

Craft Chaps Vol. 1

METHOD IN CRAFT:
Stanislavski, Voice and Workshop
Alternatives

By Bayo Ojikutu



METHOD IN CRAFT:
STANISLAVSKI, VOICE AND WORKSHOP ALTERNATIVES

BAYO O. OJIKUTU

I. THE WORKSHOP

I must allow a disclaimer at the outset. Not only is the traditional Masters in Fine Arts in Writing workshop the dominant—*only*?—practiced means of academic training available to the developing literary writer, but it is a perfectly functional ideological approach to the study of the craft for most aspirants. Because notions of audience and marketability govern the bourgeois muse of so many empowered with the leisure and driven by the inclination to write—although we never admit it, for everyone's muse is *pure*—the cult of collaborative acceptance and spiritual malleability embodied by the workshop serves an undeniable purpose. Even for those student writers whose literary ambitions are primarily of an aesthetic, rather than a capitalistic, nature, the affirmation bestowed upon one's work through the workshop experience serves a certain egoistic exigency.

Yet, for those of us whose goals lay outside the streamlined scope of this dominant literary pedagogy, examination of the workshop model reveals a myriad of philosophical problems. Rather than providing an intellectual and spiritual forum for the artistic growth of the literary aspirant, the workshop serves as a conditioning ground, preparing the culturally acceptable prosaic idea for authorization through publication. It is a politically correct, homogenized model for the perpetuation of a status quo notion of functional writing.

The workshop has little to do with art, everything to do with socialization: grinding the writer's consciousness into an undecipherable pulp, until the writer's work is ready to be further pasteurized through the editorial methods of the country's major publishing houses and elite literary magazines. From Chris Altacruise's satirical essay on the contemporary state of American literature as spawned by the M.F.A. workshop: "[t]he proper modern short story—like those in Joyce's *Dubliner*—is a non-dramatic series of events ending in an epiphany, a type of story immensely popular with influential faculty . . . [b]rief in length and scope, glass-pane language, yuppies, relationships, material that could be drawn from your own life . . . you take this popular story form -- epiphany meets middle-class Ivy League milieu—create a vast system of programs where everyone wants to be in *The New Yorker*, and you've got a late twentieth-century school of fiction, a school in which flat passes for oblique, vacuity for resonance, and in which the trivial is defended by social-realist rationalization" (19).

Altacruise is, himself, a product of several "prestigious" writing workshops (he, ironically, does not identify any of them), and constructs his article out of interviews with workshop colleagues, quotes with published workshop graduates, and his own editorial analysis of the model. He thereby convincingly delineates the powers wielded by the workshop in conforming the writer's muse. "The first thing a creative-writing workshop produces," he claims, "is an atmosphere of groupthink, an unspoken consensus on politics and aesthetics that controls student work—from the story genre, down deep into the psychic creation of the character, and out into the writer's very ability to imagine and create a world."

Malevolent as that assertion seems, there exist more riveting corollaries to the homogenization of literature through workshop; what of the student who does not belong to the model's dominant community in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, or class?

Beyond the notion of the workshop crushing the non-conformist creative muse, it would seem that such a pedagogical model works also to perpetuate Soliday's notion of social hybridization—the splintering of selves (especially among non-majority racial, gender and ethnic groups) fostered out of the marginalized individual's interface with a secondary discourse community. If we are to accept the workshop as a secondary institution as defined by Gee—schools, workplaces, stores, government offices, businesses, or churches (8)—we must recognize the part that the literary workshop plays in the smothering of non-hegemonic cultural voices, the marginalization of the prose of any resistant renegade.

Some may apply Gee's interpretation of social constructs and contend that the workshop, due to the apparent intimacy of its participants, is more analogous to a mode of primary discourse—"people with whom we share a great deal of knowledge because of a great deal of contact and experiences" (7). The subtext of such a position would be the idea that nothing renders human beings more intimate than the sharing of the soul. To this, I reply—and Altacruise would concur—that the intimacy promoted by the workshop is built upon false notions, premised upon conformity to hegemonic pretense. Further, the literary workshop, as we deal with it on the Masters of Fine Arts level, is intrinsically attached to the academy, and therefore is a component of a dominant secondary institution. Lastly, not only are acceptable "literary" pieces spawned out of the workshop model reflective of the writer's act of acquiescence to a hegemonic aesthetic, but, in the case of the racial/gender/ethnic other, the writer is acquiescing to notions that likely run counter to certain cultural assumptions, and work to further splinter the writer's notion of self—as do all secondary models.

Altacruise does briefly deal with the issue of race and the workshop, yet from the perspective of the majority (21): "[A] writer placed a scene at a [D.C.] Metro shop and described a newspaper boy, hawking papers, as 'black.' For forty-five minutes the [workshop] group tore into the writer as a racist, a closet Klansman, based on that one word. The professor wound up lecturing the other writers on their responsibility to write about America's class society as it is rather than present a delusional utopia. Afterward the group reconvened in the darkness outside and agreed that the big man himself was another racist . . . [a]fter that attack, not one black character appeared in another story for the rest of the year. The message was clear: Segregation is wrong, except in fiction." More illustration of the socializing force that is the literary workshop—similar examples are culled from the attempts of workshop students to deal with race, class, and gender.

Culled from Altacruise's assessment of the workshop experience on the M.F.A. level, and on our own theory-based study in hegemonic discourse communities, and the interface between the individual and dominant institutions, I offer this as a working definition of the graduate level literary workshop:

An academic function, implicitly supported by the major publishing entities, wherein students form a discourse community—based initially on shared literary aspirations—that operates as a microcosm of the mainstream cultural marketplace with which the aspirant desires to interface. Through the coercive force of the community at the evolved height of the discourse, a homogenous sociopolitical value system is imprinted upon the student's consciousness, and manifested within student prose.

This attempt at clarifying our understanding of the workshop is made, chiefly, in an effort to begin the work of posing a pedagogical alternative to its hegemonic status

within the world of literary-writing scholarship: here, in a manner of speaking, it is my ambition to begin to suggest a counter-hegemony.

II. AN ALTERNATIVE PEDAGOGY

Konstantin Stanislavski is credited with re-inventing the pedagogical approach to the acting craft. A renowned late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Russian actor, director, theater reformer, and thinker, Stanislavski posited that the acting art was more than imple communication of lines to an audience and placement of objects and bodies on a stage: “‘Acting’ is something nobody should be caught doing. ‘Acting’ is lying. Nobody likes a liar. If an actor must ‘act’ all of her or his roles without at least that amount of actual experiencing that’s within her/his control, that actor doesn’t deserve to be called an actor . . . the consummate actor is able to *believe in a fiction as if it were true*” (Parke, 1). Stanislavski’s approach to the craft was evolved out of an amalgamation of theories both aesthetic in relation to the craft itself and psychological in relation to the actor’s pathos. It was his position that—rather than memorizing lines to belt to a theater audience and timing those lines appropriately in relation to the other players’ periods and ellipses, while standing just so on a raised faux plateau of wood—the actor must develop a mastery over the primary instrument (the human neurological system) through “concentration on attention,” “relaxation,” and “sense memory” (Moore, 2). Thereby, according to Stanislavski, the actor is able to “become” a voice, rather than simply “emoting” a voice for the entertainment of others. “Emotion on stage is different from emotion in life because an actor leads a dual existence on stage . . . the actor on stage lives a ‘repeated’ emotion, not a ‘primary’ emotion . . . [u]nlike a primary emotion, a repeated emotion does not absorb the actor entirely.” The precept of Stanislavski’s teachings was to train the player to “become,” rather than to “seem as” or “sound like.” It is a methodology that focuses on turning the artist within, in effort to garner command over certain gifts, before the artist turns without and communicates those gifts to an audience.

There exist parallels between Stanislavski’s teachings and the philosophical contentions found within the writings of Donald Murray and Michel Foucault—admittedly on separate levels of theory. Murray calls for the writing student to recognize that they are “individuals who must explore the writing process in their own way, some fast, some slow, whatever it takes for them . . . to find their own way to their own truth” (6). Although Murray’s suggestions are intended for the Composition Theory community, they seem to take on a more salient quality when applied to a model for the teaching of literary writing—for in this field, the writer is, or certainly should be, in pursuit of a truth that stands even more wholly and distinctly as “their own” as it is siphoned from muse to paper. Reaching from within the self then, rather than satisfying the aesthetic and political needs of a “shared” community—as witnessed in the workshop—should be the first aim of a functional model for one training in the literary craft.

Foucault writes of the “singular relationship that holds between the author and text, ‘the manner in which a text apparently points to this figure who is outside and precedes it’ (179). Although his definition of the author-function seems to pre-suppose the very notion of the *author* upon the presence of capitalist institutions and assumptions,

a function which would seem to counteract the mission at hand here, Foucault does raise potential components of a pedagogical model through his specification of what constitutes the author itself. "It is well known that in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first person pronoun, the present indicative tense, nor, for that matter, its signs of localization refer directly to the writer, either to the time when he wrote, or to the specific act of writing; rather, they stand for a "second self" whose similarity to the author is never fixed and undergoes considerable alteration within the course of a book" (187-88). This sense of alternative modes of emoting witnessed within the literary arts (which Foucault referred as "quasi-discourse," perhaps because there is an accepted, active schism between the author's state of existence and the state of non-existence of fiction), is expected in that it is assumed by both author and reader to be present. And out of this quasi-discourse is produced Foucault's notion of the "plurality of egos" -- a "plurality" with which the author must become intimate, before the author can effectively marshal an emotionally salient fictive tool (the muse), communicate anything that is true, to an audience of readers.

III. PRACTICE

According to her book jacket, Sonia Moore is an internationally acclaimed teacher and scholar who has invested thirty years into the training of actors as the founder of the American Center for Stanislavski's Art. In *Stanislavski Revealed*, Moore offers a transcript of one of her classes, a class in which she introduces the rudimentary elements of the "Stanislavski method" to her pupils. Here, I appropriate her teaching strategies and attempt to impose them upon a hypothetical class in literary writing.

The objective is for the writer to come to terms with muse, command the author-function, and thereby, wield the capacity to create lucid characters who are afforded credence through their substantially communicated motivations. A subsidiary purpose is for the writer to find the path to carry the writing to an intended notion of emotional *truth*. I have substituted the "write" command where Moore asked that her acting students to make "specific gestures" or "fulfill their physical action" then "justify their responses": I am not certain as to whether Ms. Moore would approve of my interpretation, but, for our purposes, it is a start . . .

"Please put your desks in a circle and sit down. Now think: what am I doing in this circle. Know your objective. Build the circumstances. As you are sitting, wonder about why you are there, evaluate your position, make a decision about what to do next, and then summarize the whole process of thought in a writing of whatever length you feel appropriate.

Now, without looking at each other, stand up together and turn toward your chairs. You must wonder, evaluate, come to a decision as to why you are doing what you are doing. Take hold of the chairs and raise them. Why are you doing this? Before you write, you must know as the author—even if your character doesn't know—and your writing must express this knowledge (or lack thereof). Let me show you what I mean. Put the chairs down. Everyone walk around the classroom quickly, now sit and write about why and how you did so . . .

“Let us try a more complex improvisation. There was a crime committed last night. You are all suspected of being the attacker. You come in and sit down [at the police station]. The victim of the attack is going to identify the guilty person. Decide whether you are guilty or innocent. Give a noun name to the event. Have an objective. The ‘magic’ is of great help if you use it honestly. Ask yourself ‘What would I do if I were innocent of the crime? Guilty of it?—what would be your mental response? Know your objective; use people you know, perhaps. Imagine what you would do with your body—what you would be thinking, how you would comport yourself. Before each movement, wonder, evaluate, come to a decision about what to do, and write the words that communicate your state of mind in this scenario with maximum lucidity. When you finish writing, imagine another appropriate movement. The gesture does not have to be grand in its description, but it must have meaning. Write about that one also.

“Now you hear a voice ordering you to rise and turn around slowly, because the victim of the attack must see you in profile. You cannot see this person. Imagine another gesture that expresses your attitude to that command. You’re told to sit down. Think of your response . . . now write a passage that expresses—once again in as compelling a fashion as possible—conveys your response to the whole experience.

“Stanislavski said, ‘If you learn to think and to fulfill actions, and in addition you have control of your tempo-rhythms, you’re in the driver’s seat.’ The rhythm of thought and motion expresses human experience, and control over it is one of the conditions for mastering your gift” (Moore, 39-41).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Surely, the Stanislavski method itself functions within the acting field as a form of hegemonic pedagogy: compromising all opposing forms of pedagogy such that its dominance is preserved. Yet, within the field where the fiction writer’s muse finds her fancy, there is a certain need for a proverbial shake-up in the ranks, at the highest level of the academy (excuse unduly mixed metaphors). For the workshop is serving no higher purpose than providing material to the mighty institutions that publish pap for the consumption of a McDonald’s-poisoned mass, serving to condition an art, and the artists, such that they are indistinguishable in thought, product, ethic from the mainstream marketplace, which it serves. While what is truly needed within the contemporary literary world is an absolute flushing-out of so much of dominant thought, from M.F.A. Workshop, to Book-of-the-Month club, to Random House assistant editor, the first step toward revision is pluralism. I pose we begin with the formation of this alternative pedagogical model for the literary aspirant: a counter-hegemony for the personal muse, perhaps?

ANOTHER EXERCISE: BEGINNING THE FICTIVE

The overriding objective of this exercise is to encourage the student to embrace the idea that fiction is **not about the writer** (never directly about the writer, that is); embrace and appreciate that fiction is, instead, about **what the writer knows**, and how the

writer's **knowledge fosters their imagination, and informs composition.**

Toward that end of fashioning a conceit wherein the above concepts operate to tell a story, consider the following exercise:

Carefully read the following bulleted prompts and have students write their responses into a journal specifically dedicated to their fiction writing.

- **In 10-15 lines**, no more, no less, define “yourself” by responding to the following: Where are you from? How do you gender identify? How do you look? What language do you primarily speak (or what dialect thereof)? Do you believe in/practice belief in a divine being (what do you call this Divine)? Where do you go each day? Do you/did you aspire to a specific profession in life? Did you make it (how did you make your way into said profession)? What are you doing to realize your aspirations? Who are your favorite artists (musical or otherwise)? What/whom do you love? What/whom do you detest?

- **Read & re-read your responses to the above**, then in **one or two paragraph(s)**, identify and describe a character who is the opposite of the person whom you defined yourself to be. That is, consider each descriptive bit offered above, imagine the opposite (or antithesis), & describe this fictive persona, the antithetical you.

- **In one or two paragraphs**, describe this character's morning routine. What wakes them from slumber, how does the character cover their body after rising from bed, in what order does the character proceed in the restroom while cleansing away sleep's remain, in what sort of clothing does the character dress for the day, do they eat or drink anything before leaving the house? What? Does this antithetical being watch television, listen to the radio, surf the internet amid their preparation – to or for what? Where are they going for the day?

- **In one paragraph**, introduce a problem which serves as an impediment to this character completing the day as planned. This problem may arise amid your antithesis' commute to his/her identified destination, or it may manifest after the character has arrived at that destination during some later portion of the day; the problem itself may take any shape or form, or emerge from whatever wellspring the author so desires (so long as the author recognizes that the identification/deployment of this problem inevitably determines the genre in which the remaining story will operate). The only dictates are that the problem must emerge after your antithesis has left home in the morning, post routine, and that it must be of sufficient capacity that it will serve as an obstacle to the meting-out of the character's intended day.

If occasion is taken to reflect on this exercise post-writing, consider the impact had by this crafted obstacle, the degree to which its features and the manner of its emergence serve as clues, revealing (and to some exacting degree for the reader, defining), the genre of this narrative in which the character lives.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gee, James Paul, "What is Literacy", Mailman Foundation Conference on Families and Literacy, Harvard Graduate School of Education, March 6-7, 1987.

Foucault, Michel, "What is an Author", *Professing the New Rhetorics*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Blair, 1994

Horner, Bruce, "Students, Authorship and the Work of Composition", *College English*, Vol.59, No.5, 09/97

Moore, Sonia, Stanislavski Revealed: *The Actor's Guide to Spontaneity on Stage*, Applause Theater Books, NY, 1968

Murray, Donald, "Teaching Writing as Process Not Product", Cross-Walk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bayo Ojikutu is the author of the critically-renowned novels *47th Street Black* and *Free Burning*. His work has been recognized by the Washington Prize for Fiction, the Great American Book Award and Pushcart—along with various other bullet-points of renown, along the way. A graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, much of the essay/exercise made available here, he originally produced while earning his Master's in English/Creative Writing at DePaul University. Ojikutu has taught creative writing, literature, film studies, the business of publishing, etc. at DePaul, the University of Chicago, Roosevelt University (and elsewhere) for more than fifteen years. Ojikutu and his family currently live in the Greater Chicagoland area.

Sundress Publications • Knoxville, TN

Copyright © 2019 Bayo O. Ojikutu

ISBN: 978-1-939675-88-0

Published by Sundress Publications

www.sundresspublications.com

Editor: Meagan Cass, Amy Sayre Baptista

Editorial Assistant: Anna Black

Colophon: This book is set in Perpetua Titling MT, Garamond, and Centaur.

Cover Design: Sierra Jones

Book Design: Tierney Bailey