Introduction

> Are we characters, or are we the mechanical results of situations? The only thing is that we have will; *mechanical* bees shuffling mechanically into a mechanical hive, act just the same as real bees, when they are all moving inward together, but when they are left alone, they do nothing, whereas we do some little thing.[1]

Reluctantly admitting to Thistle Harris that she is like her father, that she 'cannot avoid ... the melodramatic situations of life' in which she catches herself 'trotting out the regulation remarks just like a play', Christina Stead engages not only with 'the question of Buffon'[2] but with the thought of Darwin, Nietzsche and Marx. In Stead's fiction, the unflinching gaze of scientific naturalism combined with the creative energies of Nietzschean will are tributary to, and sometimes in tension with, the cultural and political values of Marxism; these tensions crystallise in repeated narrative returns to questions about whether and how individual subjects can negotiate the seemingly omnipresent forces of determination. Mapping these tensions, my thesis explores the role of Marxist thought in Stead's authorial production; in particular, I examine the paradox of how Marxism both constitutes, and is implicitly tested by, Stead's expressly gendered representations of the revolutionary subject.

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[1] To Thistle Harris (6 April 1942), in Christina Stead, *A Web of Friendship: Selected Letters (1928-1973)*, ed. R. G. Geering (Pymble, Australia: HarperCollins/ Angus and Robertson, 1992), p. 95. Hereafter referred to as *Selected Letters, Vol. 1*.

[2] Stead continues in the same passage from *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, 'You know the question of Buffon? ... "How do we know bees have a vital principle?"' (p. 95). Georges-Louis Comte de Buffon (1707-1788) was a naturalist whose thinking was 'formed by a mechanistic tradition, complicated by Newton's influence, and balanced by a tendency toward vitalist concepts'. See entry in *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, ed. Charles C. Gillespie, Vol II (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 579.

Using approaches from cultural materialist and feminist literary discourses, I focus on the 'revolutionary subject' as a gendered construction in Stead's narratives in order to demonstrate how moral and political values underpinned by Marxism have constituted their terms and development. Stead's novels, however, are not just passive reflections of a monolithic set of pre-given ideas. On the contrary, I see them as engaging actively and critically with the developing tradition of Marxist thought, while retaining its epistemological boundaries.

My use of the phrase, 'authorial production', deliberately combines and puts into dialogue two normally distinct author functions, referring both to the diverse range of Stead's fictional and non-fictional texts, as well as to the production, through those texts, of an authorial persona. Rather than repeating the gesture of author-criticism which results, according to Barthes, in the foreclosure of writing through the imposition of the 'Author' as 'origin' and 'transparent allegory of the fiction', I prefer to read Stead's authorial production as cultural performance.[3] Invoking scriptedness, 'cultural performance' carries the notion that texts are not only constituted through a shaping network of texts and discourses but projected towards an audience.[4] In adopting a poststructuralist vantage point, I nonetheless want to read the signs in these texts of shaping intentionalities, and of projected purposes, though admittedly these are continually undone by what Bakhtin calls the heteroglossic, decentralising forces of language.[5] To agree that the 'author' is a mythical projection - to refuse to seek an origin for the text - should not, however, entail abandoning reading to decontextualised, undifferentiated multiplicity. Such an approach would

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[3] Roland Barthes, 'The death of the author', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), p. 143. Susan Sheridan articulates the significance of the work of Barthes and Foucault for reading Stead's narratives in other than autobiographical terms: *Christina Stead* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988), pp. 16-20.

[4] Barthes, in 'The death of the author', also cites the 'performative' as the linguistic category most suited to designate the modern scriptor's enunciative 'act' as emptied of 'content'. pp. 145-6.

[5] See M. M. Bakhtin, 'From the prehistory of novelistic discourse', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press, 1981), especially p. 67.

evacuate the text of its signs of moral and political value that materially orient it, rendering it 'worldly'. In view of Edward Said's objection to critical approaches which 'place undue emphasis on the limitlessness of interpretation', and his countering claim that texts 'place themselves ... by soliciting the world's attention', I seek to recognise how Stead's narratives materially orient themselves towards the world, projecting positions of political value.[6] This recognition will not, in my argument, preclude a poststructuralist understanding of their textual forces of heterogeneity, ambiguity and open-endedness.

A return to relevant biographical and historical sources is warranted in order to identify and contextualise the signs in Stead's narratives which orient them towards moral and political meanings, and in particular towards Marxism. While there is plenty of evidence to establish Marxism's importance to Stead, reading her fiction as partisan, as Chris Williams observes, is a less than straightforward task.[7] As Susan Sheridan remarks at the outset of her book-length study:

> Stead was always happy to agree that she was a writer of the Left, that her view of things was informed by Marxism as well as by an early interest in revolutionary history and in the Australian tradition of political radicalism, although she was also adamant (survivor of the Cold War as she was) that broadcasting political messages was not the role of fiction.[8]

The apparent divide between documented, biographical evidence of Stead's Marxist sympathies and her forceful rejection of partisanship in her books has not deterred critics of the New Left, such as Terry Sturm and Michael Wilding, from identifying the fictions' political - indeed Marxist - aesthetic. Stead's authorial pronouncements, however, have also been seized on by those who would resist such marked political appropriations and

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[6] Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983; London: Faber and Faber, 1984), pp. 39-40. See also Christopher Norris's discussion of Said's position, in 'Between Marx and Nietzsche: the politics of deconstruction', in *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (1982; London: Routledge, 1988), p. 89.

[7] See Chris Williams, *Christina Stead: A Life of Letters* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1989), pp. 224-5.

[8] Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, p. 2.

who would claim that Stead's work, even if broadly political, transcends party politics.[9] Further, the debate over the significance of Stead's intellectual commitment to Marxism - and the degree to which this is important in her narratives - has more recently been fuelled by Hazel Rowley's biography of Stead. Rowley's biography has been criticised on the basis that it undervalues precisely this dimension of Stead's formation.[10]

It is timely to propose, therefore, that Marxism not only informs narrative investigation of sites of ideological reproduction such as the patriarchal family, but also constructs the implied positions in Stead's novels of value, judgement and belief. Although increasingly represented as unreachable and inaccessible, what Marx articulates as the 'realm of freedom' that 'can only flourish with [the] realm of necessity as its basis'[11] is a promise of worldly salvation that retroactively shapes struggle and desire in Stead's texts. As Letty Fox tells it, a reporter once asked Karl Marx 'to define life in one word', and Marx answered, 'Struggle'.[12] Many of Stead's protagonists struggle, but remain captive to ideology, and are thus unable to experience a fully awakened, fully sensual existence. Terry Eagleton suggests that belief in 'the exercise of human senses, powers and capacities', 'the unfolding of ... sensuous richness for its own sake', functions for Marx as an aesthetic and moral imperative, 'an absolute end in itself, without need of utilitarian justification'; but in Marxism, he continues, such fulfilment of human powers can only be attained through political and economic revolution, and through the abolition of the class system of bourgeois capitalism:

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[9] See, for example, R. G. Geering, *Christina Stead* (1969; London: Angus and Robertson, 1979), 179-180; and Don Anderson, 'Christina Stead's Unforgettable Dinner-Parties', in *Southerly* 39 (1979): 36-8.

[10] See Carole Ferrier, 'Review of biography', in *Australian Literary Studies* 16. 3 (May 1994): 348-351; Ken Stewart, 'Christina Stead, Scheherazade and Frankenstein's Monster', in *Southerly* 53. 4 (December 1993): 166-173; Michael Wilding, 'Fiction is not fact', in *Australian Book Review* 152 (July 1993), pp. 8-9.

[11] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol 3, intro. Ernest Mandel, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 958-9.

[12] Christina Stead, *Letty Fox, Her Luck* (1946; North Ryde, Sydney: Angus and Roberston, 1991), p. 288. Bruce Holmes quotes this in 'Moral Dialectic in the Fiction of Christina Stead', diss., U of Newcastle, 1984, p. 15.

Only by subverting the state will we be able to experience our bodies.[13]

The heroic protagonists who most successfully subvert and supersede oppressive social structures, notably Louisa Pollit and Teresa Hawkins, are represented in passage towards the goal of liberated being, as newly awakened, sensual beings in progress towards the future, in company with a collectively striving humanity. The experience of modernity, which has been seen as a shaping force in Marx's aesthetic,[14] crucially informs Stead's depictions of characters who struggle to emerge from provincial, prehistoric space-time to a wider, public space of progressive history. The dual goal in these narratives - of emancipation and of the ultimate quest for full expression of human capacities and desires - resonates as Marxist, and in a metaphoric sense, as revolutionary, since it characterises individual struggle as a necessarily subversive and political negotiation of the binding conditions of social oppression. Where bourgeois social relations are represented in and reproduced through the bourgeois institution of the family, these are clearly relations which Stead's truly 'revolutionary subjects' act to refuse.

As highlighted in the phrase 'revolutionary subject', Stead's novels engage with an ongoing 'subject' of debate within Marxism: from Lenin's vanguardism to Althusser's poststructuralist Marxism, the role of revolutionary agency has been both theorised and contested. The teleology of revolutionary consciousness - and in Lukács's theory, its chief attribute[15] - is the goal of full realisation of human sensualities and powers. Such longings also shape Stead's narrative explorations of human struggle. Comparatively few of Stead's protagonists achieve the status of 'revolutionary subject', but the category implicitly

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[13] Terry Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 202. This paraphrases the last sentence of Marx's *The German Ideology*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), p. 164.

[14] See Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982; New York: Verso, 1983), pp. 88-90.

[15] See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1968), pp. 202-206. In discussing reification, Lukács returns to Hegel, as well as to the early writings of Marx, to argue that it is only from the proletariat's standpoint that dualities between subject and object, philosophy and praxis can be dialectically overcome.

constructs positions of value and knowledge in her texts. From the 'strange bedfellows' (capitalists and communists) of *House of All Nations*, and the proudly passionate performances of Louisa Pollit and Teresa Hawkins, to the errancy of later female revolutionaries such as Nellie Cotter and Emily Wilkes-Howard, Stead's revolutionary subjects are conceptualised in gendered terms, and this gendering conditions their refusals and renegotiations of kinship relations, communality, sexuality and love. But if the gendering of Stead's revolutionary subjects co-ordinates the ways in which they rebel against oppressive structures, it also contributes (particularly in her postwar novels) to their complicity with, and reproduction of, these same structures. In these novels, ideology becomes even more encompassing and constitutive of subjectivity itself, prefiguring Althusserian notions of interpellation.[16] If there is preservation of 'agency' in these postwar novels, it is located in the exercise of a narrative scrutiny that objectifies the protagonist - a fascinated, escalating and at times ambiguous gaze which, despite apparent impartiality, works to reinscribe 'proper' categories of gender and sexuality.

In terms of critical reception, there has been consistent but muted recognition of the influence of Marxism in Stead's fiction. In one of the earliest Marxist appropriations, Isidor Schneider's review of *The Man Who Loved Children*, in 1940, identified Engels's *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* as a crucial intertext. For Schneider, the 'tragic source' of the conflict in *The Man Who Loved Children* is 'the Pollit family's insecure and inelastic economy'. Louise Yelin finds that Schneider's review, implicitly employing Engels's aesthetic dictum that realism must entail '"the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances"', insists (in contrast to more recent New Critical readings) on the class representativeness of the protagonists; additionally, according to Yelin,

[16] See Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1971), esp. pp 160-5.

Schneider's class-oriented reading effectively submerges other issues in the text, such as nationality and gender, and is consistent with editorial emphases in *New Masses*, a key American communist party organ of the 1930s and 1940s.[17] As a contributor to *New Masses*, Stead was a highly critical sympathiser on the fringes of activism, who observed with interest and disgust the machinations of party hacks. This position of critical insider/outsider - as elaborated particularly in chapters one and five - structurally informs Stead's relation to Marxism, and her 'cultural performance'.

With the revival of interest in Stead's work after 1965, Marxist readings were still in a minority of critical appropriations, although there was an increasing tendency to acknowledge the political orientation of the fiction. Jose Yglesias emphatically appropriated Stead's work for Marxism, claiming that 'the solid structure of [*The Man Who Loved Children*] comes from political ideology'.[18] Yglesias asserts that the neglect of Stead springs from incomprehension of her Marxist point of view, not only by the literary establishment but also by the revisionist Communist establishment of the 1930s and 1940s.[19] In a 1966 review of *Dark Places of the Heart* (the American issue of *Cotters' England*), having in the meantime sought Stead's confirmation of his earlier interpretation,[20] Yglesias widened his attack, asking again why Stead's work had not received due recognition:

> ... because Miss Stead seems so old-fashioned, she doesn't interest the *avant-garde*; because her vision is so radical, she disquiets the mass of readers who are middle class; because she is so original and tough-minded, left wingers feel no comfort of recognition.[21]

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[17] Louise Yelin in her 'Fifty Years of Reading: A Reception Study of *The Man Who Loved Children*', in *Contemporary Literature* XXXI, 4 (1990), pp. 479-82. The phrase, quoted by Yelin (p. 480), comes from Engels's letter to Margaret Harkness.

[18] Jose Yglesias, 'Marx as Muse', in *The Nation*, 5 April 1965, p. 369.

[19] Yglesias, 'Marx as Muse', p. 370.

[20] See Stead's account of this conversation, in letter to Leda and Stanley Burnshaw (10 November 1966), in *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, p. 271.

[21] Jose Yglesias, 'Marking Off A Chunk Of England', *The Nation* 23 (24 October 1966), p. 421.

Although this is qualified by an ensuing remark, that 'a sensual, deeply joyous appreciation of how life is lived' would make her novels appealing to all, regardless of politics, Yglesias implicitly constructs Stead's work as morally and politically austere, as elite. Like Randall Jarrell, whose notable intervention focused on the scandal of critical neglect,[22] Yglesias similarly serves the purpose of cultural 'consecration' of Stead's work; following mainstream critical practices of rediscovering one who has been obscure, Yglesias exercises and strategically augments his own social and cultural capital in the literary field, implicitly observing the rules of the game.[23]

If Yglesias discerns Stead's treatment of character as Marxist, Terry Sturm, in 1974, specifies her political aesthetic, arguing that Stead - innovating within the tradition of naturalism, but departing from both bourgeois and socialist realism - forges a 'new kind of realism' geared to represent the workings of ideology through individual consciousness. This technique allows Stead to interweave, or to 'complicate', personal and political realms:

> Her novels are saturated with ideology - ideologies of sex, of family, of economics and politics and culture. Ideology is part of the texture of characters' individual lives, inseparable from their experience ... Christina Stead dramatizes ideas at points where they are not quite conscious in the minds of her characters, where they clash in confusing and often destructive ways with inarticulate aspirations and needs.[24]

Sturm's identification of Stead's drama of the individual's practical, non-conscious but ideologically 'saturated' interactions is particularly pertinent to this discussion. While not specifically focused on gender, Sturm's reading establishes a productive nexus for exploration of the fiction's political representation of gender, an approach conducive to

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[22] See Randall Jarrell, 'An Unread Book', introduction to the 1965 reissue of Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* (1965; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), esp. pp. 36-38.

[23] In using terms such as 'consecration', 'capital' and 'field', I invoke the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's understanding of how individuals perform in the field of culture and the applicability of his theory to issues in Stead's authorial production will be elaborated in chapter one.

[24] Terry Sturm, 'Christina Stead's New Realism', in *Cunning Exiles*, ed. Don Anderson and Stephen Knight (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1974), p. 13.

feminist reading. In contrast, Bruce Holmes refutes the predominance of political emphases in Stead's narratives and locates her interest in the realm of individual morality, finding that Sturm's use of 'ideology' is too all encompassing.[25] Sturm's approach to 'ideology' cannot, however, be so readily dismissed in the context of post-Althusserian understandings of ideology as productive of subjectivity itself. As Susan Sheridan's study has subsequently shown, poststructuralist understandings of subjectivity as a site of ideological reproduction are well attuned to the task of reading the ironies and multiplicities of Stead's narratives.[26] Terry Sturm's reading, while prefiguring stronger poststructuralist readings, offers the advantage of retaining ambiguities between what is 'conscious', 'unconscious' and 'non-conscious' in the behaviour of Stead's characters. These ambiguities redirect my own inquiry towards what may be in flux in Stead's perspective on ideology, which envisages a space for agency, however small, in the capacity to do 'some little thing'.

Michael Wilding, who also reads Stead's narratives in terms of their political orientation, particularly attends to idiosyncratic features which for previous critics had eluded classification.[27] In his reading of *The Puzzleheaded Girl*, Wilding identifies features typical of Stead's narratives: non-hierarchical deployment of characters; attention to the deforming effects of poverty and the class system; the thematic of the family and sexuality; the production of reader discomfort and estrangement through the interruption of conventional narrative flow; techniques of dramatisation rather than moralisation and an unremitting cultural critique. Through a searching formal analysis of the novellas, Wilding

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[25] Holmes,'Moral Dialectic', p. 2.

[26] Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, p. 120.

[27] See, for example, Wilding's discussion of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*'s modernist reinvention of the 'Dear Reader' convention of eighteenth and nineteenth century fiction, in its explicit and open-ended treatment of social and political ideas: Michael Wilding, 'Christina Stead: *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*', in *The Radical Tradition: Lawson, Furphy, Stead* - The Colin Roderick Lectures: 1992 (James Cook University of North Queensland, 1993), pp. 57-82.

identifies an aesthetic derived from a sustaining social and political vision, justifying his assertion that a 'radical social analysis underpins all [Stead's] work'.[28] Wilding's discussion resolves the contradictions raised by Stead's disavowals of political purposes by demonstrating instead the pervasiveness in her fiction of a Marxist world view, without having to ascribe propagandistic intent. His closing gesture to the historical context of the 'progressive, radical milieu' of the thirties, moreover, hints at further issues deserving of attention.[29] As previously suggested, Stead's experience of Marxism was historically located, and her narratives are produced within a network of discourses - including scientific naturalism, modernism and surrealism.[30]

In appropriating Stead's work for Marxism, however, these critics have given scant consideration to Stead's treatment of gender. As feminist critics have noted, Stead's novels radically politicise the personal, intertwining love with power, implicating politics with passion and investigating the unhappy polarities between the entrapping domestic sphere and privileged, predominantly masculine, public spaces. The failure of Marxist critics to seize upon the significance of these conjunctions is indicative of the historic divide between Marxist and feminist goals and concerns. Although Engels's *Origins of the Family*, for example, provided a critical concept of 'patriarchy' which feminists co-opted and reworked in dialogue with Marxist theory,[31] a major stumbling block has been Marxism's privileging of the economic mode of production. In orthodox, pre-Althusserian Marxist analysis, the material 'base' gives rise to the 'superstructure' of social, cultural and

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[28] Michael Wilding, 'Christina Stead's *The Puzzleheaded Girl*: The Political Context', in *Words and Wordsmiths: a volume for H.L.Rogers*, ed. Geraldine Barnes et. al. (Dept of English, The University of Sydney, 1989), p. 161.

[29] Wilding, 'Christina Stead's *The Puzzleheaded Girl*', p. 173.

[30] Deborah Robin Dizard focuses on interactions between modernism and socialism in Stead's early fiction, in 'Changing the Subject: The Early Novels of Christina Stead', *DAI* 45. 10 (April 1985): 3128-A (U of Massachusetts). See also Nicholas Mansfield, 'More Than The Art Of Meaningful Death: Eight Australian Post-War Novels, diss., U of Sydney, 1989: 'The figure [in modern Australian literature] who most effectively frustrates the dichotomy between realism and modernism is Christina Stead' (p.xxi).

[31] See Heidi Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union', in *Women and Revolution*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston: South End Press, 1981), esp. pp. 3-11.

ideological forms. As Juliet Mitchell suggests, because gender and gender issues have - in traditional Marxism - been rendered subsidiary to economic and class analysis, women's social positioning in terms of sexuality and reproduction has been occluded.[32] 'Woman', as a category of oppression, becomes a subset of class relations. Stead herself subscribed to a Marxist analysis of gender issues, recoiling at the suggestion that women might be more oppressed than men:

> There is a serious women's problem - about getting equal pay for equal work, and creches, and liberation from the domestic drudgery and all those things - this we know. But women are not really worse off than men, in the home; a man has to go to drudgery in the office, the factory, terrible drudgery; they do worse than women and this should be recognised. I object to any movement taking any direction which separates them from the men who are their natural friends and companions.[33]

Debate about the causes of the oppression of women, first emerging in Marxism as the 'Woman Question', was the forerunner of post World War Two articulations of feminism, in the social sciences' tactical deployment of the sex/gender distinction. Just as modern feminism's reliance, however, on the 'tactical usefulness' of the sex/gender distinction has tied it, in Donna Haraway's view, to 'a liberal and functionalist paradigm', Marx and Engels were similarly unable 'to extricate themselves from the natural sexual division of labour in heterosexuality despite their admirable project of historicising the family'.[34] Indeed, both Marxism and liberal feminism have been constitutively blind to what Adrienne Rich calls 'compulsory heterosexuality'.[35] Likewise, Stead's revolutionary subjects are strongly invested with an ideal, only bolstered by Marxism, of heterosexual coupledom.

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[32] See Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 100-101.

[33] 'Christina Stead: An Interview', Stead interviewed by Ann Whitehead, in *Australian Literary Studies* 6. 3 (May 1974), p. 247.

[34] Donna Haraway, '"Gender" for a Marxist Dictionary', in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 136.

[35] See Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), esp. pp. 48-51.

So on what terms have feminist critics read the politics of Christina Stead's narratives? All the feminist readings mentioned here have acknowledged, with varying emphases, the presence of a Marxist world view in Stead's work. The fact that Stead repudiated any allegiance to 'Women's Liberation', which she characterised as a disgraceful and disorderly movement that pitted women against men, their 'natural companions', has made her a challenge to feminists who have been thus forced to contend, as Marxist critics have not, with a contradiction between text and author - between narrative portraits of women in struggle with patriarchy and the avowed anti-feminism of the 'author'.

In the tradition of gynocriticism,[36] Joan Lidoff produced the first significant book-length feminist study of Stead's fiction, identifying its woman-centered understanding of experience and, profiting from Sturm's discussion, a voice and vision in which the personal and the political are interwoven. Lidoff coined the phrase 'domestic gothic' to describe the style of *The Man Who Loved Children* which, she argued, draws 'on inner and outer experience, as if they were of the same realm, uniting inner fantasies and feelings with outer physical and social objects'.[37] Lidoff concluded that although Stead responds to both Freud and Marx she is neither as deterministic as they, nor can she be claimed as a 'revolutionary':

> 'Her belief in change concentrates more on the inner world than the outer.'[38]

This statement, though qualified, paradoxically re-erects the very barrier between inner and outer worlds which, according to Lidoff, Stead's novelistic vision so thoroughly questions. While such an emphasis might possibly be inferred from the 'autobiographical fiction' on

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[36] See Elaine Showalter, 'Towards a Feminist Poetics', in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (London: Croon Helm, 1979), esp. pp. 25-29.
[37] Joan Lidoff, *Christina Stead* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982), pp. 177-8.
[38] Lidoff, *Christina Stead*, p. 178.

which Lidoff's discussion was primarily focused, attention to a wider cross-section of the fiction suggests, in contrast, Stead's enduring preoccupation with the subject-in-ideology.[39]

Diana Brydon, in another book-length feminist study, builds upon, expands and contests certain aspects of Lidoff's work. Brydon provides an overview of Stead's life and writing, reading each of the major fictions in their own terms while identifying the recurrent images with which Stead explores her casts of 'women and men in a variety of social relations'.[40] Framing her study in terms of how Stead's characters variously respond to the call to 'Cythera',[41] Brydon also emphasises the specifically socialist cast of Stead's approach to the representation of women's oppression, noting the influences on Stead's personal philosophy of Darwin, Nietzsche, Marx and Balzac.[42] While gesturing to these influences, Brydon does not suggest how these discourses interact in Stead's work and inform their politics; for example, the call to 'Cythera' in Stead's fiction might also be read, in Marxist terms, as the revolutionary call to fully liberated being.

Judith Kegan Gardiner, in examining the writings of three approximately contemporaneous (post) colonial women writers - Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing and Christina Stead - positions her reading strategy at the intersection of 'American feminist psychoanalysis', 'English materialism' and 'French poststructuralist attack on identity'.[43] Gardiner argues that women writers and readers are equipped to exercise a politics of empathy in their engagement with texts. Acknowledging the importance of Stead's Marxist critique of capitalism, Gardiner feels that Stead's choice of male-identified forms and

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[39] Sheridan notes a range of consequences that have ensued from autobiographical readings of *The Man Who Loved Children* and *For Love Alone*: see Sheridan's *Christina Stead*, p. 17.

[40] Diana Brydon, *Christina Stead* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 17.

[41] Brydon points out that Stead was impressed by Watteau's painting 'The Embarkation for Cythera' which depicted men and women preparing for their 'voyage towards the mythical island of love': see Brydon, *Christina Stead*, p. 2.

[42] Brydon, *Christina Stead*, pp. 164-5.

[43] Judith Kegan Gardiner, *Rhys, Stead, Lessing, and the Politics of Empathy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 2-3.

perspectives needs to be understood through an empathetic engagement with her Marxist understanding of history.[44] More recently, in a psychoanalytic reading of *The Puzzleheaded Girl's* elusive protagonist, Honor Lawrence, as a representative of woman 'caught but not caught' within culturally constructed femininity, Gardiner identifies Stead's psychologically focused observation of character as that which underpins and enables her political analysis.[45] Gardiner criticises the 'Marxist humanism' of Wilding's reading of this text, contending that it 'ignores gender and so misses the story's moving ambivalences about the connections among individual psychology, gender, and politics'.[46] Gardiner's reading advantageously recognises reflexive relations between biographical author and fictional characters and invites consideration of the novella's ways of engaging and restraining reader empathy. Gardiner raises an issue well worth pursuing further: that is, the tensions generated between narrative control of reader empathy - its construction of a position which does invite judgement, albeit humane - and the textual ironies of Honor's refusal to be caught, her 'invention' of herself. Gardiner, quoting Brydon, agrees that Stead's '"many apparent contradictions"' are attributable to her integrity, which leads to her refusal to supply easy answers to her 'puzzlement with what she sees'; to follow this 'puzzlement', concludes Gardiner, would be more productive in understanding the fiction than to heed Stead's 'puzzle-dispelling pronouncements'.[47] Perhaps puzzlement, however, persists for Stead because the contradictory status of women is partly generated by Marxist modes of apprehension.

Susan Sheridan's poststructuralist feminist study attends primarily to those narratives with female protagonists, although in subsequent publications she has broadened

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[44] Gardiner, *Rhys, Stead, Lessing*, pp. 5 and 82.

[45] Judith Kegan Gardiner, '"Caught but not caught": Psychology and Politics in Christina Stead's "The Puzzleheaded Girl"', in *World Literature in English* 32. 1 (1992), pp. 26-41.

[46] Gardiner, '"Caught"', p. 27.

[47] Gardiner, '"Caught"', p. 40.

her inquiry to some of the other fiction.[48] Sheridan negotiates the difficulty of co-opting a recalcitrant author for feminism by reading Stead's works from a consciously feminist position, citing Teresa de Lauretis's notion of the subject who is in a difficult relationship to language and whose identity is multiple, shifting and contradictory.[49] In dealing with the problem of Stead's interviews, Sheridan proposes to read them as texts which generate a particular authorial myth, not in order to erase the specificity and political importance of difference (as threatened in the move to the 'death of the author'), but so as to counter the ideology of the unified subject. Broadly, Sheridan's project is to read the novels for 'their exploration of the ways female subjectivity is culturally inscribed'.[50] While acknowledging the advantage of such poststructuralist feminism, my own argument nonetheless seeks to shift the balance of inquiry to discern the historical specificity of Stead's ideological and intellectual formation, as this is both produced in and explored by her fictions.

Finally, an important although contentious intervention in this field must be addressed: the biography of Christina Stead by Hazel Rowley.[51] This scholarly contribution presents a persuasive psychological narrative of Stead's life and of the forces driving her fiction. Combining fictional with biographical and historical sources, Rowley proposes that Stead suffered from an unresolved father-daughter complex which afflicted her self esteem, provoking an anger which would re-emerge in response to particular people and which fuelled the best of her writing. This psychological emphasis leads Rowley to interpret Stead's politics as formed in response to her connection with and attraction to strong (at times tyrannical) father-figures in her life, with a resulting desire to conform to a politically acceptable line. By implication, too, Stead's attraction to a master narrative such as

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[48] See Susan Sheridan, 'The Woman Who Loved Men: Christina Stead as Satirist in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* and *The People With The Dogs*', in *World Literature Written in English* 32. 1 (1992).
[49] Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, p. 23.
[50] Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, pp. 20-21.
[51] Hazel Rowley, *Christina Stead: A Biography* (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1993).

Marxism is, in Rowley's terms, partly explained by the same psychopathology.[52] While a number of Stead scholars, particularly those who see in Stead a strong and independent political thinker, leapt to her defence after publication of this biography,[53] it is hard not to feel that Rowley's portrait provides a context for understanding, for example, the deep ambivalences in Stead's writing about women. I agree, however, with these critics in their charge that the biography de-emphasises the role and significance of the writer's intellectual life in its pursuit of what emerge as personal monstrosities.

Unlike those who see Stead's personal and creative life in opposition to her political allegiance, I read - from a feminist position - the ways in which these dimensions are entwined and mutually productive. This entails revisiting a range of texts suggestive of Stead's intellectual formation and political beliefs, while retaining a critical and theoretical awareness of how such political views are practically negotiated. In chapter one, 'To perform, or to be performed: Stead as a cultural producer', I advance a methodological and conceptual frame, drawing upon the theoretical-linguistic work of Bakhtin/Vološinov and the cultural materialism of Raymond Williams, in order to rethink the often contradictory evidence about Stead's political views and representations. The notion of 'practical consciousness' - spotlighting an area indicative of the hybridity, rather than theoretical purity, of lived experience - is relevant to Stead's fictional representations as well as to her practical negotiations of Marxist thought. Stead's apprehension of subjects as immersed in social and linguistic webs is illustrated with passages drawn from *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *The People with the Dogs*. Stead's 'practical consciousness' - and her role as cultural producer - is then discussed in view of Pierre Bourdieu's work on the performance of agents

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[52] See, for example, Rowley's discussion of Stead's relationship with Ralph Fox and of Stead's 'bewilderment' in the face of demands for commitment: in *Christina Stead*, pp. 255 and 266. Rowley's conversation with Robert Dessaix also confirms these views: see Robert Dessaix, 'Christina: The Great?' in *24 Hours* (July 1993), p. 96.

[53] See, for example, Wilding, 'Fiction is not fact', pp. 8-9. Also relevant is Michael Wilding's satiric and coded story which meditates on his friendship with Stead: 'I Like Him to Write', in *Meanjin* 53. 2 (Winter 1994), pp. 197-207.

or actors in the field of culture. Bourdieu's theory provides concepts and terminology which invite examination of the minutiae of everyday cultural practice as both determined and dynamic. Bourdieu's theory provides a means of understanding the seemingly contradictory elements of Stead's authorial production as practical negotiations of the field of cultural production.

Marxism is grounded and tested, in Stead's fiction, in the realm of the gendered subject, taking particular shape in the context of heterosexual coupledom. In chapter two, 'Loving the revolutionary: the thirties', Stead's contact with European revolutionary discourse is illustrated with reference to representative 'couples' from *The Beauties and Furies* and from *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. Thematising Stead's love for her partner, the Marxist-economist and novelist, William Blake (formerly Wilhelm Blech), and its implications for understanding her intellectual formation, this chapter also re-reads and appraises biographical and historical accounts of the 1935 Paris Writers' Congress. I draw upon the early chapters of *I'm Dying Laughing*, comparing these with Stead's 1935 report on the Congress, 'The Writers Take Sides', in order to understand her relation to and changing perceptions of this significant period of intellectual activism. 'Loving' the male revolutionary, in these early texts, becomes a means of entering his world.

Loving but critical scrutiny of male revolutionary figures structures narrative positioning in *House of All Nations*, as argued in chapter three, 'Revolutionaries at the threshold'. Recognising that Stead's political passions need to be held in tension with her naturalist heritage and her belief in 'evolution',[54] I map the novel's intersecting discourses and its production of a richly contradictory and theatrical space of anticipation of revolution. As seen in the relation between the banking fraternity and the space of the bank

[54] As Margaret Harris suggests, in 'Christina Stead', in *The Age: Monthly Review* 3 (May 1983), pp. 7-8.

itself, Stead's representation of character is firmly situated in relation to particular, shaping habitats. My discussion of the novel attends to its privileging of modernity as a masculine, progressive, revolutionary space-time, and its use of femininity as the locus of counter-revolutionary, pre-modern, regressive, yet powerful forces.

In *The Man Who Loved Children*, as I argue in chapter four, a strong female protagonist emerges in and through patriarchal identifications, by appropriating, performing and reinventing a masculine script. With reference to the work of Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick, I examine how the novel's uses of 'performance' are productive of multiple narrative and metanarrative significations. Through the 'performances' of Sam and Henny, I argue, the narrative exposes patriarchy as 'performative' and Pollitry as a spectacle to be interrupted and superseded. 'Casting herself as revolutionary', Louisa Pollit becomes the agent of interruption of patriarchy through melodramatic but increasingly sophisticated performances. I suggest that this device may be read as Stead's practical and inventive reworking of the discourses of Nietzsche and Marx, a conjunction which offers a provisional solution to the impasse between free will and determinism.

The positive tenor of these earlier novels, which thematise male revolutionaries and their scripts, contrasts with that of the two postwar novels selected for attention: *Cotters' England* and *I'm Dying Laughing*. Any simplistic division into pre- and postwar narratives may erroneously suggest that within Stead's authorial production there exists a distinct break or discontinuity. Although such a break has been noted by some critics,[55] it is not my intention to efface the marked continuities between all of Stead's narratives, which often re-arrange and re-cast similar characters and scenarios.[56] I do, however, suggest that, along

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[55] Rowley identifies 1947, when Stead and Blake departed from the States, as a turning point in tone in her letters and in her fiction: see *Christina Stead*, p. 339. For a study of the fiction in terms of a 'break', see Suzanne Kiernan, '"Ugly By Design": The Fiction Of Christina Stead', in *Modern Fiction Studies* 34. 2 (Summer 1988), pp. 185-202.

[56] Margaret Harris observes that there are 'recurring narrative preoccupations and predispositions, together with experiments in various genres and registers': see 'Christina Stead's Human Comedy: The American Sequence', in *World Literature Written in English* 32. 1 (1992), p. 43.

with a general shift from the playfulness of pre-war narratives to the darkening mood of the postwar narratives, there is an intensification of the problematic of gender. Beyond that, I argue, while the postwar narratives become bleaker about 'revolution' and about the ability of individual subjects to transcend historical and ideological determinations, they also, paradoxically, suggest a concomitant strengthening of adherence to the Marxist value system which implicitly generates the terms of narrative desire.

Far from undermining Stead's Marxism, the adversities of the later decades were to strengthen her values, although she became simultaneously more critical of local, party orthodoxies. This view is argued in chapter five, 'Females who can wreck the revolution',[57] which returns to the contextual frame to consider briefly Stead's novels of the American 'transitional period' as well as the novels of the ensuing postwar years, during which Stead and Blake, back in England and on the Continent, contended with economic privation and obscurity. I discuss Stead's involvement with the American Communist Party, her growing disillusionment with its parochial orthodoxies. These experiences, affirming Stead's critical but committed relation to Marxism, were conducive to the consolidation of a narrative aesthetic consciously opposed to socialist realism. Stead's attitude to dominant culture - her repudiation of a commodifying mass-cultural scene - was also critical, however, in shaping her narrative aesthetic. The gendering-as-female of the revolutionary figures of the postwar narratives conjoins the spectacle of aberrant femininity with mass culture in ways that emphasise their mutually counter-revolutionary functions. Despite her rejection of the marketplace, however, and as I argue in relation to Jarrell's intervention on Stead's behalf in 1965, Stead deeply desired both the recognition of her peers and the cultural legitimation of her art.

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[57] This title alludes to Julia Kristeva's 'Those Females Who Can Wreck the Infinite', chapter 8 in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 157.

Possibly the bleakest of Stead's fictional representations of postwar society, *Cotters' England*, is discussed in chapter six, where I focus on the workings of the 'uncanny' in the representation of postwar England and its inhabitants - its strange families and its estranging familiars. The loving scrutiny of male revolutionaries in the earlier narratives is overtaken in this novel by a fascinated, masculinist gaze. Nellie Cotter, lesbian predator on the working-class movement, represents the improper woman, the female who can wreck revolution. This figure is constructed by reference to the implicit category of the proper woman or positive female revolutionary subject who identifies with, and performs according to, naturalised gender roles in heterosexual coupledom. The play between truth and lies, reality and fiction, and text and reader, however, alerts us to textual forces of heterogeneity which undo the coherence of these projected political values.

Stead's posthumous novel, *I'm Dying Laughing*, reveals a further intensification of this problematic of gender and sexuality in its representation of revolutionaries who have strayed. Kristeva's theory of abjection, according to which subjectivity and culture are both threatened and constituted by that which they cast out, is applied to the text's representation of the disintegration of the characters' political and subjective boundaries. As a couple, Stephen and Emily represent a thwarted promise of fulfilment, and Emily's body, in particular, is a site of irreconcilable division. In both Stead's and Kristeva's narratives, terror and apocalypse loom large. Thematising 'crossings' desired and thwarted, as well as betrayals enacted, my argument also suggests that Stead's narrative enacts in an inverted and suppressed form what for its author was certainly unthinkable - loss of faith in a system of thought which had promised to save the world, but which had led to the crimes of the Soviet Union and of Stalinism.

In conclusion, Stead's 'Marxism' is caught up within and co-ordinated by a wider set of social and cultural positionings. Her fictional and non-fictional texts are culturally

situated or determined performances, but also dynamic and hybrid. Examination of these narratives, as well as of biographical and historical sources, shows that a Marxist system of belief and value constructs the terms of Stead's representation of subjects in ideology. Stead's critical understanding and practical use of Marxism occurs in intersection with other radical discourses, producing her own engagement with the currents of debate of her time. Marxism, therefore, both enables and contains Stead's representation of revolution and revolutionaries.

Chapter 1.

To perform, or to be performed:

the subject in the social web.

> The great story, the writer may think, would be this - a sea of many lives, the world of today, from which rises a greater life, drawing sustenance from them, acting, sinking, back to them - Dimitrov, Lenin, the section organiser?[1]

According to Stead, the 'many-charactered novel' conveyed the teeming world, its unpredictability, its multiplicity of hungers and its flux; in the creative process, however, this oceanic chaos could momentarily assume the form of a world-representative figure. Never seen in isolation in Stead's fiction, such figures always emerge from and return to the wider social web. The means of representation of the social in Stead's fiction varies, from the recurrence of certain images, to a specific perspective on subjectivity as something produced and performed in language. What Stead continually seeks to record is the rich idiosyncrasy of speech, the elusive particularity of, for example, a set of café-frequenting Parisiennes of the 1930s, 'their verve, their intricate weaves, the wavemotion of their ideation and their tone and gesture of which they have a treasure'.[2] Stead's use of speech musters both senses of 'performance': it is willed and it is constituted, it performs and it is performed. The acknowledgement that '[society] does, in fact, mould us and push us into

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[1] From Christina Stead's 1939 draft paper, 'Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel', published in *Christina Stead: Selected Fiction and Nonfiction*, ed. R. G. Geering and A. Segerberg (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1994), p. 199.

[2] From Stead's unpublished draft paper, 'A Bistrot in Paris' (circa 1930 or 1931), Christina Stead Papers, NLA MS 4967, Box 11, Folder 79.

situations', is balanced by an interest in the 'idiosyncracy' which 'gives us an individual view and makes us act unexpectedly at times ...'.[3]

In addition to this latter notion, Stead's insistent focus on the individual's will seems initially to confound dialectical materialist notions of historical determination. As Rowley observes, Stead made lengthy use, in preparatory notes for her novel-writing workshops, of Ralph Fox's *The Novel and the People*.[4] Fox's assertion, so relevant for Stead's production, that the novelist should primarily be concerned with the 'question of the individual will in its conflict with other wills on the battleground of life' was, according to Rowley, 'as Nietzschean as it was Marxist ...'.[5] While the Nietzschean sense is undoubtedly invoked in Stead's fiction, Rowley overlooks the ways in which this understanding of the individual will connects with a set of historically evolving discourses and debates in Western Marxism. In contextualising, therefore, a set of shifting understandings, in Marxism, of the will, of agency and of the role of the revolutionary, I will propose a methodological and theoretical frame adapted to the task of reading Stead's fictional representations of subjects-in-ideology and of considering, both sympathetically and critically, the logic of Stead's performance as a cultural producer. In identifying Stead's mode of representation of subjectivity as linked to a specifically Marxist world view, and in advancing a frame which refers to both contextual and textual sources and issues, I draw upon a set of theoretical approaches which participate in debates about the subject-in-ideology. The work of the Bakhtin school and the cultural materialism of Raymond Williams offer approaches amenable to aspects of Stead's authorial production, while the work of Pierre Bourdieu, complementing these theories, provides fresh perspectives on the developing political and

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[3] From Stead's 'Workshop in the Novel', unpublished notes (circa 1944-1946), NLA MS 4967, Box 11, Folder 84.

[4] See Hazel Rowley, 'Christina Stead: Politics and Literature in the Radical Years, 1935-1942', in *Meridian* 8. 2 (1989), p.155.

[5] See Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People* (New York: International Publishers, 1945), p. 27; and Hazel Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 255.

cultural logic of Stead's authorial performances. In the following argument, without underestimating the practical logic of her choices, Stead is seen as a subject in contradiction, as one who both performs and who is performed. Stead's political views and her career as a cultural producer are not viewed as coherent or immutable, or as beyond history, but are understood in their development across three decades, and situated in terms of shifting social, political, economic and cultural circumstances.

Stead's understanding of the role of the individual subject in history and in the social - including her understanding of the individual 'will' - must initially be contextualised in relation to the historical development of Marxist thought, particularly in the early years of the twentieth century. As Williams notes, Stead was an adolescent at the time of the Russian Revolution, learning about it at school and reading *The Communist Manifesto*, although her father's fabian socialism undoubtedly constituted the major influence on her thinking at this time.[6] Apart from its role in enlisting the sympathies of many of Stead's generation, Lenin's historic enactment of the manifesto significantly determined the subsequent direction of Western Marxist thought. After 1917, Bolshevik success within national boundaries had to be measured against the failure of communist revolution to fulfill Lenin's early predictions that it would spread internationally. The emergence, however, of the Stalinist priority of consolidation - of 'socialism in one country' - generated the 'Soviet Union' as a discursive site of utopian promise for many intellectuals in the West between the wars. Comintern-led support of the Soviet Union garnered revolutionary aspirations, particularly in the context of the popular front against fascism. At the height of the popular front, the radical visions of Western intellectuals were generally not, despite unpleasant rumours, challenged by knowledge of life under Soviet rule.[7] According to Robert Gottlieb,

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[6] Williams, *Christina Stead*, p. 41.

[7] Rumours of Stalinist repression plagued, for example, the pro-Soviet Paris Writers' Congress attended by Stead in 1935. See Roger Shattuck, 'Writers for the Defense of Culture', in *Partisan Review* 51 (1984), pp. 408-9.

maintaining these ideals became ever more difficult in ensuing decades, which saw the further entrenchment of capitalism - despite successive crises - in Western democracies, as well as the growing rigidities and repressions of communist organisations and regimes; these same circumstances, however, stimulated Western Marxist recognition of 'the critical importance of class consciousness, subjectivity, and personal experience' and their role in political change.[8]

A key intervention in Marxist theory, instrumental in the Russian Revolution and crucially important for Stead's generation, was Lenin's advocacy of the *'role of the vanguard fighter'*, which, in the shape of the Party, was *'guided by the most advanced theory'* in raising the class consciousness of the proletariat.[9] Leninism marked a decisive move away from the determinist Marxism of the Second International, which had emphasised the inevitability of the historical dialectic rather than revolutionary action; in contrast, Leninism favoured a revolutionary praxis initiated and cultivated by the Party.[10] Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923) valorised Lenin's intervention in the revolution as a return to the praxis of Marx's earlier writings. Citing from the *Theses on Feuerbach*, '"The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, it is now a question of *changing* it,"' Korsch argued that Marx was expressing here 'a categorical rejection of all theory, philosophical or scientific, that is not *at the same time* practice - real, terrestrial, immanent, human and sensuous practice ... '.[11] Similarly, Georg Lukács's early work, though at first repudiated by the Comintern, anticipated its official popular front policies in 1935,[12] emphasising - with its Hegelian

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[8] Robert S. Gottlieb's introduction to *An Anthology of Western Marxism: From Lukacs and Gramsci to Socialist Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 4-5 and 11.

[9] V. I. Lenin, 'What Is To Be Done?' in *Marx-Engels-Marxism* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1947), pp. 122 [emphases in original].

[10] This argument was made by Karl Korsch in his 1923 book, later published in English as *Marxism and Philosophy* (London: NLB, 1970), esp. pp. 58-62.

[11] Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, pp. 82-3. In a 'Bibliographic Guide', in his *Elements of Marxian Economic Theory and its Criticism* (New York: Cordon Company, 1939), William Blake observes that Korsch's book is the best 'modern Marxian defense on basic philosophic assumptions of the Marx-Engels nature-dialectics', but that it is 'politically errant': p. 690 [emphases in originals].

[12] See 'Lukács' entry in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore. 2nd Ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 326.

theorisation of class consciousness - that *'only the practical class consciousness of the proletariat* possesses [the] ability to transform things'.[13] Reinscribing the role of a theoretically informed vanguard, these revisions injected the category of human agency into history's dialectic, while retaining the idea of the ideologically determined shape of class consciousness. But the early work of Marxists such as Korsch and Lukács, while triggered by the historic phenomenon of Lenin, entailed deep philosophic and political differences which fuelled the ultimate divergence of humanist Western Marxism from Stalinist orthodoxy. According to Leszek Kolakowski, Western Marxism, as it took shape in the work of writers such as Gramsci, constituted an 'internal criticism' of socialist bureaucracies which, on the basis of an 'infallible scientific theory', had laid claim to the 'right to rule by force on the ground that they [embodied] the "true" desires and aspirations of the working class ...'.[14]

How was Stead's understanding of Marxism, then, situated within this historic and discursive frame? The writings of both her partner, William Blake, and her admired friend, Ralph Fox, become particularly relevant here, as they convey the specific, historical form of Marxism - influenced by developments in the Soviet Union and in Western Europe - with which Stead was most conversant. As subsequently discussed, both Fox and Blake contributed, in different ways, to Marxist theory; similar concepts and ideas may also be found in Stead's texts. Blake's explication of dialectical materialism, in his *Elements of Marxian Economic Theory and its Criticism,* confidently subscribes to Marxism's dialectical materialism as 'scientific theory', but is also premised on an implicitly 'humanist' understanding of the individual will, as manifested in his remarks about the role of the

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[13] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1968), p. 205 [emphases in original].

[14] Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origin, Growth and Dissolution - Vol III, The Breakdown*, trans. P. S. Falla (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 252.

revolutionary. Blake emphasises that dialectical materialism is 'a theory of evolution', that like science it employs a materialist basis, and that the world is a 'complex of *processes*' in which man's freedom consists 'in his understanding of necessity':

> So long as he does not comprehend necessity he thinks himself helpless. Human freedom is impossible, though, except within natural necessity, for it can never run counter to it by an act of will or thought.[15]

Blake's exposition of Marxist economics is also informed by the early writings of Marx: paraphrasing from *The German Ideology* - first published in its entirety in 1932 - Blake reasons that consciousness 'is not the author of social forms but social forms determine consciousness'.[16] In relation to the individual, however, the 'historical materialist' must reject 'the mechanical materialism of the eighteenth century that considered man a machine ...', and believe that if 'circumstances determine men, men change circumstances'.[17] Further, in Blake's description, 'molecular' individual wills collide to produce the collective will of the mass:

> The collective will is the result of a multitude of individual wills. But since millions of individual wills have to be realized in the conflict with each other, the ultimate result is different from what is intended.[18]

Blake's formulation of the relation between individual and collective will draws implicitly on Engels's letter to Bloch, which discusses the dialectic arising from the 'conflict between many individual wills', the latter having themselves been produced by 'a host of particular conditions of life':

> Thus there are innumerable intersecting forces, an infinite series of parallelograms of forces which give rise to one resultant - the historical event. This may in its turn again be regarded as the product of a power which operates as a whole *unconsciously* and without volition. For what

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[15] Blake, *Elements of Marxian Economic Theory and its Criticism*, (New York: Cordon Company, 1939), p. 639.
[16] Blake, *Elements*, p. 643.
[17] Blake, *Elements*, p. 657.
[18] Blake, *Elements*, p. 657.

> each individual wills is obstructed by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no one intended.[19]

Louis Althusser, noting that this letter 'constitutes a *decisive* theoretical document' which 'has already played a *historical* role' in refuting 'economism',[20] finds Engels's formulation spuriously pseudo-scientific. Engels's application of the 'parallelogram of forces' - a model borrowed from the physical sciences - to relations between microscopic effects and macroscopic forms, produces, as Althusser puts it, an 'epistemological void', which leads away from materialism and back to idealism, and which ultimately disperses superstructural forms and their effects into a meaningless infinity. For Althusser, this constitutes a critical departure from Marx, who does not confuse the '*historical effects* of these factors with *their microscopic effects*'.[21] For Blake, in contrast, Engels's explanation does not appear to be problematic, and perhaps its very inexactitude creates a fluid space to conceive of the initiating role of the great man in history, whose 'special personality has a real value, if it is shown at a right juncture':

> [This special personality] cannot be overrated nor can it override social limits. But the hero is real. The worship by socialists of Marx and Engels and by communists of Lenin shows it to be a living idea.[22]

Despite potential philosophical and epistemological contradictions, therefore, a Marxist such as William Blake, in the process of reconciling a dialectical account of history with the Leninist moment of vanguardism, could effectively adopt a humanist version of subjectivity; and a 'base-superstructure' model of production could permit contemplation of the human will as an (unknowable) factor in historic destiny. This is the discursive context within which Ralph Fox, too, is quite ready to advocate a 'revolutionary literature' rather

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[19] Engels to Joseph Bloch, 21 September 1890, in *Marx-Engels: Selected Correspondence*, trans. I. Lasker (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), p. 395.

[20] See Louis Althusser, 'Appendix' to 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1969), p. 117 [emphases in original].

[21] Althusser, 'Appendix' to 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', pp. 118-128 [emphases in original].

[22] Blake, *Elements*, pp. 657-8.

than the more doctrinaire 'proletarian' novel. If '"[being] determines consciousness,"' then, according to Fox, 'all imaginative creation is a reflection of the real world in which the creator lives'.[23] Refuting a crudely determinist view of the relation between matter and spirit, Fox provides a detailed discussion of Engels's letter to Bloch, approving its account of the 'parallelogram of forces' as 'not only a formula for the historian, but also for the novelist'.[24] As a result of these deliberations on Marxist theory, Fox concludes:

> The novelist cannot write his story of the individual fate unless he also has this steady vision of the whole. He must understand how his final result arises from the individual conflicts of his characters, he must in turn understand what are the manifold conditions of lives which have made each of those individuals what she or he is. 'What emerges is something that no one willed,' how exactly that sums up each great work of art, and how well it expresses the pattern of life itself, since behind the event that no one willed a pattern does exist. Marxism gives to the creative artist the key to reality when it shows him how to discern that pattern and the place which each individual occupies in it. At the same time it consciously gives to man his full value, and in this sense is the most humanist of all world outlooks.[25]

This unabashed avowal of the underlying humanism of Marxism is not at all surprising in a 1930s context and constitutes a link between Fox's individual project and wider currents of Western Marxist thought. Fox's humanist position entails a reliance on a secure ground of truth and knowledge made available to the writer or reader who is in possession of Marxist theory, a point to which I will return in discussion of Stead's narratives. For Fox, the pressing task of the politically-committed modern novelist is, therefore, to represent 'man' in heroic rather than in ordinary terms.[26] Quoting extensively from Fox's argument, in her unpublished 'Workshop in the Novel' notes, Stead elaborates:

> For any man, with his passions turned loose by the novelist in a real setting and given free expression, eloquence, free play to his instincts and needs,

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[23] Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People* (New York: International Publishers, 1945), p. 22.
[24] Fox, *Novel*, p. 27.
[25] Fox, *Novel*, p. 28.
[26] Fox, *Novel*, pp. 73-84.

> will ruin the balance of the world - any character taken greatly will upset the world and that is why the timid novelist writing for timid people takes the 'ordinary' man.[27]

Not only Fox's literary aesthetic, but also his privileging of rounded, dynamic, Shakespearean character, resonated with Stead, who regularly acknowledged the influence of a variety of dramatists in her own mode of representing character. She approvingly describes, for example, Stanislavsky's technique of thinking from within characters to discover what 'they are willing at that moment':

> The specific will underlies the movement of every scene: and it is the will of the personage in the scene, which is logically related to his life-system which makes him live through the scene. ... 'Good characters' are in the process of becoming or reveal how they have become and reveal possibilities of further change: stock characters remain fixed.[28]

Although it is almost a critical commonplace to observe that Stead's characters are depicted in struggle with forces of determination, the ways in which such determinations both constitute and are countered by the 'individual will' need to be situated in the context of contemporary Marxist thought. The Nietzschean flavour of Stead's use of the will does not, at this historic juncture, necessarily jeopardise or contradict a Marxist framework of belief; indeed, the Nietzschean hero who challenges bourgeois values may at some level reinforce a Marxist framework, as well as serve as a reminder that Stead's political formation and early fiction arise from an eclectic, internally contradictory modernism which, as Raymond Williams has found, characterised the politics of the early twentieth century's avant-garde.[29] These contradictions continued to produce the rich tensions in Stead's

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[27] See Christina Stead, 'Workshop in the Novel' notes: NLA MS 4967, Box 11, Folder 84.

[28] From Stead's 'Workshop in the Novel' notes: NLA MS 4967, Box 11, Folder 84. See articles by Denise Brown and Anita Segerberg for further discussion of the influence of dramatists and of theatrical models of representation in Stead's work: Denise Brown, 'Christina Stead's "Drama of the Person,"' in *Australian Literary Studies* 13. 2 (October 1987): 139-145; and Anita Segerberg, 'Getting Started: The Emergence of Christina Stead's Early Fiction', in *Australian Literary Studies* 13. 2 (October 1987): 121-138.

[29] See Raymond Williams, 'The politics of the avant-garde', in *Visions and Blueprints: Avant-garde culture and radical politics in early twentieth-century Europe*, eds. Edward Timms and Peter Collier (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 1-14.

fiction, as well as influencing the terms of their developing representations of subjects-in-ideology.

Taking note of this historic, discursive flux between determinism and voluntarism, therefore, neither Marxism itself, nor the way in which Stead's authorial productions connect with it, can be seen as stable, coherent or unified. Moreover, the gaps in Marxist orthodoxy are challenged in Stead's fictional representations and in her evolving narrative aesthetic, suggesting her engagement with contemporary debates about the role of women, the nature of the revolutionary struggle, communality and the role of individual subjectivity as this is constituted by, challenges and yearns to exceed social roles, regulations and limits. Even though such challenges to Marxist orthodoxy are evident in the fiction, however, they are predicated upon a position of belief. Stead's political and social values are projected in the fiction, and particularly manifested in assumptions about what is natural in gender and sexuality. In these terms, Marxism enables, supports and contains Stead's representations. The heterogeneities and contradictions produced in the fiction, nevertheless, create opportunities for readings resistant to projected authorial values and beliefs. In aiming to analyse the political values projected in Stead's authorial production, without relinquishing recognition of its heterogeneity, I therefore propose engagement with a set of theoretical approaches, from Bakhtin to Bourdieu, which promote closer consideration of the interplay between the forces of textuality and the material orientations of texts.

Bakhtinian approaches to textuality have already been applied to Stead's fiction by several critics,[30] but I wish to invoke the historical specificity of the work of the Bakhtin school and elicit connections between Bakhtinian understandings of the subject in language and Stead's fictional representations. Although Bakhtin was unknown to Stead (as to

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[30] See Julia Duffy, 'The Grain of the Voice in Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*', in *Antipodes* 4. 1 (1990), pp. 48-51; Diana Allen, 'Lives of Obscure Women: Polyphonic Structures and the Presentation of Women in the Fiction of Christina Stead', diss., Murdoch University, 1989; Brydon, '"Other Tongues Than Ours": Christina Stead's *I'm Dying Laughing*'; and Sheridan's *Christina Stead*, esp. pp. 77 and 132.

others of the West), both writers respond to a Marxist discourse reinvigorated by the revolutionary praxis of Lenin and his followers. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,* written in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and attributed to the Bakhtin school under the name of V. N. Vološinov,[31] contests and synthesises the work of opposed schools of thought in linguistics and in psychology. Vološinov produces a model of language which refuses antinomies between synchronic and diachronic modes of investigation, between linguistic theories premised on interior psychology and those premised on ahistorical, rule-bound systems. Recognising the crucial interdependence of ideology and the sign, Vološinov's model maps the dynamic interplay between shaping social context and the life of the individual, identifying the 'dialectical interplay between inner and outer signs - between psyche and ideology ... '.[32] Although materialist in outlook and assumptions, Vološinov's text anticipates key aspects of poststructuralism, decentering not only formal modes of linguistic inquiry, but also idealist emphases on the individual psyche (or the unified subject) as the originator of meaning. Refuting precursor Georg Simmel's irreconcilable opposition between the psyche and ideology, Vološinov concludes that lived contradiction between these terms is the vital and generative source of dialectical synthesis between the inner and the outer:

> In each speech act, subjective experience perishes in the objective fact of the enunciated word-utterance, and the enunciated word is subjectified in the act of responsive understanding in order to generate, sooner or later, a counter statement. Each word, as we know, is a little arena for the clash and criss-crossing of differently oriented social accents. A word in the mouth of a particular individual person is a product of the living interaction of social forces.[33]

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[31] The controversy over the authorship of different texts of the Bakhtin school is as yet unresolved. For convenience I will refer to the 'author' as nominated in each published text, as in 'Vološinov'.

[32] Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,* trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 39.

[33] Vološinov, *Marxism,* pp. 40-1.

Vološinov's description casts language as both the constituted and constitutive site as well as the generative mechanism of ideology; individual speech performance is the living arena of its operation. Speech is the specific implementation of socially constituted semiotic material, produced in response to particular circumstances; in turn, individual performance constitutes (individually and collectively) the dynamic, living shape of language in a continuous dialectical interplay. This interplay, as I have already proposed, is also foregrounded within Stead's narratives. Some critics have privileged the narratives' psychological insight over their political dimensions;[34] but reading Stead's fiction according to Vološinov's linguistic model confounds such distinctions, highlighting rather the dynamic materiality of characters' discourse - what Stead calls 'their ideation' - and the living interweave between 'psyche' and 'ideology'. Focused on the realisation of language through the medium of subjectivity, as much as on the formation of subjectivity in language, Vološinov's theory envisages a dialectical interchange between the subject and the shaping ideological web.

Vološinov's materialist emphasis on speech as living performance, with its constitutive and constituting relation to an open-ended, dynamically evolving symbolic system, needs to be distinguished from what in some ways looks like its successor, the more determinist and anti-humanist concept of the ideologically 'interpellated' subject, formulated by Althusser in response to Lacanian poststructuralist versions of subjectivity.[35] Concepts of 'interpellation', and of ideology as the constitutive unconscious of subjectivity, powerfully describe the activity, pervasiveness and complexity of the symbolic social structure. In this theory, in which the unconscious is structurally inaccessible by and

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[34] This is contended, for example, by Bruce Holmes in ' Moral Dialectic in the Fiction of Christina Stead' and, as discussed in the introduction, by Joan Lidoff in her book, *Christina Stead*.

[35] See Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1971), esp. pp. 160-5.

discontinuous with consciousness,[36] escape from 'ideology' is effectively precluded. Althusser's structuralist Marxism pre-empts the role of agents, rendering them, in Bourdieu's criticism, 'into simple epiphenomena of structure'.[37] 'Bakhtin's implicit dialectical hinging of subject and language in/of ideology', which does indeed prefigure poststructuralist emphases on textuality, nonetheless retains an interest in the shaping activity and performance of the subject.[38]

Seeking an appropriate model for a critical-Marxist theory of literature, cultural theorist Raymond Williams finds an answer in Vološinov's text. Vološinov's emphasis on 'usable signs', positing language as neither 'simple "reflection"' nor '"expression" of "material reality"', encourages Williams to assert the mediating character of language as consciousness:

> What we have, rather, is a grasping of this reality through language, which as practical consciousness is saturated by and saturates all social activity ... It is of and to this experience - the lost middle term between the abstract entities, 'subject' and 'object', on which the propositions of idealism and orthodox materialism are erected - that language speaks.[39]

Williams's 'practical consciousness', with its underpinning assumption of the materiality of language in subjectivity, enables his theorisation of emergent 'structures of feeling' - structures obtaining within particular cultural activities and texts - as 'social experiences in solution'. These 'structures of feeling' are not only structured or constituted formations but also significant pre-formations, developing 'at the very edge of semantic availability', no doubt detectable in retrospect.[40] In an echo of Gramsci's relation between hegemony and

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[36] The difference between pre- and post-psychoanalytic understandings of consciousness, and its implications for Marxism, is elucidated by Gayatri Spivak, in 'The Politics of Interpretations', *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), esp. pp. 121-2. Susan Sheridan, referring to Althusser and to Spivak, also indicates the importance of this distinction, in *Christina Stead*, pp. 120-1.

[37] See Pierre Bourdieu's *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 9.

[38] The quoted phrase is from Spivak, in 'The Politics of Interpretations', p. 121.

[39] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 37-38.

[40] Williams, *Marxism*, p. 134.

counter-hegemony, Williams's 'practical consciousness' differs from 'official consciousness', apprehending in human cultural activity a dynamic area of social 'feeling and thinking', situated in 'an embryonic phase' until it becomes conscious history, or 'articulated and defined exchange'.[41] Thus 'practical consciousness' describes an area of linguistic and social praxis in the production and consumption of texts which counters the politically disabling and mythicising function of the 'unconscious'. Williams reads Vološinov in terms which vividly recall Marx's early writing on praxis:

> Language is as old as consciousness, language *is* practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.[42]

Eluding the rigid, theoretical antinomies of structuralism and voluntarism, Williams's 'practical consciousness' invites consideration of Stead's novels as actively and materially engaged in negotiating language and ideology, not only constituted by discursive structures but contesting them, prefiguring structures to come. 'Practical consciousness' also resonates in a number of ways with Stead's focus upon individual performers, indicating the socially and ideologically constituted material of speech acts as well as their wilful negotiations of scriptedness. In Stead's novels, as for Vološinov and Williams, psychology is immanent to the political and the political is immanent to the psyche. Stead's grasp of individual subjectivity is characterised by a materialist understanding of consciousness as constructed by the social and the ideological but equally as a mobile, desiring, meaning-making formation having the capacity to react with open-ended results. The subject is seen in struggle, in performance and in the process of becoming, whether striving for ultimate conformity with or in opposition to 'destiny'.

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[41] Williams, *Marxism*, pp. 130-1. Williams prefers the living and open-ended idea of 'hegemony' to the fixed and abstract uses of Althusserian 'ideology', see pp. 108-114.

[42] From Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 122.

A striking example of the development of Stead's apprehension of the subject-in-ideology, which also manifests 'practical consciousness' in its several senses, can be found in her fictions' successive representations of the web, mesh or vine. The apparent correspondences between these images can efface subtle differences and developments in the tone and context of their representation. These differences suggest fluctuations between conceiving of ideology in terms of extrinsically derived forces which, though individually internalised, may be capable of being superseded, and conceiving of it as the very medium of thought. In the earliest fictions, from the lily-root which tangles the foot of the 'watermaiden' in 'The Day of Wrath', to Baruch Mendelssohn's portrait (in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*) of Catherine Baguenault as a naked woman bursting through a thicket, and impeded by tropical vine and boa-constrictor, the vine represents that which entraps or constrains the potentially 'free' subject.[43] The portrait, titled 'La Femme s'échappe de la Forêt' ('Woman escapes from the forest'), patronises Catherine, containing her within masculinist terminology, perhaps projecting Baruch's own disavowed 'sensuality'. According to Baruch's Marxist gloss for Joseph's benefit, the impeding vine symbolises the middle-class woman's 'romantic notions and ferocious, because ambushed, sensuality'.[44] This seems a baldly reductive view of Catherine's situation, as is the idea that the discarding of internalised, class-based 'notions' could release the subject into a freedom beyond class-ideology. While in one sense clearly subscribing to these emancipatory possibilities, the text challenges the masculinist gaps in Baruch's discourse. The cultural marginalisation and silencing of women, depicted but not fully comprehended by Baruch, is ironically inscribed in the text's narrative and metanarrative structure. Manifestly a central

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[43] See Christina Stead, 'The Day of Wrath' in *The Salzburg Tales* (1934; North Ryde, Australia: Angus and Robertson/Imprint Classics, 1991), pp. 466-7; and *Seven Poor Men Of Sydney* (1934; Sydney: Angus and Robertson/Sirius, 1981), pp. 154-5. Maria Teresa Bindella sees the related 'mesh' metaphor as the 'formal correlative' of the novel as a whole: 'Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*', in *Australian Literary Studies* (Special Issue) 15. 2 (1991), pp. 96-7.

[44] Stead, *Seven Poor Men Of Sydney*, pp. 154-5.

personage in the narrative, Catherine is the only significant omission from the text's initial *dramatis personae* of 'poor men'. As in the portrait, Catherine's desire is partly accented through the strategy of a textual silencing: her viewpoint, emerging intermittently like her sudden, wild entrances, is continually thwarted in a script that seems to privilege a male rather than female quest for self realisation. Significantly, the portrait is framed by the crossing of several gazes. Firstly, Baruch shows it to Joseph Baguenault, in an exchange which objectifies the absent woman. Although Joseph's subsequent off-hand description to Catherine suppresses the portrait's reference to herself, she nonetheless privately surmises the truth. Another perspective is implanted, however, in Joseph's confused recollection of the title - he remembers it at first as 'The Free Woman'.[45] This misremembered title reconstitutes Catherine's struggle, symbolically endowing the woman with an already achieved freedom, even though in the image she is only in the painful process of emergence. The conjunction of the achieved utopian dream with the freeze frame of the woman in struggle, 'bursting through the thicket', expresses the tension of the unresolved relation between Baruch and Catherine, defining both picture and relationship in dialectical terms, and as the site of intersecting ideas about love and revolution, gender and Marxism, sex and social constraint. Baruch's portrait expresses a Marxist view, its confidence and truth deriving from the masculine authority of the world-traveller, and he empowers the woman through his 'revolutionary' discourse. At a metanarrative level, however, the Marxist lover is subjected to a return of the gaze. Margaret Harris has explored cross-overs between Stead's fiction and her life, drawing on William Blake's novels. *We are the makers of dreams* is Blake's version, argues Harris, of the couple's romance and of their early connubial life, a subject on which Stead also focuses in the concurrently written *For Love Alone*:

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[45] Stead, *Seven Poor Men Of Sydney*, p. 160.

> In a sense, [Blake, in his novel] not only subsumes his rival in love, but realises the rival's ambitions by living and writing revolutions. He projects the consummation beyond the passion of romantic love, showing that the most intense personal and artistic fulfilment is to be found in the comradeship of political action. In *We are the makers of dreams*, then, Blake does not only write his version of Christina Stead, he rewrites also the best-known of *her* versions of their relationship.[46]

Similarly, in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, whereas Baruch engages in representing Catherine, 'Christina Stead' engages in representing 'William Blake', appropriating the exuberant, erotic flow of his discourse. This encoded intertextuality enacts a dialectical interplay - a metaphoric web - of heterosexual desire and emancipatory politics in the criss-crossing and synthesising relation between observer and observed, lover and loved one, artist and subject, male and female. In *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, masculinity and revolutionary Marxism - and the relation between them - are problematic and desirable. The woman's struggle can be explained by Marxist theory, but also suggests a challenge to its limits.

In *The People with the Dogs*, the wild hops vine extends these earlier images to represent the recalcitrance and all pervasiveness of an ideological consciousness which catches up a whole community in its bonds. Stead develops, in a deceptively muted tone, the theme of the individual's struggle for self-realisation, this time in her portrait of the pleasurably otiose and mildly stirring Edward Massine. Although sympathetically rendered, Edward is initially unawakened to the desire which would conjoin his life to another and engage him in purposeful and productive community. Returning from his desultory urban existence in Manhattan to his roots in 'Whitehouse', the family home in the country, and stung to action by his unresolved love-life, Edward takes an axe to the spreading tentacles of a wild hops vine. He pauses in his work on one small patch to contemplate the vine's

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[46] Margaret Harris, '"To Hell with Conservatories": Christina Stead and the Fiction of William J. Blake', *Meridian*, 8.2 (1989), p.170.

overall shape and power. In the ensuing description, the futility of Edward's attempt to root out the organism is overtaken by wonderment at its self-sufficient power. Diana Brydon sees the rambling vine in *The People with the Dogs* as the perfect analogy for Stead's narrative aesthetic:

> ... pulling everything within reach into its orbit, it does not distinguish between roots and branch; it has no clear beginning nor ending; it is an interdependent system in which the man-made and the natural co-exist. Such a system is democratic rather than hierarchically oriented.[47]

While this does elucidate the vine's positive attributes, as well as the representational significance of its democratically open-ended shape, Brydon's reading minimises the description's ambivalence. Although it does not crush, the vine's 'dark communication of sinew', like a benign cancer, holds and embraces everything, 'throttling' other possibilities.[48] The vine figures social and ideological bonds as simultaneously omnipresent, accommodating, supportive and strangling. The description of the vine - a thing normally invisible to whomever is in its grasp - slowly unravels in a way that replicates the gradual awakening of the protagonist. In a conceptualisation which suggests engagement with the problematic of class consciousness in Western Marxist thought, the durable interdependence of the parts comprising the whole vine represents the relative autonomy of the superstructure, the prevalence of false consciousness and the unstoppable process of ideological reproduction. The 'deep, ineradicable cables' of the 'same great system and one vine' convey the systematic work of monopoly, the deep rooted ideology of American capitalism, the simultaneously enabling and limiting environment within which the Massine family has prospered. Edward's awakening consciousness contrasts with the illusion of individual autonomy which has sustained him and which is fundamental to bourgeois

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[47] Diana Brydon, 'Resisting "the tyranny of what is written": Christina Stead's Fiction', in *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 17. 4 (October 1986), p. 4.

[48] Christina Stead, *The People with the Dogs* (1952; London: Virago Modern Classics, 1981), pp. 150-1.

consciousness and to capitalism - a siren dream, it is implied, of vegetation and of vegetative existence.

The struggle for autonomy and self-realisation - the life struggle of the subject - is manifested in the smallest of routine tasks and permeates discourse, exhibiting 'practical consciousness'. Stead's fictions, depicting subjects within the social web, are focused exactly upon this 'middle ground', enacting dramas of linguistic flux, of intuition, of habitual interaction, and of embodied existence. This terrain is conceptualised as close to, or even continuous with, conscious deliberation, while remaining distinct from it. In an essay on women's intuition, 'The Magic Woman and Other Stories', Stead muses on the manner and mode of the individual's instinctive negotiation of the minutiae of daily life:

> George Sand says 'There is nothing less logical than daily life'. Facts roll in which do not fit our facts; to accept them or reject must be done at once, so that we feel comfortable or know what to do: we need a handy instrument. Instant judgment, immediate deduction is usually absolutely necessary to us, and for it we are obliged to rely on our intuition, a sort of ready reckoner. We do it, we are used to it and think nothing of it. So do men. This is true of teachers, lawyers, doctors, people in critical situations, the pursuer and the pursued. Rapid or instant decisions are needed and may be fatal: and what we then have, the guess, the half-formed notion, the hunch, the intimation, the divination, we call intuition. All these exist.[49]

For Stead, the 'ready reckoner' facilitates the practical, social interactions of subjects, implying their imbrication in the social arena, while retaining an idea of the subject's activity and creativity. Positing the origins of this intuitive faculty as social rather than natural, Stead aims to demystify 'women's intuition' even as she acknowledges its seemingly magical efficacy:

> About women's insight, there is a sort of folklore we inherit ... Some of this enchantment, foul and fair, comes from our early days when the woman in the home, so weak and ailing, often moneyless, powerless,

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[49] Christina Stead, 'The Magic Woman and Other Stories', in *Ocean of Story* (1985; Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1986), p.528. See pages 546-7 of R. G. Geering's 'Afterword' for full publication history.

> often anxious, disturbed, wretched, with no status to speak of, no trades-union, yet has the awful power of hunger and suck, gives life and holds off death, sets out her law, defies *their* law for our sake; from whom we obtain cure of night-terrors and the milk of paradise, a magic woman sheltering this small creature, ourselves, obliged to live in the country of the giants.[50]

The drift of this passage, however, suggests a conflation of the 'social' as constitutive with what is implicitly assumed as the constitutive 'natural' of biological, anatomical destiny. The Marxist debunking of the 'magical' thought of origins is suddenly displaced, in the semi-mystical image of maternal power, by the reminder of bodily hunger and infant dependency. In a return not contradicted by a Marxism traditionally unable to theorise adequately either sexuality or the work of reproduction, Stead treats biological nature as a kind of determining 'base' which naturally gives rise to certain superstructural gender arrangements. Rather than addressing the contradiction this implies, she is drawn rather into musing on the mysterious power of the archaic mother who is both subject to and outside of 'the law', and who usurps the role of law-giver. Stead's discourse is thus performed by the contradictions within the tradition of Western rationality which underwrites the humanist Marxism of her era.

Although a Marxist-humanist understanding of the subject informs Stead's authorial production, the gradual contraction of the space of change in the later fictions signals an increasing recognition of ideology as inescapable, a recognition which potentially runs counter to otherwise humanist views. The image of physical contingency suggested by the vine in earlier fictions is supplanted, for example, by the invisible webs of deceit in *Cotters' England*. While both the vine and the web suggest the naturalised and inanimate rootedness of cultural construction, in *Cotters' England* webs of deceit are also produced by Nellie, the spider woman. Nellie weaves entrapping webs, even as she is herself caught up within

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[50] Stead, 'The Magic Woman', p. 529.

other, unrecognised webs. Webs of self deceit trap many of Stead's protagonists: even as these hubristic characters seem magically (to themselves) to perform autonomously, they are performed by their clichés, stratagems and socially marked discourses. In *I'm Dying Laughing*, both speech and body of the female revolutionary-writer, Emily Wilkes/Howard, perform uncontrollably, compulsively reproducing the riven, contradictory discourses of American history, from the promise of revolution to postwar imperialism. While such treatment prefigures Althusserian 'ideology', the narratives' tendency to objectify these characters through naturalistic or scientific observation, to cast their thinking as fetishistic, constructs a space of negative judgement that implies, as mentioned earlier in discussion of Fox's book, access to a realm of 'truth'. According to Baudrillard, Marx's 'fetish', the commodity invested with the magical thinking of false consciousness, returns to haunt its user, as it falsely 'presupposes the existence, somewhere, of a non-alienated consciousness of an object in some "true," objective state'.[51] In like fashion, the category of the true and proper revolutionary subject is retained in and contains Stead narrative explorations of the subject-in-ideology.

If the fetish can double back upon the author-observer in this way, it can most certainly double back upon unwary critic or reader. In his rigorously self-reflexive 'sociology of sociology', Pierre Bourdieu attempts to ward off the 'magical thinking' of the self-appointed scientific observer.[52] Pointing out that 'Marx laid down the bases of a sociolinguistic pragmatics', Bourdieu nonetheless accuses both Marx and Marxism of having made insufficient use of reflexive criticism.[53] According to Derek Robbins, Bourdieu's paradigm of practice as polythetic informs an increasingly reflexive attempt to work with

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[51] Jean Baudrillard, 'Fetishism and Ideology: The Semiological Reduction', in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St Louis, Mo: Telos Press, 1981), p. 89.

[52] See, for an example of Bourdieu's idea of a reflexive sociology, 'A lecture on the lecture', *In Other Words*, pp. 177-198.

[53] See Bourdieu's 'Fieldwork in philosophy', *In Other Words*, p. 17.

and through the perspective of agents, and to incorporate into his observational method tacit recognition of his own practice as agent and observer.[54] Refusing structuralism's blunt effacing of the living practice of agents, Bourdieu's attempt to retain the political efficacy of a systematic mapping of the social world is qualified by his focus on the dynamic contribution of individual subjects to their social spaces.

Like Stead, Bourdieu is interested in how the usually ignored and seemingly most insignificant aspects of quotidian existence, such as taste in music or furnishings or the way an individual walks and talks, are called forth by and work to reproduce dominant relations of power within any given social field.[55] Stead's previously mentioned idea of intuition as a 'ready reckoner', for example, can be likened to Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus*. For Bourdieu, the *habitus* constitutes the bodily, interactive site of the social: 'The body is in the social world but the social world is also in the body'.[56] A highly variable and context-specific bundle of embodied knowledges and dispositions with which agents are equipped, *habitus* is also constituted within each of the separate fields within which agents assume their positions:

> What do I mean by 'field'? As I use the term, a field is a separate social universe having its own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy.[57]

Bourdieu's theory of the field maps the circuitry of an encompassing social universe comprised of a plethora of relatively autonomous and structured social spaces, such as the field of cultural production. These fields are dynamic, both constituting and in turn

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[54] Derek Robbins explains that for Bourdieu both 'individual selves' as well as language are 'polythetic', that is, practical logic will sustain the accretion of confused and logically contradictory meanings - something that 'objectivism' fails to observe; thus agents operate in practice in contradictory situations. See Derek Robbins, *The Work of Pierre Bourdieu: Recognizing Society* (Buckingham: Open University Press/ Milton Keynes, 1991), esp pp. 112-3.

[55] As noted by Toril Moi in 'Appropriating Bourdieu: Feminist Theory and Pierre Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture', in *New Literary History* 22 (1991), pp. 1019-20.

[56] Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, p. 190.

[57] Pierre Bourdieu, 'Field of Power, Literary Field and Habitus', in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 162.

constituted by the multiple and unchartable actions of individual agents. The *habitus* - addressing, perhaps, the elusive space of interaction between individual and collective dimensions, described by Engels in his letter to Bloch - is the intricate personal and trans-personal mechanism which produces the logic of the field and of its agents. Likening the *habitus* to Chomsky's model of generative grammar, Bourdieu stipulates that its difference lies in the acquisition of 'dispositions' through infinitely variable 'experience'.[58] Thus the *habitus*, or 'the feel for the game', is embodied - therefore culturally and historically variable - rather than an abstractable system. *Habitus* is both egalitarian, being structurally available to all agents, and capable of generating infinite variation, being always differently filled or enacted (disposed) from birth onwards according to specific social, historical or cultural contexts and individual experiences. Individual agents in this model are therefore both uniquely complex and firmly woven into their social spaces.

Through the *habitus*, an open-ended dialectic between the individual agent and social space is posited. In a paradigm seemingly congruent with 'chaos theory', neither the direction of social behaviours nor the development of social spaces can be predicted with any precision, but 'homologies' may be discerned between the actions or choices of individual agents and the social milieu within which these occur. With this emphasis, Bourdieu rejects the traditional Marxist base-superstructure model of 'mechanical causality', opting instead for 'homologies' (correspondences suggestive of structured relations), while asserting the relative autonomy of these structures.[59] In positing 'fields' as the microcosmic social spaces through which economic and historic determinations are

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[58] Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, p. 9.

[59] Bourdieu's preference for a 'genetic structuralism' as opposed to 'orthodox structuralism' (see 'Principles for a Sociology of Cultural Works', in *Field*, p. 179), implies a reworking of the genetic structuralism of Marxist sociologist, Lucien Goldmann, who also asserted homologies between the 'tragic teaching of Jansenism', the world view expressed in Pascal's *Pensées* and Racine's tragedies, and the downward mobility of the once powerful *noblesse de robe* of the *ancien régime*. See Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, trans. Philip Thody (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964).

refracted, 'much like a prism', Bourdieu aims to retain structuralist analysis of cultural works, whilst recognising specific determinations produced through the struggles amongst agents within these fields.[60] As suggested by his criticism of Michel Foucault, whom he otherwise praises for having produced 'the only rigorous formulation (with that of the Russian formalists) of structuralism in relation to the analysis of cultural works',[61] Bourdieu does not relinquish historical materialism; rather, he looks beyond 'the field of discourse' in search of the historically specific, 'explanatory principle' which underpins it.[62]

Underlying Bourdieu's theory are assumptions, therefore, that appear indebted to, even as they are distanced from, a Marxist science of the economy. In Bourdieu's lexicon, the general notion of 'capital' is appropriated to refer to the accumulated and varied types of resources, whether material, cultural, social or symbolic, which individual agents access, deploy and convert in their position-taking practice within and between fields. The Marxist genealogy of terms such as 'symbolic capital' and 'cultural capital', however, seems as strategic as metaphors from the physical sciences, such as 'forces of the field' and 'positive' and 'negative poles'. In coupling the discourses of science and Marxism, Bourdieu runs the considerable risk of instituting a new doxa in the name of 'science'. Within the academic field, however, Bourdieu's appropriation of the language of the physical sciences both suggests a strategic invocation of legitimacy and symbolic power and works to affront the comfortable pieties of the humanities. Bourdieu's language is calculated and self-aware; it would seem nonsensical to suggest that the carefully threaded reflexivity of his theory is not also directed against its own act of intervention and enunciation within the academic field.

The 'scientific' tenor of Bourdieu's work derives not only from his lexicon, but also from his empirical research; detailed data informs his sociological studies of the Kabyle and

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[60] Bourdieu, 'Principles for a Sociology of Cultural Works', in *Field*, pp. 181-2.
[61] Bourdieu, 'Principles', p. 178.
[62] Bourdieu, 'Principles', p. 179.

of French culture, including - in a pointedly reflexive move - his analysis of the academic subgroup of the French cultural field.[63] In the latter, Bourdieu's project is to uncover the principles governing the actions of agents in the field, to penetrate the 'illusio' of intellectual and artistic disinterestedness, to unveil and to question dominant beliefs about what constitutes artistic and cultural value in terms that reveal as fetishistic the relation of these phenomena to the disavowed material economy of the dominant field of power. Like Marx's anatomy of the capitalist mode of production, Bourdieu's anatomy of cultural production aims to expose its tendency toward a systematic reification.[64] Using a dialectical mode of analysis, he discovers hidden, structuring principles of intellectual and artistic position-taking which act in reverse to outward appearance, thus exposing, with the force of a cultural psychoanalysis, the contradictory nature of these positions.

In relation to subjectivity, Bourdieu's theory is highly productive, but also vulnerable to critique. What happens when agents, such as artists, producers or consumers, are consciously aware of the subtleties of the game of position-taking? Is there any escape from the structured and structuring space of the field? Is 'creativity' constituted entirely within, or explained by the mysterious 'black box' of the *habitus*? R. W. Connell argues that the degree to which the *habitus* contains the full range of human experience and subjectivity is evaded by Bourdieu.[65] Connell's discussion of Bourdieu's theory, however, both elides its reflexivity and underemphasises its effectiveness for investigating distinctive patterns of social reproduction. Whereas Connell takes issue with what he sees as the theory's

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[63] See Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984); and *Homo Academicus*, trans. P. Collier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

[64] See also Bourdieu's preface to *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), xii-xviii, for a passionately argued defence of his project and an attack on the ineffability of art and of artistic subjectivity.

[65] See R. W. Connell, 'The black box of habit on the wings of history: critical reflections on the theory of social reproduction, with suggestions on how to do it better', in *Which Way Is Up? Essays on sex, class and culture*, ed. R. W. Connell (Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), esp. pp. 151-2.

determinism, Toril Moi argues that the praxis of Bourdieu's work manifests his strong investment in the possibility of agency and transformation:

> ... *Distinction* is nothing if not a work of *critique*, a theoretical intervention which assumes that the very fact of exposing the foundations of bourgeois esthetics will contribute to its transformation.[66]

Bourdieu's theory forces remembrance of what is normally either misrecognised or forgotten in the worlds of high culture, high art and the academy: the economic and political struggles inherent in, and masked by, the defining attribute of disinterest. Reminding us that all are enmeshed in particular social relations and that all obey the 'rules of the game', Bourdieu satirically characterises the 'cultural field' (of which the literary field is a subset) as the 'island of the sacred' which remains 'ostentatiously opposed to the profane, everyday world of production'. It is:

> ... a sanctuary for gratuitous, disinterested activity, [which] offers, like theology in other periods, an imaginary anthropology obtained by denial of all the negations really performed by the 'economy'.[67]

The logic of disavowal of economic interest structures the cultural field at large, as well as each of its subsets, such as the 'literary field'. It is centrally assumed that the very 'existence of the writer, as fact and as value, is inseparable from the existence of the literary field as an autonomous universe endowed with specific principles of evaluation of practices and works'.[68] This general principle becomes useful in understanding the logic of Stead's authorial production, as does Bourdieu's more detailed examination of the logic of the cultural field. As Bourdieu explains in 'The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed',[69] the underlying logic of the cultural field is manifested in its distinctions;

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[66] Moi, 'Appropriating Bourdieu', p. 1026.
[67] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 134.
[68] Bourdieu, *Field*, pp. 162-3.
[69] In Bourdieu, *Field*, pp. 29-73; and also Bourdieu's *Rules*, esp. pp. 81-5.

these are arrayed in a reverse order to that of the economic world, the latter being the dominant field, which is ordered according to distributions of material and economic power. The 'truer' the art and the more that the artist generates an 'art for art's sake', the greater the disavowal of economic reward or popular recognition. Conversely, the more commercially 'successful' the art, and the more it addresses the vulgar marketplace, the less it is prized by those in positions of symbolic dominance. While the field of cultural production is semi-autonomous, however, it ultimately responds to whatever is occurring within the dominant fields of power and of economic and class relations.

A double hierarchy of principles, furthermore, orders this field, rendering it a site of ongoing struggle for symbolic dominance between advocates of each principle.[70] At the 'positive' pole is situated the symbolically dominant group of established artists who enjoy a high degree of legitimacy or 'consecration'. At the negative pole is the dominated group of younger, heterodox, rising challengers, who are yet to achieve consecration. Within and between these groups a further polarisation occurs, according to their relation to the economy. The autonomous principle governs those artists (whether 'old' or 'young') for whom disinterestedness and authenticity are the primary logic of production. While these 'autonomous' producers strive for maximum distance from the mass-market, an underlying contradiction structures this position, given the inescapable reliance of the field and all of its agents upon the dominant field of the economy.

The opposite pole is governed by the 'heteronomous' principle, according to which producers' recognition and reward derives from their works' popularity and commercial success. Audiences here may vary from affluent, 'bourgeois' audiences whose orthodox tastes may have been inculcated according to received canonical traditions, to audiences

[70] See also Bourdieu, *Rules*, pp. 215-223.

from the dominated classes whose tastes correspond to the 'mass-cultural' scene. Positions and tastes are conditioned by a variety of factors such as class positioning and educational levels. The struggle between heteronomous and autonomous groupings takes place in relation to the exercise of symbolic powers of classification and 'consecration'. By controlling the power to classify, those in symbolic dominance retain command of the all-important processes of legitimation, consecration and distinction.[71] Election to consecration, sought by producers who produce for other producers, is likely to be deferred in the immediate term; but in the case of the 'truest' art, such consecration is assured in the 'hereafter', at the furthest remove from the possibility of popular consumption or material reward.[72] In John Frow's criticism, Bourdieu's implicit assumptions about the continuing legitimacy and prestige of high culture, which tend to characterise mass-culture as impoverished and disadvantaged, operate to essentialise and dichotomise categories of class as well as aesthetic logic, particularly in relation to the popular domain.[73] While this critique seems overly attentive to *Distinction*, a text not strongly marked by the reflexivity so evident in Bourdieu's later work,[74] Frow's observation does serve as a reminder that Bourdieu's mapping of 1960s French culture may more effectively pertain to modernist rather than to postmodernist cultural values.

Using as his prime example Flaubert's novel, *Sentimental Education*, Bourdieu asks how a producer such as Flaubert was able to achieve such 'quasi-miraculous lucidity' in representing his own social space.[75] In the ensuing discussion, Bourdieu argues for a recognition of the adaptability of individual subjectivity in its precise response to the

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[71] Bourdieu, *Field*, p. 42.
[72] Bourdieu, *Field*, p. 50.
[73] See John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 31-35.
[74] See Robbins for this point in *Work of Pierre Bourdieu*, p. 131.
[75] See, for an expanded version of Bourdieu's thesis in relation to Flaubert, 'The Conquest of Autonomy', in *Rules*, esp. pp. 103-5.

nuances of the social field. Noting that a writer, even while positioned by the logic of the cultural field, can nonetheless be self-consciousness enough to articulate this in representation, Bourdieu believes that such self-consciousness is actually produced within and promoted by Flaubert's indeterminate positioning, his 'refusal to belong' to the field's defined groupings:

> The objectifying distance ... which enables Flaubert to produce a global vision of the space in which he is situated, is inseparable from the obsession of powerlessness which is associated with the occupation of neutral positions where the forces of the field are neutralized.[76]

Flaubert's 'lucidity' is achieved through a suffering marginality in relation to symbolic dominance. The writer who adopts a neutral position, refusing to belong to well defined groups situated at either end of the field, is likely to translate the tension of refusal of categorisation and its subsequent 'powerlessness' into a vision of the social space based on this 'objectifying distance'. The artistic vision is thus explained as structured by the artist's relation to others within the structured field, which is itself structured by its relation to the dominant field of power.

Bourdieu's sociological analyses, of the cultural field in general and of Flaubert's novel in particular, provide a wealth of insights about Stead's work, including an approach to the oft-discussed riddle of how 'political' her novels are, or even how 'feminist', or avant-garde. It is noteworthy that, as a wandering expatriate with leftist affiliations, and as a woman writer, Stead was positioned in a multiply indeterminate way within the cultural field. In addition, as her distance from institutionalised political and cultural groupings suggests, Stead's artistic vision, like Flaubert's, was to some extent homologous with this experience, and similarly characterised by a certain 'objectifying distance'. Indeed, in her

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[76] Bourdieu, 'Field of Power, Literary Field and Habitus' in *Field*, p. 173.

most strongly autobiographical fiction, in the moments of departure from the 'objectifying distance' of narrative critique, Stead lyrically thematises the quest for belonging to some wider and freer community; but the boundaries of this group remain blurred and idealised, always deferred, as mobility is privileged over stasis.

Bourdieu's description of Flaubert's '*painful lucidity* ... rooted in powerlessness' enabling a 'global vision' of his social space is also pertinent to Christina Stead's aesthetic;[77] the sympathetic but detached observation characteristic of her narratives parallels her own marginality in relation to defined groups in a number of fields. Although later in life she argued that she had always felt herself to be an Australian, Stead notably avoided situating herself permanently in or identifying with any one place, preferring to be in transit. She felt that her husband, Bill Blake, was her home and country.[78] Her relation to literary groups was also distant, as her chequered history with publishing houses suggests.[79] Uncomfortable with self promotion and slow to seek patronage, Stead remained deeply concerned, however, as discussed in chapter five, to gain a 'true' readership as well as lasting recognition.

The ambiguities of Stead's connection with radical political circles also co-ordinate her 'authorial production', in both senses. Problematically, Stead's relationship with William Blake - and with other radical men such as Ralph Fox, as well as American *New Masses* associates and friends, Stanley Burnshaw and Mike Gold - on the one hand works to demonstrate her specifically Marxist connections and, on the other hand, as in Rowley's biography, arouses scepticism about the depth and validity of her commitment to Marxism.

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[77] Bourdieu, 'Field of Power', in *Field*, p. 173 [emphases in original].

[78] See Giulia Giuffré's interview with Stead in *A Writing Life: Interviews with Australian Women Writers* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990), p. 80. See also Christina Stead, 'Why I Left', in *The Independent Monthly* (December 1994/January 1995), pp. 42-43.

[79] Margaret Harris, in 'Christina Stead in *Southerly*', in *Southerly* 3 (1989), conjectures that, in addition to the taint of leftist connections, Stead's frequent changes of publisher and her return to Europe in 1946 added to difficulties in getting her manuscripts accepted, since ' ... none of the four American firms which had published her had a vested interest in her productions' (518).

There is little to support the claim that, although she maintained involvement in various communist organisations and circles, Christina Stead was in any practical sense an activist or revolutionary herself; she never joined the party, remaining at most a sympathiser, interested observer and 'fellow traveller'. Nor do her writings suggest blind adherence to orthodox strands of the movement: her fiction is far removed from any form of vulgar Marxist determinism. This has induced readers such as Jennifer Gribble to suggest that her characters are not so much constituted by discourse as 'expressing and interacting' with these discourses.[80] Critics such as Holmes, perhaps concerned to preserve Stead's work from the unseemly taint of connection with an outdated and discredited ideology, emphasise the moral, individualistic tone of her political vision, elevating the former over the latter as her primary concern.[81] As Chris Williams comments in discussing the politically-oriented book reviews Stead contributed to the Australian-Soviet *Friendship* magazine in the 1950s, appropriating her fiction for partisan-political purposes is a much more vexed issue.[82] Stead's own authorial pronouncements (particularly after the revival of her literary reputation, from 1965, and her return to Australia after William Blake's death) add credence to this view as she repeatedly rejected the label of political partisanship.[83] Her refusal to 'belong' in any active sense to a party can, however, be read as a strategic refusal, necessary to her artistic vision, and constructive of the objectifying distance which also informs her literary representations of the social space. In 1942, in an entry she contributed to *Twentieth Century Authors*, Stead commented that:

> The essence of style in literature, for me, is experiment, invention, 'creative error' (Jules Romains), and change; and of its content, the presentation of

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[80] Gribble, *Christina Stead*, p. 7.

[81] Holmes, 'Moral Dialectic', p. 7: '... Stead uses an artistic discipline that is reminiscent of Hegelian/Marxist dialectic, but it is highly personalised, and non formulaic. It is adapted to appraise not political nor social issues, so much as the psychology and morality of individuals.'

[82] Williams, *Christina Stead*, pp. 224-5.

[83] See, for example, Rodney Wetherell's 'Christina Stead Talks to Rodney Wetherell', in *Overland* (August 1983), pp. 24-26.

> 'man alive' (Ralph Fox). I am not puritan nor party, like to know every sort of person; nor political, but on the side of those who have suffered oppression, injustice, coercion, prejudice, and have been harried from birth.[84]

Expressed here as individually disposed and antagonistic to prescriptive orthodoxies, Stead's political and aesthetic views are nonetheless broadly shaped by a spectrum of political discourses. These include both the influences of a revolutionary modernism as well as a set of literary and cultural discourses ranging from Romantic poetry to an Australian identification with the 'underdog'.[85] Stead experienced the creative process as something to which she submitted, unselfconsciously, in a manner that precluded intentional propagandising or didacticism. In response to inquiries from Laurie Clancy, Stead reflected on the question of literary influences (in this instance citing Shelley and Dostoyevsky) and on the nature of her relation to writing, which she saw as personal, instinctive and unselfconscious rather than 'professional':

> I can't accustom myself to formulas: they're a joke to me really ... Everything I write is the truth, as I see it. It doesn't have to be a special brand of truth. If truth has a brand it is not the truth; it is a brand, a marketable commodity, a political commodity, something like that ... What is behind all my work is a poetic view of things.[86]

Typically, this statement projects hyperbolic certainty about the generalised category of 'truth': 'truth' is self-evident, bracketed off from 'ideology', distinguished from 'political' positioning. But this disavowal of partisan politics is counter-balanced by the critical-Marxism of 'brands', 'markets' and 'commodities'. Stead liked (after 1965) to talk about her art as if it occupied a separate realm from that of things political. Yet closer examination reveals that her work, the bulk of which was produced during the period 1930-1960, is

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[84] From the entry on Christina Stead in *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature*, eds. Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1942), p. 1330. Also quoted in Williams, *Christina Stead*, pp. 145-6.

[85] Stead's early reading included Lawson, Paterson and Rudd: see Williams, *Christina Stead*, p. 37.

[86] From letter (15.7.66) to Laurie Clancy, quoted in Williams, *Christina Stead*, p. 240.

saturated by a critical-Marxist apprehension of the social system. Indeed, Stead's authorial pronouncements themselves often slip between preserving her art from party politics and openly avowing her art's political impulse. In 1976, Stead claimed that she wanted to 'observe people' and 'to leave a record of the world stage' as she saw it:

> I am not a bill-poster or a propagandist. I am very much opposed to the sort of writing that lays a message on top of a work like icing on a cake. If a writer has strong feelings, they find their way into the work. On the other hand, I personally do not feel prompted to make my opinions heard outside of my novels. I am not the sort of person who goes to meetings.[87]

In view of Bourdieu's model, Stead's authorial performance can therefore be understood as both constituted by and constructive of a specific position within the cultural field, a position consistent with and enabling of her narrative vision and her artistic ambition. The trajectory, through three decades, of her political thought and its fictional inscription, can be better comprehended if Stead's many seemingly contradictory positions are seen not as pathological but as logically produced in terms of her own *habitus* or 'practical consciousness', as performances scripted by - but also strategically adapted to - social, historical and discursive settings. No simplistic relation can be sought between the social context and Stead's fiction, but correspondences can be observed which illuminate and situate her political and aesthetic views. In other words, then, Stead as a cultural producer can be seen as one who both performs and is performed. As a cultural producer, desiring a readership but refusing the mass-marketplace, and operating - however reluctantly - within the rules of the game of the 'field of culture', Stead is neither a free agent nor simply determined, but is also, importantly, both. It is also, precisely, this difficult and irreducible relationship between the individual subject and the shaping social web that is lucidly apprehended, figured and explored in Stead's own narratives.

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[87] Paul Rea, 'Christina Stead Talks on Changes', in *Sydney Morning Herald* (10 July 1976), p. 7.

Can feminist attention to issues of gender be reconciled with the work of Bourdieu, or with cultural materialist approaches in general? How far can these theories advance feminist goals and concerns, particularly in relation to the study of authors, texts and textual practices, including those of a writer like Stead? For Janet Wolff, the practice of a feminist literary criticism should be based not only on poststructuralist and postmodern thinking, but also on cultural materialist perspectives.[88] Wolff envisages an interdisciplinary approach sensitive to the interdependence of textual criticism and sociological inquiry, an approach which would be necessary in producing 'a comprehensive feminist account of literature which can link conditions of production (women as authors, for example) with characteristics of representation (narrative and literary conventions as constituting and limiting the representation of women in the text)'.[89] While noting that literary criticism has failed to take advantage of a thoroughgoing sociological perspective, Wolff equally charges sociological inquiry with having been too distanced from the study of text. Citing, as possible exceptions, the work of Terry Eagleton and Raymond Williams, Wolff suggests that too often cultural theory outstrips textual literary practice, the latter remaining formal and resistant to sociological perspectives.[90]

Toril Moi, in a similar vein, argues that feminist literary theory can profit from Bourdieu's work, which provides effective tools for a more focused and sophisticated reading of the historical and material context of the producer, a context which, in turn, can be seen to condition cultural production. Moi argues that this knowledge enables the cultural critic to read texts with heightened accuracy and sensitivity, more secure in the belief that such a reading is not entirely arbitrary but is grounded in a reflexive methodology:

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[88] See Janet Wolff, 'Texts and Institutions: Problems of Feminist Criticism', in *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).
[89] Wolff, 'Texts', pp. 103-4.
[90] Wolff, 'Texts, p. 109.

> What [Bourdieu's] analyses may help us to see ... is the way in which certain texts enter into field-related intertextual relations with other texts. Once we have perceived these relations, we may then go on to produce new readings of the texts in question.[91]

Furthermore, in Moi's opinion, Bourdieu's theory is useful for feminism because it offers an unparallelled 'microtheory' of endemic, socially constituted relations of power, in terms which can neatly bypass the well-worn essentialism versus anti-essentialism debate which has plagued feminist theory.[92] Certainly, as Moi points out, Bourdieu has only belatedly recognised the significance for his work of issues of patriarchal power and of the social construction of gender. Moi discusses a recent essay in which Bourdieu argues that:

> '... our perceptions of the biology of reproduction are the *effects* of the thoroughly arbitrary social construction of gender divisions which they are supposed to legitimate and explain ...'.[93]

This timely gesture, however, may too readily eviscerate the materiality of the body from questions of subjectivity: while Bourdieu has taken pains to theorise an embodied subjectivity, he is in danger here of eliding the resistance and unknowability of the body, and of failing, perhaps, to register bodily difference. Perhaps this gesture also reinscribes the work of theorists like Williams and Bourdieu, for all their value and reflexivity, within Western and Marxist epistemologies which, according to Elizabeth Grosz, depend upon an analogy between the production of subjectivity and the production of commodities. Grosz contends that:

> The very interaction and engagement of the natural with the cultural, the production of the natural in the (specific) terms of the cultural, the cultural as the (reverse) precondition of the natural - in short, the binary opposition between the cultural and the natural - needs careful reconsideration. It is not adequate to simply dismiss the category of nature

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[91] Moi, 'Appropriating Bourdieu', p. 1040.
[92] Moi, 'Appropriating Bourdieu', p. 1019. The essay to which Moi refers is, to date, unavailable in English translation.
[93] Moi, 'Appropriating Bourdieu', p. 1030.

> outright, to completely retranscribe it without residue into the cultural: this in itself is the monist, or logocentric, gesture par excellence.[94]

Grosz here suggests the limits imposed by unwittingly phallogocentric models of subjectivity. In Stead's production, a Marxist focus on economically-determined culture is bounded, but not challenged by, assumptions about nature, in accordance, also, with epistemological categories constitutive of Western thought since Descartes. While both Nietzsche and Marx offer strategies to challenge hegemonic moral and political values and ideologies, their failure to turn the critical lens upon the gendered (as well as racialised and sexualised) construction of culture and subjectivity recuperates endemic structures of oppression through the normative, universalised (white, male, heterosexual) body. It is this body which, in European history, so often occupies the privileged site of the revolutionary subject. In her ironic modes of representation of character, Stead, too, plays upon, contests but is also constrained by this ideologically and epistemologically constituted boundary. Marxist ideology, in its specific discursive and historical context, constructs value positions which reinscribe Stead's explorations within such limits.

As I argue in chapter two, which investigates Stead's involvement in radical politics in the 1930s, heterosexual love functions as a way of accessing revolutionary subjectivity. Stead's strategic narrative appropriations of culturally masculine scripts both informs her gendered representations of the revolutionary subject and directs her most privileged female characters towards a fulfilment of womanliness through an idealised model of heterosexual companionship and love. But narrative - as in Bakhtin's understanding - is also constituted by centrifugal, decentering forces which work to undo centripetal, unifying forces of signification.[95] Towards the end of Teresa Hawkins's quest, in *For Love Alone*, the liberatory

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[94] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1994), p. 21.

[95] See M. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 272.

moment is charged with the shame of self-recognition and the vigour of performance. Though fully scripted by the privileged utopian moment of the individual conjoining with the larger 'collective will', Teresa's shame-charged performance of the will also buffets against and revises its masculine script, inscribing a desire for autonomy through and beyond the constitutive male gaze. If Stead's aesthetic aim of 'creative error' can be invoked in this context, and its recalcitrance offset against Althusser's 'epistemological void', then perhaps even Marxist-humanist 'error' can function as the mark of an agency in living performance - 'performed' but also dynamically 'performing':

> ...she felt many thousands of shadows, pressing along with her, storming forwards, but quietly and eagerly, though blindly. She even heard the rushing and jostling of their patched and washed clothes and the flapping of their street-worn shoes, their paper-stuffed soles. She began to blush deeply, deeper than ever before, into her entrails and into the brain, her heart thickened with shame ...She suddenly understood ...it was from the womb of time she was fighting her way and the first day lay before her.[96]

[96] Christina Stead, *For Love Alone* (1945; Sydney: Angus and Robertson/ A&R Classics Edition, 1978), p. 494.

Chapter 2.

Loving the revolutionary:

the thirties.

> ...It is very touching to see a person one loves, absorbed in silence or action and unconscious of one's presence or scrutiny: even when they are behaving simply, such as in undressing: inte[r]vention of small tics, rumination, inspection, hesitation, humming, inspection of self in glass. Because in fact the unconscious person is really the object of love ....[1]

> I thus thread my way into the snares of his universe, borrowing this first observation: 'All that the action of love obtains from me is merely this wisdom: that the other is not to be known; [her or] his opacity is not the screen around a secret, but, instead, a kind of evidence in which the game of reality and appearance is done away with.'[2]

In her diary, quoted in the first epigraph, Christina Stead reflects on her mode of observation of her partner, William Blake. This meditation, in which love occasions a scrutiny which can access the loved one's unguarded self, can be contrasted with Roland Barthes's rumination, embedded in the second epigraph, about the beloved's 'opacity', which not only refuses the lover's penetrative gaze but voids its hierarchical purpose. Trinh T. Minh-ha's strategic appropriation of Barthes's aphorism foregrounds the anonymity and power of the collective category of 'white male writer', initiating her own exploration of the territory of the dominant knower. Thus the scene of female entry, through scopophilia, into

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[1] Extract from Christina Stead's unpublished diaries (26 March 1931): NLA Ms 4967, Box 15, Folder 112.

[2] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality, and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p.49; quoting also from Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang/Noonday Press, 1978), p.135.

'his universe', can be an appropriation, a counter-penetration, resonating politically as well as personally. The import of Barthes's acknowledgement of the beloved's unknowability, however, is also conveyed by Trinh, who remains aware of the 'snares' of the classificatory gaze; for Stead, in contrast, the absorbing gaze upon the beloved presents an unproblematic means of access, functioning in her fiction as 'the naturalist-observer's desire to possess her objects through knowledge'.[3] In Stead's terms, 'love' embodies an authorial power of dialectical seeing. 'I love you', an otherwise semiotically empty phrase, can carry an enigmatic, performative force. For Barthes, '*I-love-you* is active':

> It affirms itself as a force - against other forces. Which ones? The thousand forces of the world, which are, all of them, disparaging forces (science, *doxa*, reality, reason, etc.).[4]

Love is a means within Stead's narratives of crossing the boundary between observer and observed, of enriching and perhaps counterbalancing the objectifying consequences of scientific observation, while never relinquishing the power afforded by this perspective. The creative process, in Stead's oft-quoted description, was like 'a love affair, exactly':

> It's like a stone hitting you. You can't argue with it. I wait and wait for the drama to develop. I watch the characters and the situation move and don't interfere. I'm patient. I'm lying low.[5]

An intense 'watchfulness' characterises the fiction, and yet, as has often been noted, this is accompanied by a deferral of authorial judgement. In her 1942 letter to Thistle Harris, Stead describes the creative act as 'the night of which no one speaks', of the 'awful, blind strength and ... cruelty' which must give rise to 'errors both of taste and style'; she envisages the creative act as emerging out of a struggle between individual will and surrender of the will to

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[3] Susan Sheridan's phrase in her discussion of Stead as satirist: see 'Re-Reading Christina Stead', in *Southerly* 53. 4 (December 1993), p. 46.

[4] Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, p. 153.

[5] 'Christina Stead in Washington Square', Stead interviewed by Jonah Raskin, in *London Magazine* 9. 11 (February 1970), p. 75.

forces of otherness.[6] These images of creative struggle and surrender rework age-old tropes of creativity as the product of the intercourse of masculine and feminine aspects of the self, presenting an artistic subjectivity which is vigorous but also consigned to destiny.

The conjunction of 'love' and 'the revolutionary' advances, in my reading of Stead's fiction of the 1930s, therefore, not only the romance of the revolutionary hero, but the idea that 'love' is a means to powerful knowledge, a process intrinsic to Stead's aesthetic method. This method is not in opposition to Marxism, but functions as its correlative. Between 1934 and 1940, a gamut of styles and genres is exercised in the fiction, ranging from exuberant lyricism in *The Salzburg Tales*, to a blend of realism and surrealism in both *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *The Beauties and the Furies*, to satire in the long, documentary, realist narrative *House of All Nations*. In the 1930s fiction, it is often men who are subject to the most intense narrative scrutiny, and male revolutionary figures - positive and negative - are (respectively) desired and appraised. An engagement with Marxist discourse is also implied at the intersection of the discourses of love and revolution in these narratives, in which the exploration of a gendered subjectivity is sourced by an ideal of heterosexual coupledom. In *The Man Who Loved Children*, a narrative in epic mode which draws upon a range of these aesthetic styles, the charismatic paternal figure, the object of first love, is superseded in the daughter's appropriation and performance of the masculine script.

Harris observes that the 'extent to which William Blake made possible the novelist Christina Stead has long been recognised ... not only in his role as agent ... but also in his role as partner and lover ...'.[7] Although Christina Stead's love for William Blake and its importance to her writing has often been discussed, the significance of this relationship in situating Stead's political and aesthetic views is less easily clarified. Stead's creative

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[6] To Thistle Harris (6 April 1942), in *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, p. 94.
[7] Margaret Harris, '"To Hell with Conservatories"', p. 161.

output dwindled after Blake's death in 1968; despite the impression conveyed in post-1968 interviews that she was continuing to produce new fiction, all her major new publications were of works drafted in previous years. Her letters to friends reveal her frustration, and the momentous impact that Blake's death had had.[8] To Joan Lidoff, Stead spoke of the loss of 'a fabric, a structure, ... built up between each other ... ' and of having to 'begin like an imbecile who doesn't know anything'.[9] In view of such evidence, the conclusion might easily be drawn that Stead's 'dependence' on Blake, amongst other significant men in her life, must also have compromised her intellectual and artistic independence. As mentioned in my introduction, Rowley's biography focuses on the psychology of Stead's relationships with men, proposing that her literary production was driven by powerful emotions connected with an unresolved complex about her father, David Stead. The biography portrays Stead as a woman who fell in love or, rather, who became repeatedly infatuated with unattainable men who rarely reciprocated her feelings. On the other hand, her relationships with women friends are characterised as initially warm but fatally flawed and rivalrous, resulting in Stead's irrational hostility and her fictional 'Bluebeard's gallery' of monstrous female characters.[10]

Is Rowley's portrait fair in dealing with Stead's Marxism? Does a woman's strongly expressed heterosexuality necessarily preclude the operation of a sharp, intellectual engagement with the political realm?[11] Feminist appropriations of Stead's work have surely sought to question the kind of thinking which separates the personal from the political. Such thinking additionally colludes in the dichotomous critical construction of Stead's narratives

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[8] See, for example, Stead's letter to Stephen Murray-Smith (20 June 1971), in *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, p. 426.

[9] 'Interview with Christina Stead', Stead interviewed by Joan Lidoff, in Lidoff, *Christina Stead*, p. 219.

[10] In the biography, Rowley writes: 'Florence James, Anne Dooley and Ruth McKenney, once intimate friends, had all been written off - literally. All three were now hanging in Stead's fictional gallery of monstrous characters.' See Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 440.

[11] In his review of the biography, 'Christina Stead, Scheherazade and Frankenstein's Monster', Stewart objects to Rowley's slant on Stead's sexuality, writing that 'Stead merely suffered from an advanced case of a fairly ordinary condition called heterosexuality ... .' (172)

as offering, primarily, either a morally-focused thematisation of individual human values of love or, in contrast, a politically-focused critique of class, culture, social behaviours and institutions. Few critics have denied the existence of both interests in Stead's fiction, but some argue for the primacy of one over the other.[12] It is demonstrably true, however, that very different narratives can be constructed from the same set of literary and biographical sources. Christina Stead's formative relationship with Blake (as with other Marxist men such as Ralph Fox, Stanley Burnshaw and Mike Gold) undermines, in Rowley's estimation, the authenticity of Stead's Marxism;[13] but these relationships can, on the contrary, be read as convincing evidence of Stead's attraction to the revolutionary world view embodied in the figure of the beloved. The latter view is strongly intimated in her fictional portraits of Blake (in the characters Baruch Mendelssohn and Michel Alphéndery, for example) as a man caught up and catching others up in his exuberant Marxist poetics.

The two published volumes of Stead's letters, as editor Ron Geering comments, are disproportionately representative of the period of her life after Blake's death.[14] There is scant documentation of the period of her arrival in London and of the early years of her relationship with Blake in Paris and New York, from the late 1920s to the late 1930s. Only ninety out of a total of nearly nine hundred pages in the two volumes contain letters from this crucial period. Relying on these few letters, on the recollections of Stead's friends, on the surviving diaries and on early manuscripts, biographers Rowley and Williams turned in part to Stead's fiction to flesh out the details of her experience of these crucial years. Rowley's exhaustively researched biography interweaves information from a variety of

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[12] See Anderson's comments about determinism in 'Christina Stead's Unforgettable Dinner-Parties', pp. 36-8; and Geering, *Christina Stead*, pp. 179-180.

[13] See Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 411: 'It was, Stead admitted, Bill's opinion, and in politics she would only ever echo him.' See also p. 133.

[14] Geering, in 'Preface' to *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, reasons: 'She must have written hundreds more during those fifty-four years [1928-1982] but it seems that she corresponded much more freely from the 1950s onward, even allowing that letters from the earlier decades have been lost or are unavailable for other reasons' (p. ix).

sources, fictional and non-fictional. Recognising the dangers of employing the fiction for this purpose, Rowley offers an initial disclaimer to contextualise her own narrative technique and, propitiating the authorial ghost, to circumvent the criticism Stead herself might have made of the 'portrait':

> A biography is not a life; lives cannot be recovered. No one knew better than Stead that life itself is a narrative. We are continually revising our memories and hopes, rationalising disappointments, modifying the way we present ourselves to ourselves and others. Everything we do has a hidden aspect; every incident has several versions; each moment of our lives is invisibly shaped by our unpruned, tangled past.
>
> Turning life into story is one of humanity's enduring pleasures. Stead may not have even been aware of the paradox when she wrote: 'The true portrait of a person should be built up as a painter builds it, with hints from everyone, brush-strokes, thousands of little touches.'[15]

This disarming point licenses an 'artist's' portrait of Stead, drawn boldly and imaginatively from all available sources. The problem resides in the invisible selectivity of this process: despite its exhaustiveness, biographical details are marshalled in the construction of a particular, and particularly rhetorical, picture of Stead. No doubt Rowley gestures, here, to the limits of her project, indicating the need for inquiry beyond the scope of her own achievement and pointing out the structural limitations of any kind of biographical or critical inquiry. This gesture is indeed necessary as the picture that the biography builds of Stead, though seductive, is at times objectifying.

It is therefore important to engage critically with Rowley's biography, since its (re)construction of Stead's life so forcefully militates against the view that Marxism played a significant role in shaping her authorial production. Firstly, by drawing on alternative readings of Stead's texts and by contextualising these historically, it is possible to see how Stead interacts with the political discourses and events of the 1930s, and to question

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[15] Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. ix.

aspects of Rowley's portrait. This will entail moving between critical discussion of, for example, Rowley's account of Stead's role in and response to the 1935 Paris Writers' Congress and other accounts of this event, fictional and historical. This strategy will both illuminate Stead's relation to Marxism and provide a context for reconsidering her fictional representations of the revolutionary.

The most obvious instance of Stead's participation in the political scene in the 1930s is that of her attendance, in the capacity of secretary to the English delegation, at the 1935 International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture (hereafter referred to as the Paris Writers' Congress). Rowley sketches in the background to the Paris Writers' Congress, noting that it was an initiative originating from the Popular Front, which was itself launched by the Comintern, and that the congress was attended by 'an imposing collection of literary luminaries'.[16] Rowley's account of the English delegation to the congress draws faithfully on various sources, but her reference to the circumstances of Stead's inclusion as secretary speculatively undermines Stead's political credentials:

> The English delegation largely comprised associates of the *Left Review*. Christina Stead's invitation to join the British delegation as their secretary probably came from Ralph Fox, who was on the organising executive. After all, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, her novel about struggling workers strangled by their material circumstances, contained solid Marxist dialogue.[17]

This seemingly innocuous point insinuates that the Marxist dialogue in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is really an uncharacteristic overlay, programmatically echoing current political discourse and perhaps not even Stead's authentic work; this furthers Rowley's general view that, at best, Stead's radicalism was typical of the naivety of the era and, at worst, was based on her uncritical adulation of left-wing male friends and acquaintances.[18] In an earlier

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[16] Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 169.
[17] Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 170.
[18] See, for example, Robert Dessaix's interview with Rowley, 'Christina The Great?', pp. 95-6.

publication, Rowley did attend more closely to the function of politics in Stead's work, particularly noting, as discussed in chapter one, the influence of Ralph Fox's *The Novel and the People* and observing that Stead would have found 'congenial' its challenge to 'the more restrictive and proscriptive notions of "revolutionary writing"'.[19] In her subsequent biography, however, Rowley does not give credence to Stead's political commitment, constructing her interest in Marxism as directed by a desire for the admiration and approval of certain heroic left-wing men. The assumptions on which these charges rest can be addressed firstly by considering both the ambiguous role of intellectuals in the radical politics of the 1930s, and how this has been represented historically, and secondly by considering the intertwining of love and politics in Stead's own representations - of the congress in particular, and of the thirties in general.

Historians of the period of European culture and politics between the wars are often, and no doubt justifiably, cynical about the motivation and participation of intellectuals and artists in politics. David Caute, for example, scrutinises the underlying political attitudes and assumptions often masked by the epithet, 'fellow traveller'. In his study of British, European and American intellectuals who, while sympathetic to the Soviet experiment, resisted joining communist party organisations, Caute finds not only a lack of understanding of Soviet reality but also an elitism, implied in the view that 'what is good, progressive medicine for the backward East might kill the patient in the advanced, industrialized West'.[20] More recently, Bernard-Henri Lévy has produced a detailed, scathingly critical account of French intellectuals' dalliance with communism, from the Dreyfus affair to the contemporary era; in relation to the 1935 Paris Writers' Congress, Lévy

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[19] Rowley, 'Christina Stead: Politics and Literature', p. 156.
[20] David Caute, *The Fellow Travellers: A Postscript to the Enlightenment* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1973), p. 203.

comments that the 'meeting was dominated by fellow-travellers, and the fiercest battle was for the microphone'.[21]

In similar vein, in one of the few publications which provides a detailed reconstruction of the background, goals and proceedings of the congress, Roger Shattuck questions the motives and understandings of its participants, as well as the ultimate historical significance of a congress which had been 'perfectly timed and designed to consolidate the formation of the intellectual popular front' and 'without which the political popular front would have had a less euphoric reception in the socialist and radical press':[22]

> Efficiently organized, indulgently reported in most of the newspapers, capable of keeping its family squabbles in an inside pocket, the Congress appeared to be a great success...
>
> But could such a congress succeed in being anything more than a mere epiphenomenon clinging to the surface of history? Could it ever constitute a nexus of real forces, a congress of *res gestae?* The thirties worried their way through a prolonged economic and political crisis that threw intellectuals and artists into a state of increasing tension. The Congress is a surprisingly clear window into that decade.[23]

Shattuck's discussion proves sobering, however, interrogating the idealisms and sentiments generated by the congress. Detailing the repressions of the congress itself - such as the exercises in propaganda and hypocrisy that directed its agenda, including the late-night scheduling and exclusion of subversive contributions, particularly those of the marginal surrealist group (represented by Breton and Eluard) which likened Soviet-backed 'socialist realism' to bourgeois culture - Shattuck criticises the self-indulgent blindness of intellectuals who allowed themselves to be manipulated by Comintern-led factions and who, while campaigning against the rising fascism of the era, were unprepared to admit evidence of fascist-style repression within the new Soviet State. Shattuck observes, certainly, that

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[21] See Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Adventures on the Freedom Road: The French Intellectuals in the 20th Century*, trans. Richard Veasey (London: The Harvill Press, 1995), p. 32.

[22] Roger Shattuck, 'Writers For The Defense of Culture', in *Partisan Review* 51 (1984), pp. 414-5.

[23] Shattuck, 'Writers', p. 395.

accurate information about Soviet rule, though available, was neither widespread nor believed:

> ... few intellectuals ever heard about the case of Victor Serge, who had been imprisoned for months and then banished to Orenburg with no means of supporting his family. The Russians had the equivalent of unlimited political and ideological credit; they alone had achieved a revolution in the twentieth century ... Few took the trouble to examine what had happened in twenty years, except to see that "Soviet power plus electrification" (as Lenin put it) seemed to have been a stunning success. The Big Bear had even joined the League of Nations in 1934.[24]

Not only because they failed to be critical, but also because they were actively loyal to the Soviet model of revolutionary achievement, continues Shattuck, Western intellectuals and Marxists allowed 'the cause of anti-fascism' to be compromised, providing moral legitimacy for the Stalinist regime.[25] He castigates the deluded romanticism of this 'thoroughly rigged and steamrollered' assemblage of intellectuals, in which 'any dissent from the prevailing opinion that the true revolutionary spirit belonged to the Soviet Government' was 'swept into a corner'.[26] Scathingly, Shattuck concludes that:

> The Congress probably tells us as much about the easily hoodwinked idealism, the opportunism, and the vanity of writers as about the political stresses of the era.[27]

These criticisms are very damaging to those radical-left intellectuals of the thirties who, believing in the Soviet state, gave it their loyal support. Many of these same intellectuals were later disillusioned by revelations of Soviet repression and abandonment of Marxist principles. Shattuck's focus on the congress, however, as a 'window' into that decade is a perspective which both informs and distorts, having the effect of bringing into

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[24] Shattuck, 'Writers', p. 398. Lévy, in *Adventures on the Freedom Road*, argues that the Soviets, in contrast with the Nazis, always made their intentions abundantly clear, but that the French intellectuals' 'faith and religion saw to it that they literally didn't understand what they were reading' (p. 17).

[25] Shattuck, 'Writers', p. 398.

[26] Shattuck, 'Writers', p. 413.

[27] Shattuck, 'Writers', p. 416.

disrepute all intellectual participation in left-wing politics of the era. Despite his attention to the congress's faction-fighting, Shattuck's account is selective, necessarily reliant on the extant speeches of key figures and only able to surmise the views and responses of the vast bulk of participants. His reconstruction of the congress proceedings, which implicates the era as a whole, tends to homogenise what was a heterogeneous movement and fails to account for the character of individual responses to world events; a depression which seemed to sound the death-knell of Western capitalism and the threat to culture posed by rising Nazism engendered strong passions and precipitated individuals towards political action. Shattuck dismisses, for example, E. M. Forster's speech as the half-hearted foray of an ageing liberal who was later to repent of his contribution. Forster's speech, which outlined 'the close connection in England between traditions and liberties and the recent danger of censorship' and in which he confessed that if he were younger and braver he would have been a communist, is characterised by Shattuck as 'inaudibly' presented and as having 'more wistfulness than militancy' about it'.[28] In contrast with this view, Margot Heinemann points out that Forster's 'ironic, modest tone' had, even at the time, been misunderstood: citing a left-wing press report dismissive of Forster's focus on the defence of English liberties, Heinemann supports Forster's credibility with a list of his considerable personal involvements and leadership in political action in the period.[29]

In excess of Shattuck's narrative of intellectuals duped by idealism remains the narrative of their search, through vision, for a blueprint for change - an admittedly far from singular narrative traced with more sympathy in *Visions and Blueprints*, the anthology which contains Margot Heinemann's study. Its editors observe that:

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[28] Shattuck, 'Writers', p. 394.

[29] Margot Heinemann, '*Left Review, New Writing* and the broad alliance against Fascism', in *Visions and Blueprints: Avant-garde culture and radical politics in early twentieth-century Europe* eds. Edward Timms and Peter Collier (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 117.

> The paradox which emerges from this book is that the poets frequently did attempt to provide blueprints for a new society, while the politicians were often predominantly inspired by imaginative visions.[30]

Raymond Williams's introductory essay explores the intersections of radical politics with modernism and the avant-garde in the early years of the twentieth century, tracing the movement's disparate, discursive origins from Marx to Nietzsche to Darwin, its evolution through successive phases, and suggesting its multiple social bases. From Futurist manifestos to workers' movements, militant formations abounded in the cultural field as well as on the political scene. Identifying the avant-garde's attack on everything 'bourgeois' as one common thread amidst motley contradictory political and cultural undercurrents, Williams cites the 'Futurist commitment to what looks, at first glance, like the same movement' as ' ... the single track of proletarian revolution':

> 'We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure and by riot [...] the multicoloured, polyphonic tides of revolution.'[31]

This declaration, observes Williams, 'carries all the ambiguities between revolution and carnival'. Coinciding with 'socialist calls to destroy the whole existing social order',[32] these lines from the Futurist manifesto display a desire for an individualistic and pleasurably anarchic destruction as opposed to a rational, unified program of scientific socialism. Williams shows how the avant-garde, though anti-bourgeois, was nonetheless its dialectical progeny and that, as such, it distinctively reproduced the bourgeois ideology of the sovereign subject, in its project of 'liberation of the creative individual'. While this emphasis 'took many towards the anarchist wing', after 1917 'the project of heroic revolution could be taken as a model for the collective liberation of all individuals'.[33]

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[30] Edward Timms and Peter Collier, 'Preface', in *Visions*, eds. Timms and Collier, p. xii.
[31] Raymond Williams, 'The politics of the avant-garde', in *Visions*, eds. Timms and Collier, p.3.
[32] Williams, 'The politics of the avant-garde', p. 4.
[33] Williams, 'The politics of the avant-garde', p. 9.

It must be asserted that it is relatively easy to be critical, in hindsight, of these intellectuals dabbling in the political current and it is easy to overlook the integrity of individually lived idealisms, the utopian impulses governing even misguided action. Fredric Jameson, asserting the need for a critical-Marxist hermeneutic, suggests that it is strategically important to 'demystify' not only the 'false consciousness' within cultural artefacts but also to:

> ... seek, through and beyond this demonstration of the instrumental function of a given cultural object, to project its simultaneously Utopian power as the symbolic affirmation of a specific historical and class form of collective unity.[34]

It is possible to see the Paris Writers' Congress as one such cultural artefact, projecting a utopian power through its collective self-representation; but it is also important to recognise it as a cultural artefact comprised of many texts, spoken and written. Though such an event may legitimately be read as the product of the symbolic unity claimed for it through its orchestrated communist rhetoric, it must also have been, for its participants, the site of diverse voices and histories, in Bakhtinian terms a 'heteroglossia' more plural in action than a moralising historical narrative can convey. It is also easy to disregard complex and structured social relations between individuals, generations and classes, and to believe that alternative ways of resisting were viable or available. To appropriate the phrase Raymond Williams uses to describe Brechtian dramatic embodiment of world views, the 'complex-seeing' of reflexive sociological inquiry can problematise the concluding generalisations of Shattuck's account.[35] Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's work exemplifies the possibility of considering the incorporated knowledges of agents, without forgetting the open-ended and dynamic relation between those agents and their fields.

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[34] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981; London: Routledge, 1989), p. 291.

[35] See Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1952; London: Hogarth Press, 1993), pp. 282-8.

Christina Stead's intellectual engagement with currents of political and cultural debate in the thirties is registered in *The Beauties and Furies*, her fiction about courtship and desire among the youthful Paris 'café' crowd. Discursively mirroring the Futurists' 'multi-coloured, polyphonic tides of revolution', Stead's novel circulates the many-stranded, diverse impulses constituting a modernist nexus between cosmopolitan free love and the discourses of revolutionary politics. Elvira Western, the narrative's sleeping beauty or unawakened Venus, follows the call of romance to Paris to meet her student lover, Oliver; indeed sleep-walking - or 'somnambulism' - figures a conjunction between love and politics, a theme which returns in several of Stead's later fictions. Oliver 'plays' at revolution just as Elvira 'plays' at love. The narrative, with its linguisitic excursions into surrealist discourse, dips into the energetic flows and sensualities of the time and place, while retaining a critical perspective on its excesses. Contradiction clusters particularly around the enigmatic figure of Marpurgo, whose Prospero-like relation to the youthful couple is both tender and malevolent. A sexual predator and borderliner, a puppet-master and monologist, Marpurgo's female counterpart is later found in Nellie Cotter. According to Rowley, Marpurgo, like the Centenarist in *The Salzburg Tales*, was modelled on Frederick Sard, an intellectual, Marxist acquaintance of Stead's and Blake's, and 'a brilliant, unstable character'.[36] Stead's unpublished diaries from the 1930s suggest her irritation with Sard's doctrinaire repudiation of the legitimacy of bourgeois art and artists who, he believed, would be rendered obsolete in the coming revolution. Stead's account of the argument inscribes her disgust with his egocentric belittling of talent and his ignorance of the contribution of revolutionary literature and art. Stead's diary records Sard's opinions, as

[36] Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 111.

well as her own parenthetical objections to his dismissive treatment of the literary qualities of *The Communist Manifesto*:

> Engineering alone will count. Art will vanish, no doubt (to blueprints? of that he was doubtful), there will be few blueprints needed by born and trained engineers, he says). The Communist Manifesto was written out of love of mankind and nothing else. Is it engineering? Or is it writing? That is a quibble. (Here he got infuriated.) Altogether a miserable exhibition and allowed him to put forward two themes, one, all is vanity, all is death, and the corollary, everything, these saltimbanques do and think so fine (better than me, alas, who talented has wasted his time, Sard's undoubted and well founded feeling about himself) is only dust and ashes). and 2. more communist than the communists (all the communists themselves now use, music, classic word-forms, etc.). will vanish.[37]

This jotting decisively demonstrates Stead's critical response to Marxist debate over the role of radical intellectuals and artists in the revolutionary movement, revealing a dislike of doctrinaire, 'base-superstructure' determinism which would relegate art to the dustbin of bourgeois history in favour of communist engineering. By 1942, and from the perspective of her naturalist heritage, Stead was refuting such mechanical models of society, and imagining a finite but crucial area of challenge to crude determinism in the capacity to do 'some little thing'. Without such a theoretical possibility, it would be difficult to sustain an argument, in Marxist terms, for either the role of the artist, or of the revolutionary hero.

The impact of an event such as the Paris Writers' Congress on Stead, in either personal or literary terms, is less easy to determine. Hazel Rowley refers to Stead's report of the congress, 'The Writers Take Sides', published in *Left Review* in 1935, as 'the only emphatic statement [Stead] ever made about the political responsibilities of writers' and adds that its 'impassioned rhetoric' needs to be qualified (in view of Stead's obligation to the editors of *Left Review* who had included her in the English delegation to the congress)

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[37] Unedited excerpt from Stead's unpublished diaries (punctuation as given), undated and unnumbered, but apparently from the period 1935-1936: NLA MS 4967, Box 15, Folder 112. The passage perhaps hints at Stead's personal irritation that Sard was directing his attack, however obliquely, against herself, who had - by this time - attracted some critical acclaim from the publication of her first fictions.

since it reveals 'confusion rather than absolute conviction'.[38] It is possible, however, to draw quite other conclusions from Stead's report and to read it as in part an attempt, however 'muddled',[39] at a positive restatement, in overtly political terms, of her major concerns as a writer. In 'The Writers Take Sides', Stead is not merely engaging in a naive form of political correctness, but expressing her strong adherence to the task, reiterated in a 1976 interview with Paul Rea, of observing and recording 'the world stage'.[40] Stead's 1935 report is a spirited response to the glamorous 'stage' provided by the congress. Given the context, it is tempting to dismiss the report as the product of a youthful writer swept away by the romance and drama of the anti-fascist front, the sense of European culture on the brink of revolution. In discussing Stead's report, Rowley suggests that Stead's political discourse was indebted to Blake:

> Certain ideas and phrases in Stead's nine-page piece sound like Bill Blech; he probably helped her with the article. Other passages of whimsical caricature are pure Stead.[41]

The polemical tone of the opening passages, as well as of other sections of the report, certainly invoke radical communist discourse; but is Rowley correct in dismissing its overtly political emphasis as atypical or aberrant rather than valuing it as an aspect of Stead's thought that deserves closer attention? Rowley argues that its polemical sections contrast with the report's wry observations of the assembled characters, which read like 'pure Stead'. An immediate problem with this is the dichotomy it produces within the unified category of 'author' otherwise assumed: Stead's 'authentic' writing is marked as that which consists of detailed, colourful and ironic observation of the human spectacle, whereas the purposeful and pointed reproduction of overtly political discourse seems to be beyond her

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[38] Rowley, 'Christina Stead: Politics and Literature', p. 151.
[39] Rowley, 'Politics and Literature', p. 151.
[40] Paul Rea, 'Christina Stead Talks on Changes', in *Sydney Morning Herald* (10 July 1976), p. 7.
[41] Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 173.

brief, as critics prefer to construct it. It would seem that one kind of author is not capable of operating both kinds of discourse.

On the contrary, the 'politically correct' sections of 'The Writers Take Sides' purposefully recast issues consistent with the project Stead identified as her enduring narrative interest - recording the lives of the obscure - as seen, for example, in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. Employing overtly 'Marxist' rhetoric in her report, Stead focuses on the plight of young, not yet established writers (a group with which, one guesses, she must strongly have identified) who struggle against oblivion in search of an audience, balancing economic worries with their vocation to represent their social vision, deploying new tools in their critique of the corruptions and stagnation of the bourgeois world:

> The problems of the most serious liberal-minded writers outside the U.S.S.R. are real. If they are not persecuted nor in exile, they pant for a public. The giant circulations of the U.S.S.R. suggest a way out. But they have to switch from the macadam of bourgeois culture which is leading them obviously into a morass, to a new clay road, hardly rollered.[42]

Besides valorising the USSR as a utopian field of production for the new writer - the place where, it is optimistically suggested, innovation and critique is valued above convention - Stead's argument posits the literary struggle as a generational as well as a class struggle. As well as rhetorically invoking the general political and cultural crisis to which the congress had addressed itself, Stead's report describes a scene of opportunity for generational cross-contact: the older, established, 'bourgeois' writers, presumably including E. M. Forster and Julien Benda, bestowed on the gathering their prestige and leadership, while the younger writers - 'tougher, more fiery, humourless and discontented than has been seen since 1830-1849' - were seeking an audience from their position of difficult obscurity. In other words, for Stead, the congress itself provided a significant locus for the 'coming out' from obscurity

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[42] Christina Stead, 'The Writers Take Sides', in *Left Review* 1. 11 (August1935), p. 453.

of 'serious' young writers: it was a place to see and to be seen, a place of cultural display and performance. Issues of honour and fame, accordingly, were at stake for the young writer in search of a public:

> This speed of development [ie; precipitation of conflict in the industrialised world] is perhaps a secret hope of the writers who gathered at the Paris Congress. They may live to grasp the truth, they may live to translate their environment, reach the people, make their name. It is no dishonour to wish to be honoured: creation of something out of nothing is the most primitive of human passions and the most optimistic.[43]

[and]

> It is an advantage to a young writer to brush elbows with those known to fame, to make his private speeches and gestures the corollary of his writings: it is something for the established writers to see what is in the rising writers.[44]

In Stead's own fiction, extreme sensitivity to honour and desire for recognition subsequently characterise the performances of both Louisa Pollit and Teresa Hawkins. Reflexively constructed on the model of the emerging artist, both characters fight against the threat of obscurity, fearing ridicule and humiliation above all. Louisa and Teresa combat, among other things, the constraining discourse of an older generation - embodied in powerful male figures - and their struggles, not without irony, are cast in epic terms. As discussed in chapter four, in forging a counter-discourse in her play, 'Tragos: Herpes Rom', Louisa challenges Sam's hegemony. For Stead, in 'The Writers Take Sides', young writers, inclined towards a narcissistic inner world, should direct their efforts towards the outward-looking challenge of scrutinising society with both the objectivity of the scientist and the pragmatic purpose of the worker:

> The younger writers, trembling and eloquent with their will to survive and create, have to give up their poetic solitudes and soft self-probings to

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[43] Stead, 'Writers', p. 456.
[44] Stead, 'Writers', p. 459.

> study worldly subjects, enter the political arena, take lessons from workmen and use their pen as a scalpel for lifting up the living tissues, cutting through the morbid tissues, of the social anatomy.[45]

This passage has been read as Stead's description of the Marxist aesthetic in her narratives.[46] Stead's rhetorical flourish - her exhortation to young writers to cast off narcissism and to become vivisectionists of the social body - even as it is scripted by 'Marxist' discourse, exorbitantly announces her own writerly appropriation and performance of a masculine script. Stead's rhetoric also exemplifies here Raymond Williams's analysis of the internally contradictory conjunction of realist and modernist discourses: the Nietzschean phrasing, 'their will to survive and create', advances the desiring subject but feeds into the collective task, as the masculine pen/sword cliché is converted into the Marxist, and equally masculinist, scalpel of social analysis. Stead's image of the prone, feminised social body subject to the incision of the scalpel, genders writing as masculine, a representation which not only suggests Marxism's opportunities for the woman writer but also (unwittingly) foreshadows its contradictions. The writer-as-vivisectionist recurs in Stead's authorial production, discursively reconstituted as scientific naturalism, in the image, for example, of the girl looking into an aquarium:

> When you're a little girl and you look in an aquarium and you see fish doing this and that, and snails and so on, you don't criticize and say they should do something else. And that's the way in which I was brought up, and in which in fact I see people.[47]

Whatever repulsion and recoil the writer feels is governed and converted into possessive fascination through the observing eye. The probing, scientific gaze of both 'Marxist analyst' and 'naturalist' combine to reinforce the sense in which such categories as gender and sexuality are problematic in Stead's work, generated by the tension between strategic

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[45] Stead, 'Writers', p. 454.
[46] See, for example, Gardiner, 'Empathizing Politics: Christina Stead's Fiction', in *Rhys, Stead, Lessing*, p. 53.
[47] See interview 'Christina Stead talks to Rodney Wetherell', p. 24.

appropriations of masculine roles by the woman writer and the often colonising act of classification, whether according to socio-economic or biologically determined criteria.

Furthermore, while Stead's public articulation of such views did become more cautious, Rowley's suggestion that, aside from 'The Writers Take Sides', Stead did not address the political responsibilities of writers, is inaccurate. Stead's unpublished notes, 'Workers and Writers', along with the 'Workshop in the Novel' notes and her paper, 'The Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel', all attest in different ways to an ongoing preoccupation with writing in its political as well as personal dimensions.[48] In 'Workers and Writers', given only cursory attention by Rowley, Stead reflects, in five closely-typed pages of notes, on the moral and political task of the writer, on the economic conditions of production, on the effects on writing of class positioning and on reasons for the historic lack of representation of (or by) the working class. Comparing the conditions for production of 'proletarian literature' in Soviet Russia, France and America, Stead rather idealistically proposes:

> ...Workers and writers must work together, workers must write and writers must work before in any country a proletarian lit[erature] can arise and both must have leisure to accomplish this union of experience and professional skill.[49]

Stead returns to the nexus between work and writing, as well as to her 1935 experience of the Paris Congress, with its 'great spirit of revolutionary France',[50] in her posthumous novel, *I'm Dying Laughing*. The historic juncture of Paris in the 1930s, with its heady promise of collective action, is the springboard for the marriage of the novel's protagonists, Emily Wilkes and Stephen Howard. Ruth McKenney and Richard Bransten,

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[48] Christina Stead, 'Workers and Writers' (circa 1936): NLA MS 4967, Box 15, Folder 113; 'Workshop in the Novel': MS 4967, Box 11, Folder 84; and 'Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel' in *Christina Stead: Selected Fiction and Nonfiction* eds. Geering and Segerberg, pp. 196-199.

[49] Stead, 'Workers and Writers', p. 3.

[50] Stead, 'The Writers Take Sides', p. 456.

upon whose lives Stead drew for her portrait of love, radicalism and ultimate betrayal, became close friends of Stead and Blake in America in the 1940s.[51] The early chapters of *I'm Dying Laughing* were written after 1966 in response to the publisher's suggestion that a more detailed historical background to the period should be provided for American readers.[52] Faced with this laborious task, Stead made an imaginative return to her own memories of Paris in the thirties, supplying an account of the revolutionary nodal point of the Paris Writers' Congress to contextualise the romance of Emily and Stephen. Whether or not McKenney and Bransten actually attended the congress in 1935, the early chapters of *I'm Dying Laughing,* viewed intertextually with biographical narratives, recast the origins of the McKenney-Bransten relationship in terms of the Stead-Blake narrative (and the Stead-Fox narrative), revisiting those politically and personally formative earlier years in Paris, and inviting another perspective which can be compared and contrasted with Stead's earlier essay, 'The Writers Take Sides'.

Emily's sea journey from America to Europe, for example, ludically mirrors Stead's journey from Sydney to London, and her later translocation with Blake to the Continent. Not without irony, Emily's journey partakes in the transatlantic revolutionary tradition; the journey from America to France is a voyage of political discovery of the origins of national identity and international revolutionary connection. Emily's warmth and vitality - she is 'fleshy, rosy, wearing a silk dress, tawny background with a big fruity pattern'[53] - is set against the iconic Statue of Liberty, the subject of her speech to a gazing group of male admirers:

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[51] See Williams, *Christina Stead*, p. 127; and Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 266. Both biographers initially refer to this friendship in the context of the *New Masses* circle.

[52] R. G. Geering's preface to Christina Stead's *I'm Dying Laughing* (London: Virago Press, 1986), p. vii.

[53] Christina Stead, *I'm Dying Laughing* (London: Virago, 1986), p. 6. All subsequent page numbers in the text refer to this edition.

> ... their glances slid all over her, fine stockings, small fat feet in purple slippers. She gave them a glance and cheerily said, 'I won a prize in high school for writing about her. *La sforza del destino.* Ah me! I know everything there is to know about that dame. She's French, their idea of the wheatfed goddess. Her nose is Greek, four feet six inches long; but her waist, oh, her waist, is thirty-five feet round. Mrs Midwest America herself; can you see her in a mother hubbard?' (6)

Transatlantic cultural plenitude is figured through Emily, announcing the hybridity of American culture, its expansive and contradictory blend of energetic optimism and absurd vulgarity. Like Eleanor Herbert, Emily misquotes the title of Verdi's opera, *La Forza del Destino;* as Susan Sheridan notes of Eleanor, the substitution of 'sforza' for 'forza' suggests that 'effort or exertion ... is the keynote of her own destiny' rather than either submission to fate or the indulgence of a tragic passion.[54] Emily's relation to destiny is also problematic: if Eleanor's refusals of the invitations of destiny suggest her perversity, Emily's efforts directed towards a greater destiny also go astray, but in a grandly parodic, operatic spectacle.

Although irreducible to it, 'Emily' marks the site of reflexive, authorial self-representation. In conversation on the train to Paris for example, Emily and Stephen play out a scene from Stead's biographical narrative in which, according to her own recount long afterwards to a friend, Ralph Fox suggested that they truant from the congress and walk through Normandy.[55] That Stead should invest her memory, whether fantasised or real, in her fictional characters foregrounds the particular passion inspired by the revolutionary hero, signalling the romantic call to destiny and the challenge to break with the past. Several interchanges, however, between Emily and her cabin-mate, Mrs Browne, complicate such linear, biographical decodings. Mrs Browne is travelling to Paris to rejoin her husband, Walter Browne, who works 'in a small private bank in London' (15). Not only is the

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[54] See Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, pp. 102-3.

[55] See Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 178; and Stead, *I'm Dying Laughing*, pp. 26-7.

similarity of this husband to 'William Blake' readily apparent, but aspects of the otherwise dour and taciturn Mrs Browne who seems, to Emily, 'stodgy, conservative, prudish', enigmatically suggest a self portrait in miniature:

> ...the thick, pale, almond lids dropped over her dark eyes, the long lashes rested on her pale cheeks. She may have been feigning sleep to end the conversation, once she had given her downright views. Perhaps she hated to talk; but the machinery was somehow set in motion against the will? (16).

Her Russian parentage and sympathy for the 1917 revolution make Mrs Browne a cultural and political outsider to America, even though it had been her country of birth. She is highly critical, for example, of the 'palliative' of Roosevelt's New Deal. Mrs Browne's admission that she and her husband are communists is shocking to the young Emily. While she represents a political maturity which contrasts with Emily's naive optimism, Mrs Browne also espouses a troublingly deterministic view of the role of the artist, views inimical to the humanist notions of creative genius invoked, for example, in Ralph Fox's book. With a severity reminiscent of Frederick Sard's, whom the younger Stead had wanted to refute, Mrs Browne blankly asserts that '... all art is based on a convention, a fiction between the artist and his public ...' and that '[f]antasy has no social value ...' (15). Mrs Browne also illustrates her argument with reference to government subsidies to Greenwich Village artists which render them socially useful: 'Those artists are glad to have a weekly cheque and they do what they are told to do' (15). Revisiting debates about the relation between writers and workers, Mrs Browne's anti-bourgeois attitude, though harsh, is quietly valorised. Asking whether great artists 'belong to a convention not yet made', Emily is fuddled by Mrs Browne's firm response:

> 'That is impossible, ... no-one invents anything: it is there, made by the people; there is no room for individuals - an artist should interpret.' (15)

In this interchange, it is tantalising to imagine that Mrs Browne represents the cool voice of an older, more experienced Stead, interrogating as well as empathising with the romantic ardour not just of Emily but of her younger self. Emily's mature involvement with the American Communist Party and her justified clashes with its orthodoxy do not, however, equip her to understand the views or praxis of the Western European communists she admires, such as Vittorio and Suzanne, whose political views mesh with those of Mrs Browne.

Stead's letters from Paris - 'not so much the French capital as the capital of the modern world'[56] - reveal the impression that the city made upon her at the time, as a place of high culture and imminent political drama:

> What is there in Paris? We are looking for the germinal reason of all this turning towards Paris, but it is hard to define in original terms. It is more than economic, more than traditional; it lies in the fact that in this 'Police State' (as they call it) there is a free commune of the mind and senses, but this is mere evasion - what is the compensation it offers that is so special I mean, even to simple people like myself? It is partly, also, I think, in the suavity, intelligence and amiability of the French people ....[57]

The sense of being involved in significant world events, of being in 'the middle of things', is conveyed here, along with the romance of early love amid the high drama of revolutionary politics. The letters' tone and attitude bears comparison with Emily's breathless admiration for Paris, in the early chapters of *I'm Dying Laughing*:

> She usually spent half a day sightseeing, half a day at the congress. She arrived at its doors each day very elated - from the faubourg St-Antoine, from the Luxembourg, from the Ste-Chapelle - what a city, what people, and here in the hall, what freedom lovers; 'the Hall of Fame on roller-skates from all points in the compass,' she said. (31)

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[56] Stead, *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, p. 12.
[57] Stead, *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, pp. 23-24.

Paris and the congress function as more than merely a colourful background for the individual drama of Emily and Stephen: their love is sourced by and interwoven with the idealisms, enthusiasms and political debate of the decade. Continuing the central debates canvassed at the congress itself, the lovers discuss the function of artists and writers in the social and political arena, specifically the imperative to challenge convention:

> Stephen said, 'Every writer worth his salt begins by some notion of revolt. He wants to show people that the labels are wrong; and then there's the contagion. Writers don't write about themselves - they need others. The others - the all important.'
>
> 'Ah!' she said. 'The baffling, puzzling, beloved others. If we could just for half an hour get inside someone else and be someone else, we'd swipe the laurels ....' (33).

Stead's views on the role of the writer are implicated here. Writing for political purposes and writing out of the creative impulse are tangled in this dialogue: for Stephen, the writer's political desire to 'revolt', to declare that '"[t]he emperor has no clothes"' (33), is directed by reference to 'others', by his consciousness of what the world thinks; whereas for Emily, on the other hand, it is immersion in the viewpoint of the 'beloved' which constitutes the real challenge. The difficulties emerging later in the narrative from Emily's desire 'to swipe the laurels' suggest that other distinctions between author and character are also implied. While the 'love affair', as seen earlier, was Stead's preferred analogy for the creative process, her own usage departs somewhat from Emily's, which implies an abandonment of self in the other. A space of authorial neutrality and watchfulness is preserved, by contrast, in Stead's understanding of the writer's relation to her subject: 'I'm lying low'. Even though making tactical use of 'love's' sympathetic and connective force, Stead's own authorial control and perspective is not 'swept away' or obliterated within the space of the other. The author, 'lying low', remains a self-contained, interpreting presence.

The courtship of the young lovers in 1930s Paris is bound up not only with the shifting political debates of the time, but with the problem of the lived reality of socialist praxis. Ironically, Stephen's and Emily's participation in the political field is marginal: they are dilettantes, playing 'hookey' from the congress, leaving organisational matters and political lobbying to others. Ironically reproducing the tone of Stead's 1935 report, 'The Writers Take Sides', Emily displays awestruck admiration of the impressive left-wing writers who address the congress:

> Louis Aragon, the French writer, said, 'I returned from the Soviet Union and I was no longer the same man. However, there remained a thousand bonds, fine as a spider's web for me to break. That I have had the strength to break them, is, I know, due to practical work, to the social work which was carried on by the proletariat of my country.'
>
> 'I am floating, Stephen, I am floating. Now I am glad I am a scribbler. There is a future. Tom Barrie is right; France sheds light on everything. We have a future.' (32)

The failure of the couple's lived commitment is ironically placed in the narrative with reference to other characters such as Ruth and Axel Oates, or Suzanne and Vittorio. Emily's and Stephen's romantic enchantment with the radicalism of 1930s Paris, followed by their spectacular indulgence in postwar hedonism on the continent, contrasts with their aspirations. The encoding of the Stead-Blake courtship in the narrative of Emily-Stephen, however, with its sly record of youthful enthusiasms and hopeful utopian visions, constitutes a reflexively ironic perspective, widening the scope of the narrative critique beyond the renegade couple to include, perhaps, the naive idealism of a generation. It could therefore be argued that, in writing the early chapters of *I'm Dying Laughing*, an older, more experienced author - in an altered political climate - takes the opportunity to reflect upon the younger, more impassioned author who wrote 'The Writers Take Sides'. As I argue in

chapter seven, while such self-reflection may be implicated, the novel nonetheless projects an overriding commitment to Marxist values.[58]

It is instructive, then, to consider Stead's authorial production in terms of its representations of art, intellectuals, revolution and revolutionaries, as these intersect with and interrogate each other. Such a consideration problematises the construction of simplistic and reductive biographical narratives about the relation between Stead and Marxism. While the significance of Stead's relationship with Marxism cannot be disentangled from her relationship with significant others, such as with William Blake, recognising the importance of this relationship does not preclude considering Stead's political views in their own right. That the impact of Stead's love for the person, William Blake, should be privileged over the impact of his political discourse is a dichotomising notion that should also be challenged. Stead's novels also engage in exploration and criticism of orthodox Marxist discourse, implicitly asking how Marxism might be relevant for women. In appropriating a discourse primarily operated by men, women may also be constrained by the script which empowers them. Even if not resolved, the implications of 'revolution' for issues of 'gender' as well as 'class' are dramatised in Stead's fiction, from the exchanges of the gaze between Catherine Baguenault and Baruch Mendelssohn in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* to the marital battle of Stephen and Emily in *I'm Dying Laughing*. As suggested in chapter one, a multi-faceted dialectic is present within Stead's fiction, complicated by autobiographical metanarrative texts, suggesting her ongoing conversation with Blake and their differing versions of romance and revolution.[59] That this dialectic emerges suggests that Marxist analysis is not merely 'congenial', but is actually structural to Stead's authorial production.

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[58] Gardiner makes the point that Stead's last novel 'shows Emily and Stephen's tragedy as that of a generation, not of an ideology; this novel condemns corrupt Marxists, not Marxism ...': see Judith Kegan Gardiner, 'Lives of the Party', in *Women's Review of Books* V. 1 (October 1987), p. 8; and also Gardiner's 'Empathizing Politics' in *Rhys, Stead, Lessing*, p.80.

[59] See Harris, '"To Hell with Conservatories"', pp. 160-173.

The treatment of men and women, and of their interrelationships, remains problematic in Stead's fiction, indicating certain cultural assumptions about women which pertain to the ideology of a particular social group and generation. Stead said that she understood men better than women, although she claimed to represent men and women 'equally':

> No doubt because I was brought up by a naturalist, I have always felt an irresistible urge to paint true pictures of society as I have seen it. I often felt that quite well known writings lacked truth: and this was particularly so of the pictures of women, I felt, not only because women took their complete part in society but were not represented as doing so, but because the long literary tradition, thousands of years old, had enabled men completely to express themselves, while women feared to do so.
>
> However, my object was by no means to write for women, or to discuss feminine problems: but to depict society as it was: indeed, I felt I understood men better, having been early introduced to the various colleagues, visitors, and others my father met. Naturally, I wished to understand men and women equally.[60]

While Stead's focus, in her earliest narratives, is predominantly upon men and their activities in the communal or public sphere, the perspective of women is always present as a significant, interrogating dimension. Women, in these narratives, occupy less stable social positions, compelled to project their relation to the world through their lovers rather than acting on their own account. Further, the configurations of courtship and love in these narratives, specifically encoding aspects of the Blake-Stead story, far from suggesting indifference to or disengagement from the political, actually constitute a major site for the generation of questions about society and revolution. In my next chapter, these questions are further explored in the context of the fascinating and predominantly masculine world of Stead's book, *House of All Nations*. What emerges in this discussion is the crucial presence of

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[60] R. G. Geering, 'From the Personal Papers of Christina Stead: Extracts and Commentaries', *Southerly* 4 (1990), p. 425.

the 'feminine' domain and its implications in constructing the narrative's view of revolutionaries and capitalists.