which were dropped and the like, such as you can get in. *old files of NY law special old court ... Hall of Record*s Famous trials which are on record: criminal, political: divorce, invest: investigations of love-cults: embezzlement: Do not read the newspaper reports, never mind the dreams of journalists, you read the actual reports, the questions and answers especially of cases which have mellowed a little. (Session Four: 99 handwritten additions italicised).

She includes a number of writing activities that focus on direct observation of models specific to the novel and on accurate and representative verisimilitude, including specific features and habits of different individuals:

> How to observe dialogue. At first your ear will be caught only by what is familiar, you'll shy off the unfamiliar rigmarole and won't even recognise it. But in a week or two you'll be able to recognise even the sort of conventions and banalities you use yourself. These are important for placing a character by speech... (Session Nine: 233)

> Young art students we all know are always drawing subjects in subways and buses. This is what we should do… This is a mere preliminary and may be dry and matter-of-fact … to you, this detailing of a man's age, baldness, thinness and bad … skin colour, but it requires only a little constant practice to be of real help to you in your writing. At first you will not see. You will only learn to see after some practice and after reading suitable books. (Session One: 17)

3. Polti and writing theory

Although she briefly mentions a number of writing practitioners-theorists such as EM Forster (1927) and Ralph Fox (1937), her attention is mainly given to a set of theatre theorists including Konstantin Stanislavski and Lajos Egri. This area of discussion is totally dominated by references to Georges Polti and his identification of three dozen basic dramatic situations (adultery, dishonour, madness, vengeance, etc.); in fact, Stead's discussion and use of Polti comprises about a sixth of the notebooks. Her choice of Polti may partly have been informed by her sojourn in Paris where he was better known and, in any case, he was familiar to both Stead and Blake well before they first attempted scriptwriting before her initial workshops. More pertinently, perhaps, Stead appears attracted to the analytical approach of

Stanislavski, Polti, Egri, and others who reduced playscripts to such basic elements as action and dialogue.

Accepting the applicability of Polti's scheme to all forms of narrative, Stead construes Polti's ahistorical conception of situation as a bridge between character and plot where plot is construed as a configuration of situations:

> These situations if memorised or referred to will serve as a writer's clue, for you, to the plots of all books … with any drama and all … dramas, also to situations in daily life: and give you a sort of skeleton … that you can build up your writer's creative fantasies … upon. (Session Five: 186)

Polti's notion of situation appears to be one of social relationships, not context, setting, or background. Nor is it similar to contemporary narrative theory, especially since Gérard Genette (1972), which tends to construe narrative situations as the amalgamation of two aspects of discourse: voice (who speaks or tells) and focalization (who sees or perceives).

Stead not only provides her students lists of the situations which she translated from her 1924 French reprinting of Polti, but often, like Polti, draws upon plays of Shakespeare and Ibsen when giving detailed examples to illustrate them. She employs Polti's situations in developing the students' manuscripts, asking them to write summaries of the situations in their outlines or manuscripts. She also utilises them in the workshopping as her outlines and analyses of the students' work demonstrate:

> Mr. Wise's novel of the Revolutionary War TIMBER ACRES. (Read the … synopsis.)
> Situations in the synopsis:-
> Family divided and friends divided: or
> SITN. XIII – Hate between those near and dear?
> SITN. XIX – To love an enemy (they love the little Tory.)
> SITN. II (feebly) ONE WHO GIVES AID. (The Saviour, Helper) - to ask and receive refuge.
> SITN. XI – The enigma. (Mystery rider.)
> SITN. XXVIII – Impeded Love-affairs. (Session Five: 140)

Stead's use of Polti emphasizes her focus on writers developing conscious, analytical identification, classification, and understanding of situation and through it the relationships of characters and their conflicts:

> The list of situations here gives a scheme for relating all the forms of novel, on the basis of internal structure and it is for this it is useful: it helps you to classify, the first step in understanding any mass of material, as, when, entering; a forest, being a city-dweller, or a foreigner … and not a botanist, you see only a mass of green and the slow stages to recognition and naming: classification and then true knowledge and finally love, through comprehension – so with the body of the novel you are writing. (Session Six: 171)

Stead's extensive inclusion of Polti illustrates her almost scientific focus on conscious identification and taxonomy of social situations and characters. She stresses how this analysis leads towards the insight and self-awareness writers need to identify and develop message.

4. Workshopping

The notebooks contain critiques of students' work. These are based on students' broad conceptualisations of their novels, their written outlines, or from full drafts. Stead's workshopping often takes the form of summarising and critiquing the theme or plot of the stories, the core message, the characters or genre being attempted:

> Miss Stonakar's novel supposes, at least for the moment until we see her plan and some of her MS some sort of intrigue, conflict between characters and probably between female characters, since CHARLIE the hero is a man and possibly an employer. It is necessary to know much more about this story. But we have the background (an office) and the characters and now we must know what Miss Stonaker wants to <u>say</u>. What is it you want to say? What message? Can you devise one on the lines of our talk last week? E.g. What is CHARLIE? What are the relations of the women to him? What is it about? Do not tell the story. Tell what you want to say. (Session Three: 62, Stead's underlining here and below)

Much of the workshopping emphasizes message, often returning to the distinction between plot and message. Development, too, is often foregrounded, partly owing to incomplete manuscripts:

> Miss Roth then can use this very theme and make a story out of it; but I feel that for a beginner such a very hackneyed theme is exceptionally difficult: it would be almost impossible for Miss Roth to invent anything in this subject at least, at present; and it would remain a flat banality. (Section Three: 57)

Examples, reading and critiques

5. Examples and models

Stead frequently provides examples from novels and non-fiction. Some are used to illustrate specific issues – situations, characterisation, dialogue – whereas others are used as examples of good or bad writing in general. Despite her constant use of examples, Stead makes no direct reference to any of her works, her own research, or the novels she was drafting during the period of the workshops, notably, *For Love Alone* and *Letty Fox: Her Luck*. Noticeable, too, is how she employs classical models for anchoring Polti's situational analyses of playscripts, for instance, *Hamlet*:

> This play is an admirable example of the use of a situation: in practically all its forms.
> Revenge of a fratricide by (presumably) the gods, by the hand of the … victim's son.
> Revenge of … fratricide by the gods. in loss of power, of the throne…
> The theme – son revenges father appears twice: Hamlet revenges his father Hamlet: Laertes revenges Polonius his father. (Session Four: 87)

At the same time, she shows a comprehensive knowledge of recent work, including numerous books recently filmed, for instance *The Ox-Bow Incident* (although she never refers to filmed versions). However, she is openly critically about, even hostile towards, the kind of 'slick' writing produced through the Hollywood studio system and explicitly directs students to avoid it:

> Remember that there is almost no characterization in films, especially from Hollywood and that Hollywood characters usually belong to … "status or occupation types." This is one reason why it is very bad to go to a film while having difficulty with a scene in your novel or with character. (Session Seven: 118)

6. Critiques of novels and other texts

Many of the works praised are recent ones focusing on issues of social change. Works disparaged are those considered formulaic or cow-towing to the commercial demands of magazines or Hollywood. An example of the former to which Stead returns on several occasions is *The Ox-Bow Incident* by Walter van Tilburg Clark (1940), a western novel told from the perspective of one of two drifters who are drawn into a village mob that tracks down and hangs three men wrongly accused of theft and murder:

> Author's aim: he is out to show, explain and detail that the mystery of "how does a community act take place" – it comes out of nothing and simmers down into nothing and those who have done it are ashamed do not mention it after – not "mob madness" but a conscious rather aimless cohesion –
> This is what makes the book exceptionally interesting… Interesting also as a pure example of movie technique in novel-writing. It is, of course, not a novel, but an incident. (Session Nine: 255)

By contrast, works wallowing in the formulaic are dismissed:

> Hence, conventional types, … and cinema types more acceptable to big-business, church, ironbound state and oppressors and also the …such part of the community as are formed by them, than true character-study. (Session Eight: 164 Stead's underlining)

Her inclusion of non-fiction and novels of social commentary as models suggests that she believes that the role of the novel is to illuminate social structures or injustices. However, she makes no explicit reference to Marx or communism in these discussions or, for that matter, anywhere in the notebooks.

7. Reading history and recommendations

Stead includes some extensive lists of novels and plays, wanting to know if her workshop students have read them. Contrary to many of her mostly modern examples and models, these lists include many classics and illustrate a breadth of reading, ranging from eighteenth century (Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* or Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*) to relatively recent novels (such as Elizabeth Madox Roberts' *Time of Man* or Julien Green's *The Dark Journey*). Similarly, she lists sources for research and

reference (including those mentioned above: Forster, Fox, and Egri). How these lists were actually used in class is not fully outlined. Beyond these lists, a number of recommendations are made throughout the notebooks as if Stead is implying by her constant references that one needs to read to write.

Reflections on writing and teaching

8. Critique of the profession and industry

The last session is dedicated to a critique of the publishing profession and the difficulties writers will encounter. This critique is preceded by passing comments about the industry throughout the notebooks:

> When you write you must make up your mind, and you probably have made it up, between…
>
> money and reputation: no security for getting either –
> or GOD and MAMMON.
>
> Those who choose prestige think it will bring money, it sometimes does: and those who choose money, think they can straddle the two horses – probably never is it done. (Session Twelve: 298)

Stead is also willing to correct students' misapprehensions about, for example, the role of agent and publisher:

> The publisher is fixed; his firm has been there for ten, twenty, thirty or a hundred years: you are a meteor – if you have written one book, you may not write ... two; if you have written a best-seller, the second may be a flop – you are not by any means, fixed. The agent, being in business will pay more attention to the publisher. (Session Twelve: 298)

Interestingly, four of Stead's students were published: Bogart Carlaw, *The Wild Place* (Lion Library: New York, 1955) (originally entitled *Giants Should Be Gelded*); Florence Homolka, *Focus on Art: Photographs* (Ivan Obolensky: New York, 1962); Doris Julian (script), *Crystal Tree* (music by Luther Henderson, based on her 1956 novel of the same name and first performed at the AMAS Repertory Theatre, New York, May 1981); and Beth McHenry (with Frederick Myers), *Home is the Sailor* (International Publishers: New York, 1948) and then as Beth McHenry Myers, *The Enchanted Land* (Avalon Books: New York, 1953).

9. Notes on Teaching

The notebooks include comments that explicitly outline parts of her teaching including lesson outlines, homework to be set, or topics in need of re-iteration:

> Homework for next time – I want you each to write a description of one member of this class – not myself, one of … your colleagues. The description is to be neither satiric, disagreeable nor flattering: it is to be as impersonal … but exact as you can make it.
>
> Can be one sentence (if you think it exactly describes) or a page – not more than a page. (Session Six: 215)

There are also occasional responses to students or questions raised in class:

> What do you think about a short story without a plot? A short story need not have a plot, very many don't – they are then, sketches, anecdotes, and the like but equally acceptable. (Session Five: 111)

10. Development of the course

Finally, the notebooks contain many annotations, deletions, and insertions that show the development of the sessions during the first course and revisions made for subsequent ones. These give us an insight into Stead's thinking about her classes and changes she made. Differences can be seen between the initial outline of the course and the actual content of the sessions. Her initial notes on elements of writing, in particular, are developed from the 1943/1944 workshops onwards. The following examples typify her self-conscious, self-critical preparation. Here, we find newly typed pages adding to the course:

> WORKSHOP IN THE NOVEL. New N° 5. Autumn Course.
> 1.Review, see previous yellow page.
> 2. Re workshop journal – list great themes, for one. (to widen horizon, chances.)
> 3. Re steady work on text – plunge in, skip scenes, write towards end, or towards great sc. Or towards devpt. of character, or work up setting, background – but keep

> on writing and keep on refreshing your mind with regards to your proposition. (Section Five: 91)

Also inserted are handwritten notes (represented by italics) similarly amending the emphasis of a session:

> *Lecture no 7 Ask character study*
>
> *Agenda*
> *1 Causation*
> *2 Interesting Monologue –*
> *3 Kinds of characters - more permanent types.* (Session Seven: 163)

Frequently included, too, are handwritten revisions of typed sections, further modifying an original or an altered session:

> New
> AGENDA. N° II. DIALOGUE. 21st Dec.
> *Read 2 extracts – pose, stylisation – before*
> A. To resume – there are two forms of artificial dialogue
> *discussion.* (Session Eleven: 265)

Re-encountering the notebooks

This paper began with a question: Why should we, as writers and teachers of writing, read Stead's writing workshop notebooks? Initially, the approach to the novel seems relatively conventional, focusing upon the longstanding components of character, setting, and the like. Moreover, very little time is devoted to technical issues of genre, narration, and style or to the experimental fiction she herself was then writing. This may have arisen from workshops centred upon the initial conception and drafting of novels rather than the evaluation of completed drafts, thereby limiting reflections upon processes involved in the later development and completion of novels. Nonetheless, she does engage the role and purpose of the novel. Stead explicitly promotes literature as a tool for engaging social concerns, suggesting closely observed social analysis of the real world equally applies to the construction of writer's fictional world. Her 1942 public manifesto ends by seeking the 'content' of literature in

> ...the presentation of 'man alive'... I am not puritan or party, like to know every sort of person; not political, but on the side of those who have suffered oppression, injustice, coercion, prejudice, and have been harried from birth. (Stead 1942: 1330)

While Stead was clearly left-wing, she makes no direct reference to or mention of Marx, Marxism, or communism in the notebooks. However we characterise her political values, it is clear she was not preparing a Marxist manual of writing.

She also reflects upon the processes involved in crafting a novel. She particularly focuses upon how situation and message are used as the means for workshop participants to develop conscious, self-analytical control of the writing process from its preparatory phase onwards. To develop this self-awareness, Stead draws upon Egri, Stanislavski, and especially Polti, taking techniques from drama to teach the novel. What might account for such a bias? Perhaps it derives from the bare structural approach pedagogically informing her conception of the novel. Stead introduces a unique factor into her workshops, the situational analysis of Georges Polti. Polti becomes Stead's means of teaching her students how to analyse and understand novels, when conceptualising them, drafting them, editing them, or just reading them. Polti's nuanced taxonomy is not used as a crude source for stories, but a vocabulary for discussing them. To that extent, Polti shapes Stead's pedagogy in one crucial respect: the analytical takes precedence over the experiential.

The workshop notebooks lend themselves to an historical examination of the teaching of creative writing and, in that respect, act as a basis for comparison with current teaching. Many novelists have written books on how to write novels, but very few have left a lasting record of how they actually taught a course. Stead enables us to examine the shift from writers learning their craft in the salon to an apprenticeship in the classroom. Future research into female writers teaching writing – Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Toni Morrison – might invite further re-appraisal of Stead, a Sydney-born, mid twentieth-century, cosmopolitan, experimental novelist.

At a pedagogic level, we know how and what she prepared for her writing classes, but of course we do not know precisely how she used her materials or what else she might have introduced into her workshops. Nothing indicates the extent to which she worked with the group as a whole or with individuals alone. However, the notebooks do provide evidence of what she taught about the goals or ideals of writing novels. They clearly manifest an emphasis upon observation over inspiration, upon a

researched sociological rather than a purely personal approach to content. In this, Stead as a teacher of writing counters any temptation to view the novelist in romantic terms, as someone simply given to self-expression. If nothing else, Stead makes us confront the difference between how we write and what we teach about writing. Her notebooks give us a unique resource for reflecting on the history of the teaching of novel writing, the part of novelists, women and Australians, in that tradition, the style and content of our teaching – what is constant and what is unique to the teacher or the era, and what novelists' teachings can tell us about them as writers.

Works cited

Allott, M 1959 *Novelists on the Novel*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London return to text

Baker, GP 1919 *Dramatic Technique*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston return to text

Blake, A 1997 'A Reconsideration of Christina Stead at Work: Fact into Fiction', *Australian Literary Studies* 18, 1: 12-20 return to text

Carter, A 1982 'Unhappy Families,' *London Review of Books* 4, 17: 11-13: http://www.lrb.co.uk/v04/n17/angela-carter/unhappy-families (accessed 13 November 2012) return to text

Clark, WT 1940 *The Ox-Bow Incident*, Random House, New York return to text

Egri, L 1942 *How to Write a Play*, Simon & Schuster, New York [= *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1946] return to text

Franzen, J 2010 'Rereading "The Man Who Loved Children"', *The New York Times* 159, Sunday Book Review (6 June): http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/06/books/review/Franzen-t.html?pagewanted=all (accessed 13 November 2012) return to text

Forster, EM 1927 *Aspects of the Novel*, Edward Arnold, London return to text

Fox, R 1937 *The Novel and the People*, Wishart & Lawrence, London return to text

Genette, G 1972 *Figures III*, Éditions du Seuil: Paris [= *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans JE Lewin, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1980] return to text

Lever, S 2003 'Christina Stead's Workshop in the Novel: How to Write a "Novel of Strife"', *Journal of the Australasian Society of Australian Literature* 2: 81-91 return to text

McGurl, M 2009 *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA return to text

Myers, DG 1993 'The Rise of Creative Writing', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54, 2: 277-297 return to text

Myers, DG 1996 *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago return to text

Polti, G 1894 *Les Trente-six situations dramatiques*, Mercure de France, Paris [= *Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*, trans L Ray & J Knapp Reeve, Franklin, 1916)] return to text

Rowley, H 1993 *Christina Stead: A Biography*, William Heinemann, Port Melbourne return to text

Sage, L 1990 'A goat with grit', *Times Literary Supplement* 4530: 85 return to text

Sage, L 1993 'A necessary cruelty', *Times Literary Supplement* 4716: 3-4 return to text

Stanislavski, K 1936 *An Actor Prepares*, ed & trans ER Hapgood, Theatre Arts, New York return to text

Stead, C 1939 'Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel', in RG Geering & A Segerberg (eds) *Christina Stead: Selected Fiction and Nonfiction*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1994: 198-199 return to text

Stead, C 1940 *The Man Who Loved Children*, Simon & Schuster, New York return to text

Stead, C 1942 'Stead, Christina', in S Kunitz & H Haycraft (eds), *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature*, HW Wilson, New York: 1329-1330 return to text

Stead, C 1944 *For Love Alone*, Harcourt Brace, New York return to text

Stead, C 1946 *Letty Fox: Her Luck*, Harcourt Brace, New York return to text

Williams, C 1983 *Christina Stead: A Life of Letters*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne return to text

Alison Burns teaches in the School of Communication & Creative Arts at Deakin University. She has taught professional writing, linguistics, and literacy at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Dr RA Goodrich also teaches in the School of Communication & Creative Arts at Deakin University – Melbourne Campus, co-edits the online refereed arts-practice journal Double Dialogues*, and previously contributed 'Scriptwriters? Who Needs Them?' to the October 2009 issue of TEXT.*

TEXT
Vol 18 No 1 April 2014
http://www.textjournal.com.au
General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy & Enza Gandolfo
text@textjournal.com.au