

Chapter 3.

Revolutionaries at the threshold in *House of All Nations*

'Where' says Fox, in literature is 'Cecil Rhodes, Rockefeller or Krupp?' and so on. And here he strikes the heart - 'They have no place in imaginative literature, the writer shrinks from them, fears the awful forces that will be let loose in his pages if once he tries to re-create such a personality in fiction ...'.¹

'The dense web of the fortunes of man are woven without a void: and in society as in nature, the structure is continuous ...'.²

Preamble

Set on the cusp of the Great Depression, at an historic still-point between the decline of the radical left and the rise of fascism, Stead's capacious story of the fortunes of a private Paris bank, with its legion cast of corporate cowboys, loyal employees and multifarious clientele, constitutes both a reply to and a deviation from Ralph Fox's striking question about the hero-villain in the modern novel. In the same context, Fox asserts: '... there is no reason why the devil should be denied imaginative treatment'.³ If Fox's words may be applied to *House of All Nations*, then the narrative's representative modern villain,

¹ Christina Stead, quoting from Fox, *The Novel and the People*, in her 'Workshop in the Novel' notes, NLA MS 4967, Box 11, Folder 84 [punctuation as given].

² This quotation is contained in one of Stead's unpublished manuscripts, NLA MS 4967, Box 11, Folder 79. Entitled 'A Journal Abroad November 18: Autumn in the Hills', the piece appears to be a draft story with strong autobiographical elements, probably dating from the period 1935-6. The original quotation comes from the opening passages of Lord Acton's 'Inaugural Lecture on the Study of History' (1895), published in *Lectures on Modern History* (London: Macmillan, 1921). The context in Stead's story, on p. 9, is as follows: 'The dead, suffocating body of antiquity lies over the people: I thought of Acton's phrase "The dense web of the fortunes of man are woven without a void: and in society as in nature, the structure is continuous, so that we can trace things back uninterruptedly, until we dimly descry the Declaration of Independence in the forests of Germany"' (p.9).

³ Fox, *Novel*, p.78.

its 'Rhodes, Rockefeller or Krupp', is surely the bank's owner, Jules Bertillon. Despite Stead's evident approval of Fox's commentary, however, the satirical vein of her novel precludes the serious epic treatment proposed by Fox. Jules Bertillon is a comic version of the tycoon, no more evil than a charming pickpocket. Other, more sinister characters, such as Jacques Carrière, come temporarily into view, but then vanish from the stage of this 'many-charactered novel'.⁴ For Stead, the evil face of capital is not, it would seem, so readily personified. History is represented not as the product of a single individual's all powerful and determining will, but as the dialectical outcome of many wills in conflict.⁵ The 'awful forces' of history are contained in Stead's novel within the stage-like confines of a small private bank. While theatrically alluding to apocalypse, the novel's portrayal of the 'fortunes of man' situates individuals within the dense, but flexible structure of the 'web'.

In the first section, 'Documenting the bank', I trace this novel's particular representation of a web-like environment. The web is transmuted into a network of 'beehive' images in this text, troping the social as counterpart to (or imitation of) nature. Within the 'beehive', theoretical purity of position is not only untenable, but ahistoric. In what proves to be the text's implicit affirmation of dialectical materialism, the novel's communists and Marxists are drawn into history in quotidian ways. Produced within a web of genres, discourses, environments and texts, *House of All Nations* can be said, moreover, to 'document' not only the bank, but also the wider historic space and time. Stead's distinctive use of the omniscient narrative, as well as her preparedness to multiply and fracture perspectives, situates her novel at an intersection of realist and modernist discourses. The narrative documentation of this environment and of its inhabitants entails larger issues,

⁴ See Stead, 'Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel', pp. 196-9.

⁵ As discussed in chapter one. See also Rowley, 'Christina Stead: Politics and Literature', pp. 155-6. I depart from Rowley's implicitly hierarchical emphasis that Fox's theory 'legitimised Stead's writing as political.'

encompassing the pairs modernity and revolution, time and space, and masculinity and femininity.

Secondly, in the section entitled 'Strange bedfellows', I discuss the relation between the novel's capitalists and communists, focusing particularly on key players such as Michel Alphendéry, Jules Bertillon and Henri Léon. I revisit an argument by Bruce Holmes that, by contrast with the energetic representation of its capitalist rogues and villains, the narrative signally fails to portray its supposedly 'good' communist revolutionaries with equal vigour.⁶ I advance an alternative explanation of the novel's treatment of these two groups and question the dichotomous division between moral and political realms superimposed in Holmes's argument. Bourdieu's work, with its concepts of 'field' and 'habitus', helps to elucidate how individuals are seen in Stead's novel as both determined by the structures within which they function, as well as how, in their variety of responses and adaptations, they are dynamic and productive. Bourdieu's work also provides a new way of considering Michel Alphendéry as a mediating figure between different worlds, and thus as homologous with the figure of the artist.

In a third section, entitled 'The Gorgon', close attention is given to the narrative's reliance upon and exploration of a masculine/feminine binary code, as well as what this code conveys about 'revolution'. The metonymic structure of masculine desire and energy (revolutionary modernity) is located in the 'time-forward' of the narrative, but is counterposed to the metaphoric container of feminine stasis (as seen in the narrative's allusions to a reactionary, premodern 'time-abolished'). My reading suggests that *House of All Nations* is structured according to the culturally pervasive masculine/feminine binary. The question of gender which has haunted the relation between Marxism and feminism

⁶ See Bruce Holmes, 'Character and Ideology in Christina Stead's *House of All Nations*', in *Southerly* 45 (1985), pp. 266-279.

therefore becomes relevant. Some individual scenes from the novel are selected for discussion of gender, and the findings are extrapolated in discussion of the narrative's main story, that of the downfall of the bank. This story gathers momentum in the latter half of the book, the concentrated use of a masculine/feminine binary code coordinating its dialectical framework.

1. Documenting the Bank

A large book, rich in material, since it deals with a private bank in Paris. It is a complete picture of the governing class of Europe at that time, as involved in international finance and intrigue and contains authentic aphorisms with their view of life, their class objectives. It was very popular in America and was read by Wall Street men and other business men, and the same people in Europe, who admitted that it was a true picture of their class and the workings of their minds.⁷

Following the linguistic abundance, lyricism and fantasy of Stead's first three books, the documentary realism of *House of All Nations* seemed, to some readers, a radical change of direction. One early reviewer registered disappointment on Stead's having 'retreated farther from the world of fantasy' of her first book, *The Salzburg Tales*. Tellingly, however, the review notes:

The retreat is intelligible enough; the claims of the world that is conveniently called real press more heavily upon writers of every sort and to-day Salzburg itself is not quite what it was.⁸

The reviewer refers, of course, to Europe's looming fascism, and to a corresponding surge towards political involvement in literary circles. *House of All Nations* may be seen as a response to this climate, manifestly in its references to 'real history' and in its

⁷ Stead's own synopsis as published by Geering, 'From the Personal Papers of Christina Stead', (1990), p. 422.

⁸ See review in *The Times Literary Supplement* (12 July 1938), p. 399.

between capitalists and Marxists. Although some readers have found the novel's scenario implausible,⁹ for others, the story of the bank is 'Europe's story':

Its rivalries, subterfuges, plots and counterplots enact and illuminate the history of Europe between the wars.¹⁰

While *House of All Nations* marks a stylistic break from its precursors, certain key aspects of the novel show a logical development of their concerns. Central to all four books is the project of recording an environment, a particularised social space, as well as the individuals who inhabit it. While *The Salzburg Tales* offers a baroque celebration of the European literary field, it also enumerates and dissects the varied species and habitats of Western Europe and its outposts. In *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *The Beauties and Furies*, Sydney and Paris allegorise modern, urban environments which are also distinctively local: they are the encompassing spaces within which the inhabitants move and speak.¹¹ *House of All Nations* continues this pattern. Unlike *The Beauties and Furies*, however, it is not the city of Paris which is foregrounded, rather it is the interaction of particular social classes within the European metropolis that is represented in microcosm within the architectural spaces of the Banque Mercure. In her paper, 'Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel', Stead observed that this particular genre was 'the novel of metropolitan today', allowing the writer to '...fix in a multiplication of characters the relatively classless, and again hugely stratifying social organisms of man ...'.¹²

⁹ See, for example, Elaine Feinstein, 'Bleak Houses', review in *New Statesman* (14 June 1974), p. 856.

¹⁰ Brydon, *Christina Stead*, p. 66.

¹¹ See Manfred Mackenzie, 'Christina Stead and the 'Natural Uncanny'', in *Crossing Lines: Formations of Australian Culture* (Proceedings of the ASAL 1995 Conference, University of Adelaide: 1996). Discussing Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Mackenzie detects a national focus in Stead's representation of a split subjectivity arising from the settler culture's investment of uncanny otherness in the non-European environment.

¹² Stead, 'Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel', p.198.

The period during which Stead drafted *House of All Nations* was probably the most overtly politicised of her life, as it was for many of the European intelligentsia.¹³ Moreover, the narrative depicts and reproduces a complex cross-fertilisation of cultures and discourses. Among her personal papers, a piece entitled 'Journal of "the Blackmailer"' attests to Stead's detailed and technical background research.¹⁴ Stead's notes on her first visit to America (1935-6) suggest that the comparison between French and American cultures informed this novel's analysis of capitalism:

But here where the love of money is brutally outspoken and crassly advertised, no illusions are offered to the workers: they see quite plainly, through numerous scandals ... that it is all a scramble for boodle and nothing else, that gangsters get away with it if they can pay, that ignoble and corrupt lawyers whose lives stink are permitted to practise, that the richest men live outside the law and that money openly covers all sins. Not even the faded rugs of an aristocracy exists as it does in France to cover reeking sores.¹⁵

Stead's admiration for America's innovative energy is combined with a repudiation of its brazen corruption. Along with its cross-cultural sources, *House of All Nations* furnishes a similar mix of attitudes towards the world of high finance, dwelling on the underlying contradiction between the moral indignation incited by American-style capitalism and exhilarated enjoyment of American disregard for European convention.¹⁶ The transatlantic orientation of Stead's political analysis also prefigures that of her darker, postwar novel, *I'm Dying Laughing*.¹⁷

A sense of the world on the brink of 'revolution' permeates *House of All Nations*. Drafted in transit, the text's anticipatory mood ludically recreates Stead's own brush with

¹³ For a biographical account of this period, see, for example, Rowley, 'Christina Stead: Politics and Literature', pp. 149-159.

¹⁴ Geering, 'From the Personal Papers', (1990), pp. 402-3.

¹⁵ Christina Stead, "'It's all a scramble for boodle.": Christina Stead sums up America', ed. R. G. Geering, in *Australian Book Review* 141 (June 1992), p. 23.

¹⁶ Stead, as an Australian, seemed predisposed to sympathise with America's New World separation from Anglo tradition.

¹⁷ The transatlantic setting of *I'm Dying Laughing* is discussed in chapters two and seven.

the onset of the Spanish Civil War. As commonly observed by historians, the civil war was not only a dress rehearsal for World War Two, but provided a rallying point for the radical, European left, who 'saw there the symbol of liberty in peril and the prefiguration of our future'.¹⁸ During a six-week sojourn in Ronda, Spain, in 1936 - and only dimly aware of the extent of the looming crisis - Stead recorded the tense relations between classes in the town:

The Rondonese workers and peasants have a strange habit, perhaps unique, of walking and talking together in the street in multitudes. They fill the street from wall to wall, their cloth caps serried, as they move out towards the sky and field, and their meeting places. I remark that one could almost think they were preparing for a revolution.¹⁹

The thrilling scene of revolution in preparation constitutes a suppressed, or inverted narrative in *House of All Nations*. Rather than foregrounding the preparations of the working classes, the novel represents 'revolution' through the inverted lens of the desires and fears of the rich and powerful. This 'upside down' view of revolution corresponds with Marx's well known description of ideology's inversion of reality:

If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.²⁰

To expand the scope of politically-engaged literature to investigate the distorted, ideological consciousness of the privileged classes, as *House of All Nations* does, is surely a Marxist project. As Rowley comments, such a project in fact does correspond precisely to the model of 'revolutionary literature' advocated by Fox, in *The Novel and The People*.²¹ It was certainly

¹⁸ André Chamson, cited by David Caute in his study *Communism and the French Intellectuals: 1914-1960* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964), p.117.

¹⁹ Geering, 'From the Personal Papers' (1990), p. 400.

²⁰ See Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p.118.

²¹ Rowley, 'Christina Stead: Politics and Literature', pp. 154-5.

not an orthodox perspective, and implied a rejection of the socialist realism of the 'proletarian writing' then favoured in Soviet-influenced communist circles.

The idea that Stead adopted a position of critical rather than orthodox Marxism is borne out by the intertextuality of Stead's narratives with those of her partner, William Blake. As Rowley points out, Blake's first novel, *The World Is Mine*, was written at the same time as *House of All Nations*. Margaret Harris comments that apart from dealing with the financial world, what these texts have in common is '... a relish for the exhilaration of manipulating capital without reverence for capitalism'.²² Blake's lively and erudite textbook, *Elements of Marxian Economic Theory and its Criticism* was published directly after *House of All Nations*, in 1939. This book reveals Blake's passion for dialectical materialism as a scientific method capable of anatomising Western capitalism and representing the motor of history. Blake likens Marxism to 'celestial mechanics':

We have a formulation for the solar system, a still wider one for the stellar systems, and a still more comprehensive one of their evolution and direction. Thus Marxism takes account of that large section of any order that comes from the past or foreshadows the future.²³

Stead's detailed documentation of the bank displays a comparable interest in how things work, the narrative focusing with tireless fascination on the mechanics of the financial world, endowing a patina of 'authenticity' through the technically detailed, discursive reproduction of an elite male preserve.²⁴ Referring to Samuel Hynes's *The Auden Generation*, Rowley observes that Stead was probably influenced by the mid-1930s' emphasis on 'documentary writing':

²² Harris, "'To Hell with Conservatories'", p. 162.

²³ Blake, *Elements of Marxian Economic Theory*, p. 21.

²⁴ Stead often vouched for her novel's authenticity by invoking her experience of working with Blake at the Travelers' Bank, owned by Peter Neidecker. See 'Christina Stead: An Interview', with Whitehead, p. 238; and Rowley, *Christina Stead*, pp. 141-2.

... in April 1937 a new London journal called *Fact* claimed that the immediate task of socialist writers was to observe and record the facts, the ground of reality.²⁵

Storm Jameson was the journalist in question who proposed the 'first theory of documentary as a literary form'.²⁶ Like Stead, Jameson had been a contributor to *The Left Review*, a detail which circumstantially strengthens the likelihood that Stead was well aware of debates about the appropriate form and purpose of socialist literature. These debates, gathering momentum in the 1930s, pivotted on whether the revolutionary cause would be better served by an aesthetic of realism or that of an experimental modernism, as evidenced in the influential Expressionism debate between Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Anna Seghers and Bertolt Brecht, which circulated in various radical journals.²⁷ Under the Stalinist regime, socialist realism, or 'Zhdanovism', became the dogmatically prescriptive formula for communist art. The radical left in France, seeking alliance with the new Soviet state without loss of creative freedom, attempted to resolve the contradiction by translating socialist realist principles into local contexts. Louis Aragon, the avant-garde writer and communist radical, declared in 1930 that 'proletarian literature will be national in form and socialist in content'.²⁸ In David Caute's view, Aragon's novels of the 1930s, despite his advocacy of socialist realism, did not adhere to its romanticised elevation of positive working-class heroes, but presented critiques about and from within the middle class.²⁹

While Stead's use of 'documentary writing' in *House of All Nations* situates the narrative in an apparently firm relation to the real, aspects of her narrative technique are in

²⁵ Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 213.

²⁶ See Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: The Bodley Head, 1976), p. 270.

²⁷ See Ernst Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, afterword by Fredric Jameson (London: Verso, 1980): Lukács's attack on expressionism was published in *Das Wort* in 1937, whereas Brecht's refutations were not published at the time - the reason for the latter remains unclear (pp. 11 and 62).

²⁸ Cited in Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, p. 321.

²⁹ Caute, *Communism*, p. 326. As discussed in chapter five, Stead's review of Aragon's novel, *The Century Was Young*, praised it for precisely these reasons. See Christina Stead, "'The Century Was Young'", in *New Masses* (20 January 1942), pp 23-25; and Hannah Josephson and Christina Stead, "Pro and Con on Aragon," in *New Masses* (17 February 1942), pp 25-6.

excess of conventional 'realism'. For the reader, following the technical side of the bank's operations is both demanding and distracting. The narrative's enthusiastic and exhaustive detail rhetorically flags its own process of documenting a segment of the real world. In this respect, Stead's use of realist technique swerves towards modernism, as excessive use of documentation foregrounds the medium itself.³⁰ Emphasis on observing reality as closely as possible risks disregarding the effects of media on representation. Storm Jameson betrays such assumptions when she advocates borrowing cinematic techniques:

Perhaps the nearest equivalent of what is wanted exists already in another form in the documentary film. As the photographer does, so must the writer keep himself out of the picture while working ceaselessly to present the fact from a striking (poignant, ironic, penetrating, significant) angle.³¹

Like Jameson's uncritical assumption that the camera is a transparent vehicle, reflecting reality more directly than other media, Stead's own comments about the intended 'realism' of her work are both naive and misleading. Closer attention to her narratives reveals the hybridity of genres and styles employed. Jennifer Gribble, for example, describes *House of All Nations* as 'cinematographic'.³² The allusion to cinema is evident not only in the novel's vocabulary and structure - its short scenes, rather than chapters, in rapid succession - but also in its use of the Hollywood-style gangster narrative, its dialogue peppered with idiomatic, wisecracking aphorisms. So even if, as 'documentary', the narrative's cinematic feel refers to the camera's apparent window onto reality, it may also signal its status as representation, through its intertextuality with other media, and by reference to a heterogeneity of cultural contexts. Allusions to the traditional genre of the theatre are also

³⁰ Angela Carter's description of Stead's 'tachiste' narratives suggests a modernist preoccupation with medium. Carter compares Stead's technique to that of 'a blind man throwing paint against a wall'. See 'Unhappy Families - Angela Carter on the scope of Christina Stead's achievement', in *London Review of Books* IV. 17 (1982), p.11.

³¹ Storm Jameson, quoted in Hynes, *The Auden Generation*, p. 271.

³² See Gribble, *Christina Stead*, p.37.

embedded in the narrative, and I will return subsequently to an exploration of the implications for 'revolution' of these theatrical allusions.

In addition to the narrative's idiomatic allusions to gangsterism, exhaustive documentation of technical conversations between the bank's 'insiders' conveys the abstract and specialised knowledge constituting the market game. The rapid articulation and the density of technical and strategic discourse in the narrative mime the breathless pace of a revolutionary modernity. Speed and density of dialogue also, however, produce its opposite, creating a textual entropy and retarding the progress of the plot. The opening scene, 'He Travels Fast But Not Alone', which follows the frenetic womanising of Henri Léon who flits from one seduction opportunity to the next, inscribes a moral vacuum within modernity's speed. Léon, exuding largesse, excites expectation but finally disappears, with cash intact, in pursuit of the next object, leaving a crowd of disgruntled prostitutes to be placated by the Raccamonds. This introductory scene mirrors the plot structure of the novel as a whole; after beguiling his clients, and as his bank collapses, Jules Bertillon, too, vanishes with the booty, leaving others to clean up the mess.

This first scene also serves to illustrate how narrative viewpoint is typically organised, through a subtle variation on the traditional, 'omniscient narrator' technique.³³ The narrative emanates from specifically located observation sites both close to selected characters and exterior to them. This is combined with the use of shifting focalisation. For example, in this first scene, much of the observation approximates the perspective of Marianne Raccamond. Marianne's perspective sharpens the satire, since it is critical of Léon's activity. As a 'legitimate' lover - a wife - Marianne is bracketed off from the realm of

³³ Gardiner describes the narrative technique as that of an 'omniscient insider' in *Rhys, Stead, Lessing*, p. 60.

prostitution with which the scene is preoccupied. And yet, as wife, she is also uncomfortably implicated in the system of exchange:

Méline got up, bowed, ignored Marianne's plainness, seemed to enter it in large figures in her credit sheet that she was cherished by someone (Aristide) if not by him³⁴

The satiric delineation of the exclusion of women from the male preserve of business gathers force from the narrative alignment with Marianne's unvoiced but critical standpoint. It heightens narrative scrutiny of Léon's performance which, while polite and deferential, remains patronising:

'... I've got a lot to talk over with you, Aristide.' He turned to them, 'Excuse us, Marianne. I want to go over a lot of business with your husband. We'll both make a profit. You don't mind, do you? I must look around. I'm expecting someone. A lady. I want her to come to lunch - er, I want you to run your eye over her, Marianne. I think a lot of your opinion. A very fine business head. I don't usually go in for business ladies -' (the sudden sunrise which was his smile) '- one of the smartest I ever met.' He frowned slightly, shook his head vigorously into his collar, and pulled back his chin with a rebellious pout and a somber roll of the eye. (8)

Forced to acknowledge Marianne's sharp, 'manly' intellect, Léon's fragile masculinity is registered through his bemused body language. This sharp, psychological observation is characteristic of Stead's mode of representing the subject. Privileged observation posts are adopted, creating opportunities for satirical probing, but characters are rarely represented from 'inside'. If relevant at all, emotional states are usually inferred from the drama of dialogue or from the narrative's precise description of external behaviour or expression. Sites of focalisation can shift unexpectedly, creating a sudden shock of view. Describing a brief encounter between one of Léon's mistresses and the Raccamonds in Scene One, the

³⁴ Christina Stead, *House of All Nations* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1974), p. 7. All subsequent page numbers in the text refer to this edition of the novel.

narrative - while still occupying the position of an invisible observer - detaches itself from Marianne's viewpoint:

She [Léon's mistress] advanced with studied insulting vanity. 'Charmed, I am sure.' Her manners were perfect, that is, she flouted the Raccamonds outrageously, stirred the eels in their souls, while she went through the polite ritual minutely and coaxingly. (4)

This is a particular use of the omniscient narrative. While remaining exterior to much of characters' inner subjectivities, sharp observation is maintained through a contingent focalisation. Distance and withdrawal are also used to disengage from characters and to multiply perspectives. The narrative thus provisionally fosters reader identification while developing a shifting, critical perspective. Thus, the narrative prompts reader occupation of contradictory, uncomfortable and sometimes repugnant perspectives.

It would be mistaken, therefore, to read the camera-like transparency of the narrative, its elision of overt judgement, as simply an instance of the cinematic style recommended by Storm Jameson. The technique reverberates thematically as well: authorial 'absence' heightens the text's representation of the capitalist market system as automaton, or driverless machine. A thoughtful 1938 review of *House of All Nations* noted its evocation of the driving technologies of modern capitalism, its 'bizarre automatons', its 'cargo of mechanised human beings'.³⁵ Identifying the narrative technique as cinematic, the reviewer discerned a blend of genres, concluding that the novel's 'powerful originality' was founded on three paradoxes:

... the machine like a living thing, the application of romance to hard commerce, and the speeding up of a conversation-piece with gangster-novel technique³⁶

³⁵ Unsigned review, 'Christina Stead's New Novel', in *The Bulletin* (17 August 1938), p. 2.

³⁶ 'Christina Stead's New Novel', p. 8.

The phrase, 'machine as a living thing', usefully hints at the historical and discursive significance of the 'beehive' - the model of the natural machine and a recurring metaphor in the narrative. The beehive tropes not only the metaphoric space of the bank within the text, but also the interdependence of its inhabitants. Michel Alphendéry, for example, is described as '... always going out like a honeybee to other scenes to bring in a store of sweet for the dark hive in which he lived' (264). Alphendéry, furthermore, explains to Léon that "'Jules is as full of ideas as a hive of bees. He goeth along like a dancer'" (24). The beehive represents the financial world in terms of the multiplicitous, habitually co-ordinated activities of colony members, who are encompassed and determined by their habitat or social space. This social space functions as an organism, a 'natural' or living machine. Beehive images also encode the perspective of the naturalist, whose observant eye studies faithfully the motions of the hive's individuals and gradually discerns, through the accretion of a vast amount of empirical data, the complexity of the mechanism.

The bank-as-beehive, which synthesises natural/organic and modern capitalist/machinic structures, also draws on traditional socialist discourse in conceptualising the social totality. In *Elements of Marxian Economic Theory and its Criticism*, Blake refers to Hogarth's depictions of the proletariat as 'orderly factory bees'³⁷ and also identifies Charles Fourier, amongst other nineteenth century socialists, as a forerunner of Marx. Fourier was a French utopian socialist whose doctrine of harmonious communities, or phalansteries, was reliant on the model of the beehive. Donald Drew Egbert comments:

To Fourier, men must work together, as do bees, to achieve social harmony because, in isolation, 'The individual is an essentially false being.'³⁸

³⁷ Blake, *Elements*, p. 67.

³⁸ Donald Drew Egbert, *Social Radicalism and the Arts - Western Europe: A Cultural History from the French Revolution to 1968* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1970), p.134.

The beehive trope situates *House of All Nations*, therefore, at an intersection of contemporary political and aesthetic discourses, displaying its modernist relation to scientific rationalist and utopian socialist traditions. In 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century', Walter Benjamin observed that Fourier's phalanstery bore traces of both a classless prehistory and of a machinic present:

Its highly complicated organization is like a piece of machinery. The meshing of passions, the intricate interaction of the *passions mécanistes* with the *passion cabaliste*, are primitive analogies to machinery in the material of psychology. This human machinery produces the land of milk and honey ...³⁹

As an ideal social machine or phalanstery, the bank also functions in the text, using Benjamin's phrasing, as a collective, 'wish-fulfilling fantasy'.⁴⁰ The machinery of the industrial era has a darker side, of course, but in dialectical materialist terms this negative side proves to be revolutionary. In *Capital*, Marx analyses the effects of modern machinery on labour, showing how modernisation not only accelerates material production but is also, in technical terms, 'revolutionary, whereas all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative'.⁴¹

The 'machine' invokes other significances as well; indeed, in *House of All Nations*, capitalism itself 'appears as a magnificent machine with no one at the controls'.⁴² The metaphor of the driverless, runaway machine locates *House of All Nations* within the interwoven discourses of the modernist aesthetic. The industrial capitalist system is founded on 'machinery' and the power and anarchic potential of machinery, technology and modernisation were celebrated by the avant-garde, as Marshall Berman observes:

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 148.

⁴⁰ Benjamin, *Reflections*, p. 148.

⁴¹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, intro. Ernest Mandel, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 617.

⁴² Kylie Tennant, 'Critics Choice', in *Sydney Morning Herald* (7 December 1974), p. 16.

The futurists carried the celebration of modern technology to a grotesque and self-destructive extreme ... their uncritical romance of machines, fused with their utter remoteness from people, would be reincarnated in modes that would be less bizarre and longer-lived. We find this mode of modernism after World War One in the refined forms of the 'machine aesthetic' ...⁴³

While *House of All Nations* owes little debt to futurism as such, it circulates similar ideas about modernity in its representation of the ceaseless activity of the financial world. The driverless machine carries the suggestion, however, that modernity's power is diffuse, rather than concentrated in individual hands, suggesting a dialectical view of the complex social totality. In *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, Marshall Berman finds modernity inscribed in Marx's concept of permanent revolution and in his fascination with the bourgeoisie's role in unleashing unparalleled productive forces. According to Berman, modernity's continual transformations, its permanent revolution, is seized on by Marx as a key characteristic of the activity of the bourgeoisie. Similarly, in Stead's novel, successful capitalists are characterised by their obsession with speed, progress, transformation and change. But as portrayed most sharply in the Hallers, the rich are also haunted by a 'Nietzschean resentment', an enslaving fear and envy of the masses, prompting them to hoard and to dissemble:⁴⁴

Aristide's large dark eyes ... rolled fearfully about the room, Marianne thought; the hall empty except for one cheap hat-tree; the salon empty save for this table, settee, chair, and Mr. Haller's desk. And not misers. Fearful of the revolution. (273)

In the novel, the word 'revolution', considered etymologically, can be conjoined with the beehive. Among the novel's working titles was the ironic *The Revolving Hive*, which was

⁴³ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, p.26.

⁴⁴ Jameson analyses the Nietzschean narrative of resentment, in *The Political Unconscious*, especially pp. 201-2. Resentment, according to Jameson, denotes the masters' attribution of envy to the slaves, and the consequent infection of the masters' confidence and aggression. The masters propitiate the masses through charity, or else by becoming priests of revolution. Jameson concludes that this is an 'autoreferential structure', and that 'the theory of *ressentiment* ... will always be the expression and the production of *ressentiment*.' (202)

featured in advance publicity.⁴⁵ This title combines Stead's 'naturalist' perspective with an ironic play on the signifier, 'revolution'. The hive of the bank is revolved as a world under the observer's investigating and classifying gaze. As Raymond Williams points out, post-1789 meanings of 'revolution', implying a sudden and complete transformation in social structure and economic relations, diverged from prevalent scientific uses of the term, as the cyclical and repetitive motions of the spheres.⁴⁶ In Stead's novel, 'revolution' evokes this double meaning: fear of revolution is compounded by a sensation of being subject to forces, cyclical and ceaseless, which govern the lives of individuals. Marianne tells the superstitious Aristide of the hand-writing expert's prophecy:

'She said you run in cycles - always the same, beginning to end. She said what you're afraid of will come about.' (14)

If *The Revolving Hive* signified the organic machine with its endless activity and iterative pattern of human affairs, the novel's final title, *House of All Nations*, foregrounded what Don Anderson has called its flesh-cash nexus,⁴⁷ equating the house of the bank with house of the Parisian brothel.⁴⁸ Houses, public and private, along with contingent spatial signifiers such as the doorway, the stage and the sideshow, form a significant network of contrasting environments in the narrative. Significantly, the domestic spaces to which the male banking fraternity retires are rarely foregrounded. In the novel's few domestic locations, the presence of women, however, does become portentous, as will be discussed in section three. The Hallers' house, for example, is a domestic mausoleum, occupied by the pathological housewife-hostess, with drawers and cabinets stuffed full of unused, exquisite

⁴⁵ Geering, 'From the Personal Papers' (1990), p. 404.

⁴⁶ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana/Croon Helm, 1976), pp. 226-230.

⁴⁷ Anderson, 'Christina Stead's Unforgettable Dinner-Parties', p. 42.

⁴⁸ 'House of All Nations' was the name of a famous brothel in Paris, according to Geering, 'From the Personal Papers' (1990), pp. 404-5.

domestic finery, the product of exploited female, working-class and colonial labour. The Hallers' house is a museum of bourgeois fetishes, seething with displaced desires.⁴⁹

While the Banque Mercure, which houses predominantly male characters, can be seen as a socially stratified space, it is also manifestly heterogeneous. All nationalities, all manner of men - and a sprinkling of women - pass through the bank, like actors moving across a stage. The house, as bank/brothel, signifies not only in terms of whoever is physically present but also in relation to its absences, and to the world beyond its doors. As Gardiner puts it, the narrative 'rarely follows the bank's customers out its doors into the rest of their lives'.⁵⁰ The interior of the bank, however, represents the public world in microcosm. Scene Fourteen, 'The Collection', which is organised around a clerk's attempt to collect money from clients and employees for a wedding present for the bookkeeper, encompasses a number of human dramas. The device of the clerk's progress through the bank facilitates a dramatic intersection of classes and nations. The clerk, Armand Brossier, collides on the staircase with one Zuccherio Zurbaran,

...an Argentine millionaire of great strength, a sweet, savage, uncivilized nature, who owned herds of steers no wilder than himself, to whom his servants, peons, and boundary riders were men-dogs to be lashed, who trampled down and shot at will. (117)

The clerk's strategic self-abasement in the face of Zurbaran's reckless disregard dramatically sketches social positioning and contingent attitudes to money and power. The narrative deploys the bank's interior spaces to mark these differences:

Small in the sight and dreams of godlike men, Armand Brossier crawled about below with his wash-leather bag. Abernethy Gairdner smiled like a bloodless angel, declared in his pure voice whose echoes could be heard

⁴⁹ Jennifer Gribble draws attention to the interactions of envy and desire in the scene: 'Both couples are party to the conspiracy in which the hunger for envy and praise draws to it the hunger for power and money in a travesty of the sacramental meal. The entrée is a ritual unveiling of priceless gold, crystal, laces, rugs, furs, kept out of sight and out of use for fear of 'the working class': see Gribble, *Christina Stead*, p. 43.

⁵⁰ Gardiner, *Rhys, Stead, Lessing*, p. 60.

rolling around the building, 'Of course, with pleasure. Good luck to the young lady.' (123)

The bank's doorways, particularly its grand entrance, signal theatricality: figures are frequently silhouetted at the threshold. Dramatic entrances and exits punctuate the narrative sequence, as, for example, in the entrance of Bertillon's wife, Claire Joséphe, 'in a coat of the silkiest sable' (109). Momentarily framed 'against the light', a paragon of wealth, elegance and fashion, Claire Joséphe is glimpsed from Marianne's perspective, highlighting the latter's lust for social climbing. Bertillon's wife functions as Marianne's object of desire, a symbol of the doorway to wealth and economic power. Like the majority of female characters in the novel, however, Claire-Joséphe remains opaque, a passing reference to the private life of the bank's owner.

The idea that individuals occupy emotional and spiritual houses, that subjectivity is itself a dwelling, is suggested in Adam Constant's explanation to Michel Alphendéry of the importance of encounter with a significant other who will initiate passage across the threshold into the experience of ideal community:

'... When you see another person and, though you have never held - his hand, you know you are planted in him ... You have already touched with your finger, lightly but sensibly, the living clay, you have been at the heart of life and seen invisible life. The clay of all living men is on fire, after that, with the same life. But there has to be one, perhaps not your lover, who has to be the door to the house of the living.' (75-6)

The concept of the lover - implicitly a woman - as initiating the rite of passage from one life to another is not only characteristic of Stead's fiction. Such a view of heterosexual coupledness was pervasive between the wars.⁵¹ After 1940, Louis Aragon articulated his

⁵¹ See Christina Simmons, 'Companionate Marriage and the Lesbian Threat', in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* IV. 3 (1979), which describes a 'spate of literature' about companionate marriage in the 1920s, and ensuing 'technical marriage manuals and popular advice in the next decade.' (p.54)

revolutionary vision by reference to the image of the loving couple. Lucille Becker translates and comments:

'... this sweetness of man and woman for whom the world is not limited as long as they are mingled, their breath and their bodies, their exaltation and their repose ... their thoughts are interwoven like a braid of happiness; on all sides, they prolong themselves towards that future that is within them, and which can exist only through their rapprochement ... This experience cannot be transmitted. Those who have it experience at the same time the dizzyness and the marvelous intensity.' In *J'Abats mon jeu*, Aragon wrote that he envisaged communism as a society in which the basic cell would be the united couple of man and woman, faithful, happy and in love.⁵²

Similarly, for Adam Constant in *House of All Nations*, true heterosexual companionship and love holds the personal and political promise of the ideal society. Michel Alphendéry, by contrast, is situated in a limbo between worlds, in both personal and political terms. There is some inconsistency in the novel concerning his status: at first, apparently, he is single, but it later emerges that he is in touch with an estranged wife. It is tempting to speculate that this encodes shifting memories of the period of 'threshold' in Stead's and Blake's relationship, weaving together intimate dialogues about love and future worlds.

Metaphorising the threshold, doorways become a visual figure for temporality. In the doorway, the passage of time is arrested. Michel Alphendéry's liminality, further discussed in the next section, is often represented moving between spaces and through doorways - between the offices of William and Jules, between the foyer and the inner sanctum and between the bank and the communist fraternity. Scenes rather than chapters indicate the arrangement of time in theatrical bursts: rather than following a particular character through various settings or places, characters and conversations pass through the doorways, corridors and offices of the Bertillon frères. This plays with conventional novelistic relations

⁵² Lucille Becker, *Louis Aragon* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971), p. 84. In conversation with Lévy, as recorded in *Adventures on the Freedom Road*, Edmonde Charles-Roux comments that Aragon's 'view of the USSR was shaped by a woman and his view of that woman by the USSR' (p.267)

between time and space, accenting the mobility of subjects, while deploying the bank as confining matrix, as theatrical space.

Theatricality marks the representation of character in the novel. The narrative observation of shysters and crooks does not preclude admiration for their clever performance and trickery. The trope of theatre meshes with images of the sideshow and merry-go-round. The con-man/capitalist becomes the sideshow magician playing to his audience, perpetrating deception through the colour and circular movement of a dizzying game:

‘That’s the convention of the stage and of women,’ Aristide remarked, ‘that there is some way of getting things done and some way out. As if in a dizzy beehive like the bank there was some way of getting anything done. No, it is not a beehive, it is a merry-go-round. The horses look splendid, their nostrils flash fire, their mouths drip slaver, they rear, their eyes dart passion, their manes float, and they even go round, but all is sculpted wood, and a spinning platform. The bank is a stage, Marianne: there is something in it I can’t seize, for the life of me. I don’t know what gives it momentum.’ (306)

The mysterious machinery of the stage, the trickery of the sustained illusion, is co-terminous with the figure of ‘woman’, the seductress. This phantasmatic woman who taunts and tortures is ubiquitous in the narrative, from prostitute to scheming wife. Aristide Raccamond, sent sprawling by the taut leash of a Scotch terrier belonging to the ‘charming Mme. Mimi Eloth, mistress of Achitophelous’, is further humiliated by the woman’s ‘insulting insouciance’:

...she smiled and turned from poor Aristide towards the lift. Etienne, the old porter, closed the gilded door of the lift cage and bore her aloft into glory to the first floor, surrounded by flashing mirrors, serpentine brass, and electric bulbs concealed in cinquecento blooms. (83-4)

The gilded, baroque architecture of the lift, parodically troping the ascending madonna as whore, aligns the ‘feminine’ with the bank as deceptive façade. The ‘feminine’ recurs in the

narrative in a cohort of signifiers: 'prostitution', 'domesticity', 'flesh', 'fortune', 'fate', 'earth', 'fertility' and 'femininity'. 'Femininity' is implicated in images of the market as governed by an invisible mechanism that controls human destiny. Premodern concepts of fate, embodied by the Roman goddess, Fortuna, are inscribed in the personification of the market as fickle and seductive, cruel or kind.⁵³ For speculators the 'flashing in and out of the prices' on the American stock exchange represents 'the heartbeats of Dame Fortune herself':

And with them stock-market luck has become one and the same thing as fate. (240)

The financial adventurer is he who dares to predict, take risks and gamble, and who pits himself against the anonymous, 'feminine' machine of market fluctuation.

Judith Kegan Gardiner finds somewhat troubling a tendency to male homosociality and decentering of women in *House of All Nations*, in which women serve as little more than 'occasional metaphorical vortices'.⁵⁴ Whilst women are indeed comparatively marginal, there is some narrative play with stereotypically gendered characteristics. Masculine and feminine attributes are not necessarily respectively aligned with male and female subjects. Just as men and women can exchange gendered characteristics, moreover, so can communists and capitalists exchange their visions. It is to the gendering of the exchange between the novel's capitalists and communists - as thematised in the figure at the threshold, Michel Alphendéry - that I now turn.

⁵³ See Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 110. Giddens discusses fate and risk-taking in modernity and how they have evolved as a means of controlling time and 'colonising' the future.

⁵⁴ See Gardiner, *Rhys, Stead, Lessing*, p.63.

2. Strange Bedfellows

It was the last moment such capitalists and Marxists were brought together by gentility and subversive impulses. The novel - perhaps the period - is permeated with strange bedfellows. Anticipating revolution, whores grow conservative, countesses lionize Reds. A young broker is also a revolutionary and poet of passionate sensibility. A self-made Balkan argues that you can make more money under socialism.⁵⁵

House of All Nations, as the above commentary suggests, is peopled by contradictory types - ineffectual communist activists and visionary businessmen. These seemingly antagonistic groups share certain key features, including masculine identity and the capacity to generate utopian, world-changing visions. Mediating between them, but completely at home in neither group, is Michel Alphendéry, who is the site of a dialectic between the political, emancipatory imperative to strive for revolution and the opposing economic and cultural imperative to survive in the present. Janus-like, he is positioned in the doorway between times and worlds, between the future world of communism and the present world of capitalism. He is a threshold figure between at least two discourses, two worlds and two possible experiences of time; he is the signifier for the teasing proximity of an unlikely revolution.

Alphendéry's answer to Jules Bertillon's question, 'Michel, why are you in this game?', reveals not so much a solution to the riddle of self as an awareness of its contradictory and flexible nature. In an allusion to 'credo', the question of Alphendéry's integrity acquires cumulative significance in the narrative. Ironically dubbed the 'Limen of Honesty',⁵⁶ he is surrounded by speculation. What are his motives? What is his real influence in the bank? This speculation extends from the bank's customers to the text's readers. As a Marxist who serves the rich, is he a tawdry sellout? Or, is his Marxism - in

⁵⁵ Bell Gale Chavigny, 'With rake-offs for the Pope', in *Village Voice* (4 October 1973), p. 21.

⁵⁶ This is the title of Scene Six in the novel. 'Limen', the root of 'liminal', is from Latin, meaning 'threshold'.

tension with his loyalty to the bank - the (as yet) uncrossed threshold of an ethical and political truth? Torn between a fear of poverty sharpened by familial responsibilities and the ideological magnetism of Marxism (as embodied in Jean Frère), Alphendéry occupies an unstable position as middle-man between two worlds:

‘My father was a small banker as well as lawyer, my grandfather a small steelmaster. When my father died I became the secretary of Alphendéry, the Alsatian *rentier* millionaire who had retired and made a hobby of collecting proofs of Dreyfus’s innocence. He was also a Marxist and while with him I became a fervent Marxist. You see, I have always been a revolutionary at ease, the shadow of a rich man.’ (353)

His adopted name condenses the contradictions of identity (‘revolutionary at ease’), shading in subtle layers of class definition and inscribing mobility between groups, as well as referring to his ambiguous self-reinvention and reinscription of patriarchal origins. The story of Alphendéry’s entrée into Marxism is entwined with fatherlessness, and the consequent contrivance of a new patriarchal lineage. This social act positions him on the threshold between classes. He is a seemingly unlikely but wholly representative type of revolutionary figure, embodying the *déclassé* intellectual, a protégé of the generation which first defined the modern intellectual in the wake of the Dreyfus affair. His Marxist praxis, like an aesthetic practice, is installed at a remove from its ostensible object, the working-class, and flourishes in the interstices of the system against which it is shaped. Does this represent Alphendéry’s Marxism as parasitic, dependent on the wealthy, and perpetuated as another form of the ‘aesthetic’? As ‘revolutionary at ease’, Alphendéry figures the very problem of the aesthetic. Ian Hunter argues that when the ‘aesthetic’ is understood as an ideological practice sequestered from material and political realms, then it can appear ‘to both embody and forestall *the unfolding of all that we might become*’.⁵⁷ In *House of All Nations*,

⁵⁷ Ian Hunter, ‘Aesthetics and Cultural Studies’, in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 349 [his italics].

'revolution' is figured in precisely this way, as an embodiment, anticipation and suspension of the future, as a goal which determines the present but which - by definition - remains incomplete. Drawing on both Weber and Foucault, Hunter proposes an alternative explanation of the function of the 'aesthetic', identifying its expansion into realms beyond the literary elite as evidence of a pervasive 'technology' of the self: that is, individual subjects construct their lives in accordance with an 'aesthetic' model, practising critical self-problematisation as an art of living.⁵⁸ It may not be outlandish to suggest that the influence of Weber can be seen in this novel's questions about subjectivity:

...what is the origin of the monster, the Bourgeois? Not purely materialist conception but psych[ological] qualities engendered themselves influence material. No-one (says Weber) has explained that fantastic creature the Bourgeois: other people like to grab land and hit their rivals on the head, but the bourgeois likes to sit peacably in the towns and cerebrate and make money out of cerebration. He ascribes it all to protestantism (says Bill).⁵⁹

Challenging the notion that dialectical materialism renders subjectivity a passive term, Stead observes that psychology is both engendered by and acts back upon material conditions. Weber's study of protestantism becomes a valuable adjunct here:⁶⁰ just as protestantism is a vehicle for the lucrative practices of 'cerebration', Marxism is Alphendéry's art of living. Radical thought, it is hinted, does not simply oppose or transcend aesthetic practice, but is the latter's mutually enabling field. Textual play with the 'aesthetic' also suggests a certain homology with Stead's own contradictory position as an artist striving for distinction within bourgeois society, while still rejecting its values.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Hunter, 'Aesthetics', pp. 349-55.

⁵⁹ See NLA MS 4967, Box 15, Folder 112, p. 41 (in a section dated 3.8.36). This passage from Stead's diary mentions that the original on whom 'Alphendéry' was based (i.e. Bill Blake) was a student of Weber's. Geering provides a slightly different version of the same passage, from another version of Stead's journal: see Geering, 'From the Personal Papers' (1990), p. 404. The version quoted here contains a slightly expanded delineation of Weber's view.

⁶⁰ See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons. (London: Unwin University Books, 1930).

⁶¹ As mentioned in chapter one, 'homology' is a term used by Bourdieu. In his particular usage, it describes the parallel structures within seemingly disparate fields, which suggest their underlying relatedness. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991; Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), especially explanation on pages 182-3.

Bourdieu's theory of social fields, with its contingent terms of homology and *habitus*, is useful in expanding on *House of All Nations*' representation of subjects in relation to their environment, the world of the bank. Jules Bertillon, the mercurial owner of the bank, provides an instance of the actor - the dynamic subject - posited in Bourdieu's theory. As discussed in chapter one, Bourdieu revises structuralism by reintroducing the dynamism of the agent, inscribed by and interacting within the social structure:

...I wanted to emphasize that this 'creative', active, inventive capacity was not that of a transcendental subject in the idealist tradition, but that of an acting agent.⁶²

The 'capacity' described here is the 'habitus', a term derived from 'authors as different as Hegel, Husserl, Weber, Durkheim and Mauss'.⁶³ Bourdieu adapts 'habitus' to describe a variable but durable set of dispositions enabling individual actors to function in specific social settings. Importantly, the habitus is a generative capacity:

...[a] system of dispositions ... acquired through experience, thus variable from place to place and time to time. This 'feel for the game', as we call it, is what enables an infinite number of moves to be made, adapted to the infinite number of possible situations which no rule, however complex, can foresee.⁶⁴

Unlike Aristide Raccamond, whose subjectivity appears fully determined in the structuralist sense (he is a pawn in the hands of his wife or of Fate), the narrative's successful bankers demonstrate Bourdieu's 'feel for the game'. Jules Bertillon is characterised as an astute player, a bedazzling thief who continues - despite his exposure - to inspire hope and belief even amongst those whom he has cheated:

His old friends, and even the most pertinacious of the creditors, hoped that he went and made immediately a shining new fortune with which he would come home presently to flash in their eyes. For he had by now

⁶² Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, p. 13.

⁶³ Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, p. 12.

⁶⁴ Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, p. 9.

benefited by the immorality as well as by the mythomania of the financial world and had begun to be relacquered in the minds of the rich. For others, though, it is true, he still remained a rankle and a hurt, the charmer who deceived. (787)

Jules's dealings are made possible through the institution of belief, and through his accumulation and conversion of what Bourdieu calls 'personal' rather than 'economic' capital, the capital of his charisma. Citing Weber, Bourdieu refers to the 'heroic and prophetic' quality of 'charisma ... the product of an inaugural action performed in a crisis situation, in the vacuum and silence left by institutions and apparatuses ...'.⁶⁵ The bank is a phantom construction, a projection of Bertillon's mercurial temperament and style. Proving to be all façade, the bank is frequently termed (by those in the know) a 'bucket shop', where the money on the books is without substance and the gold deposits are borrowed from Henri Léon in an attempt to forestall Raccamond's frenzied investigations. Raccamond's penetration of the bank's façade is not due to any calculated control over events; rather it is predetermined by the mirage-like construction of the bank itself. In parodic microcosm of the destined collapse of the capitalist mode of production through history's dialectic, the seeds of destruction are always already present in the bank's operations, as Jules himself suggests from the beginning, long before events reach crisis point through the agency of Raccamond:

'I'm not stupid, Michel ... I've always known this day was coming. I never had to learn: I *knew* when I started. Now the day has come. This is the highest I've ever been and perhaps ever will be. Who knows? Things may turn upwards. I can only make money when the rest of the world is going to pieces. I'm like the pickpocket who gets his big chance in an earthquake. I've got to slip away before the buildings fall in on me' (190)

⁶⁵ Bourdieu, in *Language and Symbolic Power*, adds to this that 'personal capital ... disappears with the person of its bearer (although it may give rise to quarrels over the inheritance' (p.194).

Jules's success is built on his knowledge of this transiency, combined with his opportunistic belief in himself and the belief he inspires in his supporters and clients. And yet his belief is mixed with cynicism.

In the text's 'incredible' scenario, the *sine qua non* of 'belief' in supporting and reproducing social structures and systems of exchange is explored. A whole range of beliefs is tested and given play: belief in money, in the market, in the bank, in the future of the capitalist order, in the integrity, competence and sincerity of Jules Bertillon, and in those same qualities in Alphendéry. 'Belief' is indeed the founding quality of the Banque Mercure, as signalled in the novel's ironic, inaugurating *Credo*. Seemingly undermined by cynicism, the *Credo* is nonetheless attended by what appears to be universal consensus. The central players - whose objective is to milk the system for their own gain - from the outset collude knowingly in the rules of the game. Like actors in a theatre, they depend on a symbolic-social contract with their audience/clients; this contract, depending upon willing suspension of disbelief, performs no less than the ritual handover of legitimacy and symbolic power:

It's easy to make money. You put up the sign BANK and someone walks in and hands you his money. The façade is everything.

-JULES BERTILLON. (*Credo*, p. ix)

Writing about representation and power in the field of political activity, Bourdieu examines the constitutive power of 'belief' in the institution and maintenance of symbolic power:

It is a power which exists because the person who submits to it believes that it exists. *Credo*, says Benveniste, 'is literally "to place one's kred", that is "magical powers", in a person from whom one expects protection thanks to "believing" in him'. The *kred*, the credit, the charisma, that *je ne sais quoi* with which one keeps hold over those from whom one holds it, is this product of the *credo*, of belief, of obedience, which seems to produce the *credo*, the belief, the obedience.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Political Representation: Elements for a Theory of the Political Field', in *Language and Symbolic Power*, p. 192.

The efficacy of belief in sustaining the status quo is thus premised on the willed blindness of the dominated to the fact that their domination is made possible by their very support, through belief, of an arbitrary system. Magic is a function of delusion - that other term for belief. The opening *Credo* in *House of All Nations* reveals that capitalism, like the money market game, is sustained by the players' cynicism in manipulating the rules; but at the same time, the players themselves must believe in or subscribe to the system at a practical level. The dominant players are therefore suspended between belief and skepticism; indeed to be successful, players must be both insiders and outsiders, believers and skeptics. They must believe in order to drive forward their own interests within a legitimating system, but maintain sufficient clarity - or cynicism - to manipulate the rules:

Of course there's a different law for the rich and the poor: otherwise who would go into business?

- ERALPH STEWART

A self-made man is one who believes in luck and sends his son to Oxford.

- MICHEL ALPHENDÉRY. (*Credo*, p. ix)

The inclusion of Alphendéry's voice in the *Credo* emphasises his own status as insider/outsider. As one who exercises a skilful mastery of the rules of the game, but who maintains an ideological as well as a practical remove, Alphendéry represents ambivalence. Alphendéry's inclusion, furthermore, underscores the hegemonic reach of the market game.

Jules Bertillon is therefore necessarily both charming and self-deceived, equipped with the skills of a thief, adapted to a specific niche in the habitat of modern capitalism:

His judgement was limited, he never troubled to find out the background of other rich men's lives, he pretended to himself that they were all like himself, part of Ali Baba's band, and thus he was able to lose overnight ground which had taken him and his friends months to gain. He knew, really, nothing, and nothing of the world he lived in, worked in, made money in: monstrously ignorant, he succeeded because he had recognized

at once that in the financial world there are no dignities which cannot be questioned or facts which are not given out for someone's interest. (88)

Bertillon is a tactician, a superb game-player, possessed of a refined set of instincts with which to negotiate the choices immediately present and to manipulate a complex, codified system for personal gain: he is a pilot at the controls rather than a mechanic who comprehends the workings of the machine. He both lacks and spurns any moral or theoretical perspective which would permit him to question either himself or the system which produces and sustains his cheerful parasitism.

Associated with the element of air, Bertillon disavows earthly materiality, as also seen in his pursuit of wealth in the abstract, and his preference for the symbolic logic of the game rather than for its outcome, material wealth. In this respect, he has much in common with the intellectual or the 'pure artist' in the field of production. This suggested consonance with the creativity of artists privileges Bertillon, despite his faults, as a textual representative of the 'good'. Alphendéry's love for Jules is logical, justified by the correspondence of their spheres; their mutual disavowal of the economic base is richly contradicted by their manipulations of the game.

In contrast, Henri Léon's wheat scheme represents an earthy, practical form of endeavour, providing an intriguing and contradictory 'blueprint' for a different world. The complexities of Léon's scheme, addressing 1930s international relations, are thrashed out in a three-way conversation. The technical detail of the wheat scheme, like other 'deals' elaborated in the narrative, attends to the workings of a machine-like structure and explores minds adept in responding to its nuances. Léon proposes his scheme in excitable, telegraphic prose while Alphendéry interprets, translates, and mediates it for Jules Bertillon. Despite Alphendéry's flair for exposition, however, Jules never really comprehends the meaning of the scheme.

Léon's wheat scheme, the text's parodic blueprint for a new world order, represents a (literally) golden opportunity to avert fascism and world war. Organised as a three-tiered system of wheat consortia, the scheme has something for all players: Russia could retain her wheat supplies for her own people and obtain necessary machinery to develop industry; America could obtain a reasonable price for its surplus wheat; the value of wheat in the future would be shored up; and the German economy would be stabilised, thus checking the prospect of extremist political solutions. Excited by its potential, Alphendéry reads the wheat scheme as revolutionary:

'To turn the Russians into buyers instead of sellers is sensational, completely sensational ... it revolutionizes the whole market situation - and it's dialectic, it's along the right line, that's why it's perfect: don't you realize that?'

'Dialectic - what's - h'm?'

'The logic of world history, in the line of evolution.' (407)

Of course the idea of tinkering with the dialectic represents a comic misreading of Marxism, not least because of the failure to account for divergent human desires to which even the logical Alphendéry is prey. Léon, visionary capitalist and follower of 'all the great beans of the Second International' (105), is driven by such contradictory desires:

But now he drank water, intoxicated enough by the view of this gigantic citadel he saw the invisible but strong hands of his genius building up in front of him for him to inhabit. He smiled, darkled, glinting at Michel, his confidant; in every aspect the Oriental potentate, the Turk, talking to his favorite, supine counselor, quite sure that his own favorite topic - himself - was also the theme that Alphendéry's ears yawned to hear. (407-8)

Léon's romantic belief in socialism only accommodates his egotistical fantasies, his enthusiasm for the wheat scheme extending beyond expectation of mere material reward. Léon's comic lust for personal prestige, however, is offset by his naivety, energy and his warm relationship with Alphendéry, factors which also distinguish him from his

counterpart, the far more contemptible womaniser, Robbie Grant, in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*.

Léon's magnificent wheat scheme, in *House of All Nations*, marks him as contradictory capitalist. The scheme also gives expression to some of the deeper utopian desires of the text. The 1935 Paris Congress Speeches, which had been annotated and selected by Stead for *The Left Review*, contained '[a] few of the little flowers of Ilya Ehrenburg', head of the Soviet delegation at the Congress.⁶⁷ Ehrenburg's view, that the new Soviet society was the ideal environment for artists, recurred - as discussed in chapters two and five - in Stead's own writing.⁶⁸ Her selection of particular phrases from his speech resonates with the image of 'wheat' in *House of All Nations*:

... The factories are not temples for us, but instruments ... Work is not quartered off from leisure in our land. If they play Shakespeare in the fields, we find ourselves before an exchange between two creations, wheat and drama ... Bourgeois society establishes a hierarchy of hours ...⁶⁹

Ehrenburg characterises post-revolutionary society as non-hierarchical. The exchange between wheat and drama symbolises the fraternity of intellectual and physical labour in this new order. Accordingly, socialist society fulfills the utopian vision of the fully integrated, harmonious society, where all needs are recognised and supplied, whereas the art of 'bourgeois society' is an alienated 'aesthetic', separated from the material sphere. The terms of this arrangement are ludically transposed in *House of All Nations*' suggested re-ordering of international relations via its utopian capitalist scheme for spinning gold out of wheat.

⁶⁷ 'Paris Congress Speeches', selected and annotated by Christina Stead, in *The Left Review* 1. 11 (August 1935), p.475.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Stead's 'The Writers Take Sides', p. 453, 454.

⁶⁹ 'Paris Congress Speeches', selected and annotated by Stead, p.475.

The story of Stead's own time 'working' at Neidecker's bank is reflexively inscribed in Bertillon's tolerance of employees such as the poet, Adam Constant, who uses his time to gather material for his book about the 'money galls' (80). Constant's vision parallels, but is also in excess of Ehrenburg's 'comintern' rhetoric:

'...A real poet would be a waster, not a conserver ... Oh, I think when the people are free a great harvest will come up and the poet will be the first to eat from it, with the stealing birds and the harvesters at noon. To feel the hard meat, the reluctant milk of the heavy cream grain! ... It gives comfort, it gives wit, it gives peace. So is a land heavy with well-watered and round-ripened people. I wish I could see that age.' (77)

The idea of a land of milk and honey in *House of All Nations* is the culmination of a chain within which wheat and gold are links. Wheat, fruit of the harvest and age-old symbol of an abundance produced by human labour and the earth, represents an ultimate value, in a manner both mimetic of and opposed to 'gold'. In *Capital*, gold is identified as the universal equivalent, the linking mechanism between commodities and money.⁷⁰ This status is obtained through metonymy (as seen in its proximity to both forms as commodity and as customary means of exchange). With its primary use-value forgotten, gold is also fetish, the 'incarnation of value', the 'pure concentrate of a power that is ... social'.⁷¹ In Stead's novel, in a scene entitled 'In Praise of Gold', gold is depicted as fetish in terms redolent of well known passages in *Capital*;⁷² it is an object of desire, which, in addition to its sensual and physical beauties ('brightness, softness, purity, rarity, great specific gravity ...'), carries a 'lifelong association ... with the idea ultimate wealth, perennial ease, absolute security':

It is an absolute and in its presence the anxious heart breathes sweetly and the blood laughs and the toiling brain sheds its dew of agony. Sweet gold! It has in it everything that man desires in a wife, that cannot, precisely, be purchased with gold. (135)

⁷⁰ See Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, in Chapter 1, pp. 162-3.

⁷¹ See *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore, p.191.

⁷² See Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, in Chapter 1, especially pp. 163-5, for a discussion of the commodity's 'mystical' and 'enigmatic character' as well as its sensuous qualities.

The fetishistic allure of gold strongly connotes the feminine, with its irresistible but suspect stimulus to masculine desire. Metonym is thus converted to metaphor, as the movement of desire is ensnared by the fetish. In Léon's grand plan, 'wheat', the material commodity which could sustain Russia's Five Year Plan and forestall the rise of Nazism in Germany, is the golden means by which the interests of capital and socialism might interact co-operatively, realising utopia. The wheat scheme plays (nostalgically, given that any such moment had certainly passed by the time of the novel's writing) with the possibility of a new world order in which every nation's needs and wants are met by the co-operative efforts of self-interested capitalists. The scheme is a ludic version of utopia, which, like gold itself, tropes masculine desire folding back into the fetish.

These opposites, however, are only temporarily harmonised. The unfolding of the dialectic inexorably fractures Léon's dream. His 'wheat' (an earthly, material resource), is alien to the shadowy and etherial operations of Jules Bertillon, and it is this difference which raises Bertillon's hackles from the start. The wheat scheme fails because premised on the idea that Jules is capable of acting outside his disposition, beyond his limits. Jules, the genius high-flier, is really caught in the web of his own delusions. The coded telegram William receives from Jules towards the end of the novel ironically reveals these limits:

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

MERCURE

The sky, representing Jules's own insubstantial, flighty nature, is also his limiting element. Unable to see the sense in working with material commodities, Jules travesties and plunders the scheme, appropriating it for his own game and turning it into a farcical sideshow, with the help of the clown-like Theodor Bomba. Measured against the realities of economic practice, the wheat scheme's proposition, to channel capitalist enterprise towards shoring

up the Soviet experiment, constitutes an unlikely fiction, the fantasy of the armchair communist. Alphendéry's and Léon's retailing of the scheme in these terms irritates Bertillon, who has no desire for connection with material or political contexts:

'... No great swag was ever made out of commodities. To make a fortune, you've got to steal it, with nothing honest at the back of it. All great fortunes are financial ...came out of the air.' (414)

Thus the wheat scheme and its lack of fruition instance the demise of the great utopian idea, doomed by self-interested human nature.

Moreover, the wheat scheme represents the divided nature of capitalism, its negative and positive aspects, its 'innovative destructiveness'.⁷³ Marxism's version of history, therefore, strongly informs the ideological viewpoint of the text; through the failure of Léon's grand enterprise, the accuracy of a Marxist analysis of capitalism is vindicated, if faintly mourned. The narrative's mix of critique and celebration mirrors Marx's 'two-sided attitude toward capitalism': its emancipatory power, its organisation of production, its mobilisation of social energy are all positive developments, but these are accompanied by '... the aggressive and instrumental use of scale and technique in pursuit of social ends ...'.⁷⁴ Similarly, in the spirit of Marx's *Capital*, *House of All Nations* does not depict the society that would take capitalism's place (although the hive displaces it), but explores the contradictions inherent in the present system which make it ripe for revolutionary change. As both Duncan Foley and Marshall Berman suggest, *The Communist Manifesto* is a rich source of images about capitalism's revolutionary potential:

Modern bourgeois society with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and exchange, is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to

⁷³ This phrase is borrowed from Berman, summarising Marx's view of the revolutionary potential of the bourgeoisie: see *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, pp. 98-105.

⁷⁴ Duncan K. Foley, *Understanding Capital: Marx's Economic Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 160-2.

control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells⁷⁵

This representation of capitalist as sorcerer bears a strikingly similarity to figurations of capitalism in Stead's *House of All Nations*. Berman links the sorcerer to Faust, the archetypally modern man who, in his quest for knowledge and control, conjures up the forces of the nether world.⁷⁶ Likewise, in *House of All Nations*, although the market seems a secular and material realm, its most energetic players - such as Jules Bertillon, Henri Léon and Aristide Raccamond - are at the mercy of superstition and fear, subconsciously aware that they have no real control. Jules Bertillon reads events as pointers (or otherwise) to his luck, acting on the basis of intuition rather than logic, to Alphendéry's frustration. The narrative, however, bears witness to the efficacy of Jules's intuitive fears, bringing them to fatalistic fruition.

For, as Bourdieu argues, the 'precondition and the product of the functioning of the field' is the ceaseless generation of individual and collective 'misrecognition'.⁷⁷ If agents are to comply in countless functional ways with the 'undisputed' rules of the operation of the field, then they must tacitly agree not to question, or to unveil, its underlying logic of self interest. Such practical belief, according to Bourdieu, is not simply a state of mind, but is inscribed in and enacted through the body.⁷⁸ Jules's perception of the world as gripped by mysterious, unfathomable and uncontrollable forces conditions his creative misrecognition of himself as survivor and small time pickpocket, enabling him to ride the storm (130). Although Jules vandalises the wheat scheme, his actions are inevitable, and indeed part of the dialectic inscribed in the agent/field relationship. Alphendéry, equipped with insight

⁷⁵ From Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, as cited by Foley, in *Understanding Capital*, p. 163; see also Berman, *All That Is Solid*, especially pp 98-105.

⁷⁶ Berman, *All That Is Solid*, p. 101.

⁷⁷ See Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*, p 68.

⁷⁸ Bourdieu, *Logic*, p. 68.

into Jules's disposition and fortified by Marxism, comes to terms with the scheme's failure sooner than does Léon who, as originator of the idea and projected beneficiary, has invested his own belief in the project. Like Alphendéry, the narrative indulges in and sympathises with the dream, but preserves an ultimately ironic detachment.

So how is Michel Alphendéry's inclusion in the banking fraternity, as symbolised in the *Credo* with its proclamation of the corrupt beliefs of the moneyed classes, to be understood? Does his presence fracture the unity of the capitalist game, or is it a sign of compromise and collusion? Alphendéry's liminal position signals structural tensions within the field, generated by its necessary variety of positions. There is conflict between Alphendéry's creative and intellectual pleasure in playing the game, and the adulteration of such pleasure by skepticism, by his lack of belief in the legitimacy of the system, by his ideological otherness. It is this otherness, however, this critical detachment from the game, as Jules Bertillon shrewdly recognises, which is one of Alphendéry's chief assets as an employee:

'... Surround me with dullards and loafers, O Lord: spare me the office boys who study bookkeeping and the bookkeepers who study banking and the office managers who read pamphlets on will power. I don't want those who believe in my game ... The best people for a man like me are dopes and communists ... I'm not joking. Dopes are grateful to you for keeping them because they're dopes and communists because you know they're communists... .' (63)

Perennially marginal to power, never a threat to the boss, a rich source of disinterested information, an astute because undeluded player, a provider of intellectual product and strategies for the main players, Alphendéry's involvement in the game as insider/outsider embodies the ambivalent position of what Bourdieu (following Lucien Goldmann) terms 'the dominated fraction of the dominant class'.⁷⁹ This is the educated middle-class, a group

⁷⁹ See Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, see chapter 9, especially pp. 144-5.

which is economically dependent upon the entrepreneurial class, but which is ideologically alienated from it. Developing his 'genetic structuralism' (which theorises subjectivity as the readable site of a dialectic of function and structure, which can be used to decode transindividual significance), Lucien Goldmann identifies in Racine's tragedies the world vision of the *noblesse de robe*.⁸⁰ Adrian Mellor suggests that Bourdieu's work owes something to Goldmann's analysis of this French seventeenth century 'dominated fraction' of the dominant class which was:

... caught in the double-bind of an unresolvable contradiction ... in the uncomfortable position of being at the same time both dependent upon and opposed to royal absolutism⁸¹

Accordingly, explains Mellor, this position of dependence upon and ambivalence about the monarchy produced a 'tragic vision' which universalised 'unresolvable contradiction' and 'stasis'. Although Michel Alphenéry's experience and viewpoint similarly expresses the collective world view of a particular class fraction, his is not, however, a tragic vision. As Holmes has indicated, much vitality and energy is invested in the banking community:

... the implied judgement of the capitalist system is countered by a relish for its excitements and joustings.⁸²

But Alphenéry's position does encode fractures in the ideology of the dominant classes, functioning to represent the 'hugely stratifying social organisms of man' rather than a bounded class system.⁸³

There is another fracture, more subtle, within the character of Alphenéry, indicating the text's submerged ambivalence about gender. Symbolically, as privileged confidante of

⁸⁰ See Goldmann, *The Hidden God*: Goldmann studies texts as an expression of a world vision, proposing that 'in the modern world ... artistic, literary and philosophical works have been associated with social classes and closely linked with the consciousness each class has of itself.' (p. 99)

⁸¹ See Adrian Mellor's 'Science Fiction and the Crisis of the Educated Middle Class', in *Popular Fiction and Social Change*, ed. Christopher Pawling (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 38-9.

⁸² Holmes, 'Character and Ideology in Christina Stead's *House of All Nations*', p. 267.

⁸³ Stead, 'Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel', p. 198.

the novel's major performers, Alphendéry is the mediator, the (strategically male) interface between the (female) authorial signature and the dominantly 'male' world represented in this narrative. This approach founds the narrative's male-identification, to which Gardiner has referred.⁸⁴ A further liminality is implied, however, in the cross-gendering of authorial and character perspectives. These implied perspectives confound Stead's unequivocal identification of Blake as Alphendéry's real life original: 'He was Alphendéry'.⁸⁵ Although, like his 'original' in Blake, Alphendéry is reputedly (as well as evidently) a persuasive and knowledgeable speaker and a sought-after member of the communist fraternity, his presence in the narrative is less than dominant. In his role as attentive listener and sympathetic audience, Alphendéry becomes somewhat 'feminised', as locus or receptacle for the feverishly dominant monologues of Bertillon and Léon. In a 1974 interview, Stead described herself as having been uniquely positioned in the bank because of the 'cover' provided by her gender:

Those boys told me everything, especially in business, because they think the poor romantic soul won't really understand that sort of thing, you know. They do tell you everything. Business men are not misers, they're out-going people, out-giving people.⁸⁶

As unfeigned observer and listener - 'I wasn't concealed under the desk, I was *at* the desk'⁸⁷ - Stead characterises herself as both critical of her employers and charmed by them; clearly some of these responses are vested in Alphendéry's relation to his banking brothers, and are implied in his distinctive narrative role.⁸⁸ Although, according to biographical readings,

⁸⁴ Gardiner, *Rhys, Stead, Lessing*, p. 63.

⁸⁵ 'Christina Stead: An Interview', with Whitehead, p. 238.

⁸⁶ Whitehead interview, p. 238.

⁸⁷ 'Christina Stead Talks To Rodney Wetherell', p. 24.

⁸⁸ This is evident, for example, in the two scenes: 'J'Accuse' and 'The Revolution'.

'Alphendéry' represents 'William Blake',⁸⁹ this particular 'William Blake' is imbued with the observant ear and eye of 'Christina Stead'.

Alphendéry's perspective registers and mediates affection for an array of male characters, chiefly Jules Bertillon, establishing the dilemma of a contradictory position. As a member of the bank's inner sanctum, he retains only the power of his eloquence to affect decisions. At the mercy of the whimsical Jules, whom he loves, and without obvious mercenary motives, he is as liable to be misunderstood as to be respected. In a sense the strategic intellect behind the operations of the bank, he is nonetheless in a dependent and vulnerable position:

He was bound to the bank by money needs and affection for the Bertillons, as well as inertia. (230)

Alphendéry's presence in the bank facilitates sympathy for the Bertillons and for Henri Léon. Committed to supporting the Banque Mercure and protecting the wealth of Jules Bertillon, his loyalty to Jules is continually put to the test. Geering observes that Alphendéry is the novel's 'ethical center'.⁹⁰ Rather than confining the text to a 'moral' sphere, this useful phrase alerts us to the tension of a subjectivity enmeshed with the social; Alphendéry embodies the contradiction between the confidence bestowed by his Marxist vision and his practical occupation of an uneasy position between worlds.

House of All Nations appears to enjoy and endorse many aspects of a world at odds with a socialist vision. Bruce Holmes reads the novel as celebratory of the energy generated by the most fascinatingly corrupt of its characters, asserting, for example, that:

... [Stead's] writing sparkles when describing the ingenious rascality of people like Léon, Jules and Comba [sic]; it wilts ... when dealing with

⁸⁹ See, for example the inscription of Blake's personal qualities: 'Alphendéry leaned forward, his eyes glossy with his personal passion, exposition ...' (20).

⁹⁰ This is Geering's phrase in *Christina Stead*, p.76.

situations like the socialist meetings that are peopled by types so sincere they appear atrophied of human interest.⁹¹

While he identifies the narrative's preoccupation with obsessively contradictory characters, Holmes does not do justice to the function of the novel's parallel socialist realm. The socialist realm comes into being in and through Alphendéry's mediating presence. In order to consider the wider implications of these seemingly contradictory realms, in the next section I turn to a detailed discussion of two scenes in particular, in which Alphendéry's focalising viewpoint and the representation of masculine and feminine modes of subjectivity are crucial.

3. The Gorgon

They all feared the insane goddess of darkness squatting there and dreaming of inchoate things (490)

If Marxism shares with progressive capitalism a conception of history as 'time forward', a counter to 'time forward' is evoked in the novel as 'time abolished', as articulated in the title of Scene Fifty-Nine. The novel's blurring of expected distinctions between communist activists and visionary businessmen is compounded by further antagonisms: the difference between activity and passivity, speech and silence, and 'masculine' and 'feminine' modes of subjectivity. Although connections between gendered modes of subjectivity and the sex of individuals are not completely fixed, the novel does use a masculine/feminine binary to represent related concepts of temporality and revolutionary energy. The ceaseless busy-ness of the hive does not counteract the sense of progress stalled; indeed the two coalesce and condense in overdetermined images of the merry-go-round, or the swarm of cocooned

⁹¹ Holmes, 'Character and Ideology in Christina Stead's *House of All Nations*', p. 273.

caterpillars. Revolution, signifying on the one hand progressive upheaval and on the other the inexorable (re)turn of fortune's wheel, seems to wait forever in the 'wings'.

Firstly, though, what of the narrative's portrayal of men and women, and of their modes of subjectivity? For feminist critics, *House of All Nations* has proved resistant to the task of feminist analysis and appropriation. Its primary focus on a teeming multitude of male characters going about male business in predominantly male-oriented settings has contributed to this feminist avoidance. While its dissection of the workings of male power and activity is fascinating, the narrative's marginalisation of female perspectives seems uncomfortably complicit with patriarchal constructions. For Gardiner, *House of All Nations* presents 'a dazzling array of men who overflow the ideology that purports to understand them', in a display that suggests the narrative's over-identification with male consciousness.⁹² Accordingly, even heterosexual love and passion is supplanted by homosociality, by the investing of 'male comradeship with erotic force'. As mentioned earlier, Gardiner points out that:

The novel solves the problem of female identity in a way traditional to the male canon and to orthodox Marxist theory, by abolishing women as persons, letting them serve instead as occasional metaphorical vortices.⁹³

For Gardiner, the capitalism/prostitution conjunction in the novel, symbolised in the brothel/bank of the title renders the metaphor an equation suppressive of real women's viewpoints. Anderson's description of the novel's 'flesh/cash nexus'⁹⁴ and Allen's examination of the presentation of women also indicate the importance to the text of the connection between women and money as '... twin toys of rich men'.⁹⁵ Allen reasons that *House of All Nations* is worthy of consideration because it constitutes 'the topic of woman as

⁹² Gardiner, *Rhys, Stead, Lessing*, p. 63.

⁹³ Gardiner, *Rhys, Stead, Lessing*, p. 63.

⁹⁴ Anderson, 'Christina Stead's Unforgettable Dinner-Parties', p. 42.

⁹⁵ Allen, 'Lives of Obscure Women', pp. 184-185.

social being' in ways which continue to find expression throughout Stead's work.⁹⁶ But Allen, like Gardiner, finds aspects of the authorial narrative troubling for feminism, particularly in its more than occasional deployment of pejorative references to feminine characteristics and to individual women.⁹⁷

Sheridan's more recent reading of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* tests the terms of her earlier feminist appropriation of Stead's fiction, in which the lives of female characters were foregrounded.⁹⁸ Noting the challenge to feminism represented by *House of All Nations*, Sheridan turns to *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*, finding in Stead's portrait of Robbie Grant the woman writer's curious scrutiny of male desire. This approach is surely applicable to *House of All Nations*. As these critics have noted, however, the discomfort produced for feminist readers by the narrative's often schematic representation of female characters needs to be recognised. This discomfort also suggests the extent to which Stead's Marxist orientation both enables and contains her articulation of gender as a site of oppression. Narrative play with masculine and feminine modes of subjectivity represents an important, if tentative, foray into the problem of gender and its relation to the revolutionary project.

Scenes involving the socialist characters, Jean Frère and Adam Constant, provide a contrast to the business world but also add another dimension to the portrayal of masculine subjectivity in the novel. An early example of this is found in 'Jean Frère's Garden', in which Michel Alphendéry and Adam Constant visit the communal country house of the Frères. Signs of chaos and fertility confront Alphendéry whose sense of order is challenged at the sight of the 'tangled weeds, grass, shrubs, and lumps' which make up the Frère's

⁹⁶ Allen, 'Lives', p. 192.

⁹⁷ Allen, 'Lives', p. 190.

⁹⁸ 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), pp. 2-12.

garden (73). Wandering at the garden's perimeter, he sights a caterpillar colony. According to Holmes, the colony represents a parody of the utopian socialist dream of a new Eden:

The adjective 'communal' strengthens the implication that the plight of communism is being described.⁹⁹

This reading does not fully account for the perspective of Alphendéry, his particular discomfort and extreme revulsion indicating city-bred culture and middle-class origins. His sense of displacement is evident from his arrival in the country, contrasting with the happy ease of Adam Constant, who appears like his biblical namesake 'in one of William Blake's dawn pictures' (74). Alphendéry's visceral reaction to the sight of the caterpillars is clearly registered:

He recoiled and his heart flopped stickily around. [The shrubs] were loaded with swarms of small black caterpillars, living for the most part in communal cocoons, very large, white, and flossy and through which, though, imprisoned they could still be seen, moving sluggishly. This vermin had attacked a great number of the green things in the neighborhood. They ate up the leaves and covered the bare branches with their horrible black masses and their giant white cocoons. They confirmed Alphendéry's worst suspicions about the country. (74-5)

The caterpillar swarm contrasts with the ordered hive, predation and chaos replacing purpose and harmony. Any simplistic yearning for pastoral, utopian conditions is undoubtedly fractured by the image. The terms of the description, however, also register Alphendéry's own personal effort to repress the darker side of the golden community of the bank, the ugly state of affairs behind the façade. This awareness must be repressed if he is to sustain his daily commitment. The abject scene of an invasive, pestilent, predatory nature not only thwarts Alphendéry's dalliance with the otherness of Jean Frère's dream, but reveals a fear of disintegration of the urbane, civilised order of the bank's workaday realm.

⁹⁹ Holmes, 'Character and Ideology', p. 276.

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, explored more fully in chapter seven, diagnoses such experiences of horror as evidence of the work of maintaining the coherent boundaries of both culture and subjectivity.¹⁰⁰ Where nature is represented as 'feminine', as abject, it provides both counter to and specular counterpart of masculine subjectivity and civilisation.

The countering feminine erupts more dramatically still in another episode concerning the 'socialist' realm in the latter half of the novel. As in Scene Seven, much of this later scene is focalised through Alphendéry. As its title - 'Time Forward, Time Abolished' - suggests, the pace of the narrative is arrested and, within the hiatus, a set of discourses not normally dominant emerges. Its twilight liminality modifying spatial and temporal perception, the setting is 'coated with [a] faint lucent ghostly gelatine light that makes Paris-real so like Paris-graved and Paris-memored' (473). The comrades, Frère, Constant, Alphendéry and physicist Charles Lorée, gather informally in the semi-domestic setting of Frère's modest workshop flat, where the simply prepared stew contrasts with the ostentatiously displayed 'stuffed carp' at the Hallers' dinner-party.¹⁰¹ Unlike most other dinner-party scenes in Stead's fiction, this meal is characterised by informality, lack of pretension and by an atmosphere of relatively wordless and peaceful co-existence. Importantly, the initial comradely atmosphere - sustained only during the women's absence - implies a provisional suspension of subjective boundaries:

They sat down in the angles of the workshop, angles made by walls, tables, cupboard, a bookpress, a stove, chairs, and sat on all sorts of things the natures of which were concealed in the thickening night. (474)

¹⁰⁰ See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 67: Kristeva proposes a correspondence between 'a (social) symbolic system ...[and]... a specific structuration of the speaking subject in the *symbolic order*' (p. 67) [emphasis in text].

¹⁰¹ See Anderson's discussion of this scene in, 'Christina Stead's Unforgettable Dinner-Parties', p. 29.

Alphendéry, however, has trouble adjusting: his initial desire to talk politics is frustrated by the suspended nature of the time, space and mood (475). Alphendéry experiences disorientation as the daylight, intellectual world he usually inhabits is displaced, as the visual is replaced by the aural, by the tactile and by the arousal of emotions:

He was not used to sitting in the dark: he always sat in the brightest lights possible and thought and talked in the most brilliant manner possible. It unnerved him to sit with the 'great people's leader' Jean Frère and the 'famous physicist' Charles Lorée in the dark and hear them singing Old Man River. His world swiftly dissolved and slowly rose up again from cells. (475)

The brilliancy of the dominant 'masculine' world - its bustle and importance, its reliable categories - is dislodged. Public, confident, 'masculine' values are temporarily annulled by 'feminine' silences and tentative reminiscing. The initially all-male gathering is quiescent, attended by 'feminine' receptivity to rhythms other than words, of openness to warm bodies, of silences, reflection and meditation. Alphendéry needs to work hard to acclimatise to this, for him, unaccustomed world.

Initially this interruption of the dominant, materialistic mode of the world seems wholesome, but it does not remain so. The atmosphere of comfort and peace and the sense of harmonious, utopian community are disrupted by the cumulative intrusion of women onto the homosocial scene. Why does the men's openness to this 'feminine' mood depend on the absence of women? Prior to their arrival, the men had drifted into nostalgic reminiscences in which pastoral and domestic vistas emerge. Alphendéry's reverie about his childhood and his uncles' efforts to inculcate in him the values of high culture and train him as an academic leads him gently towards an acceptance of the disparity between his past and present lives, towards a harmony with the other men. But the vista of such male-bonding is broken as Judith Frère, Henrietta Achitophelos and Suzanne Constant arrive one by one, in ascending order of challenge, to destabilise any semblance of unity and solidarity.

Judith's quiet, wifely presence is superficially harmonious, but hints of domestic tension are present. Adam, in love from afar, idolises Judith as the model revolutionary companion: as 'time-forward', she represents for him the promise of a post-revolutionary, idealised coupledness. Alphendéry's observation of Judith seems to confirm this reading. She embodies rather than speaks of revolutionary change, in a troubling elision of conscious, intellectual knowledge:

...the face of a tempestuous being, a firm will, a firm destiny but ignorant of it; meditation was stormy and fruitful in this head, but the first unconscious gesture of the chin, the faint shades flying over the face showed a restless mind, not well buttressed against the affronts of life. (479)

This essentialising description represents Judith as revolutionary Woman - not woman - and as an embodiment of the emblematic feminine of the French Revolution. Inspirational and mysterious, elemental and discontented, she is depicted from a predominantly 'masculine' vantage point as an enigmatic, mystical other. There are hints within the scene of another position from which to view Judith. Male mythologising, for example, is complicated by the rebellious, protofeminist potential of her namesake, the courageous biblical assassin, Judith. Jean Frère, who both idealises and patronises her ('Judith is a good girl ...' 478), falters in his attempt to describe her more accurately. Narrative representation of Judith, however, fails to realise (although it hints at) her specificity and emphasises her role as an object of masculine desire, her presence inducing further talk of poetry and dreams.

Alphendéry's restlessness re-emerges in this atmosphere in which 'femininity' has become suffocating, and he struggles '... through the sea of dreams with breast strokes, gasping toward the safe rocky shore of important discussion' (482). The subsequent entry of the pretty young Henrietta completely dispels the initial atmosphere. The narrative moves from lyrical to satiric mode, as Henrietta flirts enthusiastically with the 'marvellous'

Professor Lorée. The latter's egotistical susceptibility to the young woman's adulation (and his lack of interest in Alphendery's questions), undermines his stature, revealing him as superficial and comically predatory, fracturing comradely solidarity.

The stunning entry of Suzanne Constant into the now comic scene 'abolishes' all polite pretence, turning towards a hyperbolic and dark comedy:

At the door stood a woman of stone, with a face dug up from the grave.
'Suzanne!' exclaimed Adam. (484)

Whereas Adam had identified Judith as 'time-forward', he identifies his wife, Suzanne, as:

'... time-abolished: she crumbles conventions, abolishes distances, and pierces matter for the construction of her own primeval psychic world.' (478)

This also literally describes her effect on the gathering. Suzanne's loud and unflattering attention to the scene of flirtation between Lorée and Henrietta punctures the professor's credibility entirely, enlisting a certain sympathy for Suzanne, despite her outrageous behaviour. Strongly foreshadowing characters in Stead's later work, such as Henny in *The Man Who Loved Children* and Emily in *I'm Dying Laughing*, Suzanne horrifies and transgresses polite society. She is unkempt, unruly and loud, driven by angry passion and a rebellious fervour that challenges patriarchal social bounds:

'...I see through you all. Your piecrust conspiracies. I know what's boiling in your pots!' (487)

Her counter to the ideal of domestic companionship (represented by the Frères) powerfully evokes the dark underside of the domestic economy, in language that could just as easily be Henny Pollit's:

'... How do you think I got this complexion? Not with a life of milk and roses ...Roses! Not a single rose. It's been a dog's life. I'm not a woman but an old pack mule he's sorry for: society for kindness to animals and he's to be a saint for that! Not I. I'm not the one to stand all that! I'll drink,

slobber, caterwaul, and muck up and bawl him out as often as I want to.' (486)

This protest raises a number of questions. Clearly, Suzanne's description of her situation draws on Marxism as a tool for theorising the oppression of women: representing herself as 'an old pack mule', she angrily voices the exploitation of women which underlies and supports patriarchy. Marxism, however, can barely explain the frenzy of an attack which is well in excess of its immediate target, the meek and forbearing Adam. Suzanne appears rather as a victim of socially and discursively constructed gender roles, expressing a distorted love for Adam through a monstrous jealousy. No site of solidarity between women is available in this discourse. Suspicious of all the other women present, Suzanne attacks Henrietta Achitophelous with a mixture of Marxist critique and irrational spleen:

'... Where did your father get his money, Mademoiselle? Tell me that! Out of sending white women out to Buenos Aires ... Out of buying and selling little girls in China, out of the silk crop, eh, Yes, yes. I know. Your pretty manners, your little red nails, your big almond eyes, your little fern-smelling curls: I know' (488)

At the very least, Suzanne's rhetoric ruptures the comfortable comradeship of the socialist group, deploying Marxism as a weapon against their complacency and their assumptions about women, revealing their untheorised reliance on patriarchal gender relations.

To what extent is Suzanne's protest consistent with Marxism? Does it reveal the efficacy of Marxist analysis in dealing with gender oppression, or does the episode leave a residue of doubt? The group, whose comradely unity has been punctured, whose 'masculine' coherence has been undone, is in the grip of a force which challenges the social-symbolic order. Characterised as 'time-abolished', Suzanne's negative energy converts revolutionary forces towards the anti-modern, and the anti-social. Stripping away constructed 'human' order, Suzanne's diatribe refers her listeners to their animal and bodily origins:

'...Such jelly fish. I frighten you all with my tantrums. You really believe I'm mad. No. I'm just strong. I break him and myself because I'm too strong. I'm a female gorilla amongst the chimpanzees. Look,' she crouched forward on the chair, let her arms hang, 'look, it's striking isn't it? A gorilla-ess.' She clenched her teeth. 'I make the bars of my cage dance, all right.' ...

...After they had eaten and drunk again, she subsided and sat there musing savagely, throned on her squat hips while the others talked in fragments, softly and without confidence, politely, as if they had just met. They all feared the insane goddess of darkness squatting there and dreaming of inchoate things. (489-90)

Even if her discourse does employ Marxism, Suzanne's negative presence also subverts Marxism's explanatory power. Representing the antithesis of modernity, masculinity and revolution, Suzanne is also what negatively defines these terms. Her discourse and actions are aimed at destruction rather than reconstruction. Unlike Judith who is an object of observation and admiration, Suzanne is also like her, in that she is a mystery unable to be fully articulated. Sustaining a certain sympathy for her, the narrative is nonetheless aligned with the silent, appalled, fearful listeners in the room, transfixed by the Medusa, 'Adam's gorgon' (490). Narrative closure of Suzanne's disruptive power is effected in an ensuing conversation between Alphendéry and Adam Constant, which functions as a postscript to the scene. Adam's explanation of his continued loyalty to Suzanne both elevates his wife and fatalistically consigns her, along with women as a category, to a position of psychological dependence:

'I venerate her courage in loving: most women are such beaten dogs. They have such immense passion and they give vent to such poor, sniveling words. Nothing in the world seems to me so beautiful as woman's love for man, nothing is so deformed. You understand.' (490)

The eruption of Suzanne Constant into the harmonious realm of the communist brotherhood, even if dialectical, is already constituted by an inherent duality of thought. In the terms of this duality, according to Irigaray, the 'feminine' is the mirror which guarantees what is 'masculine', functioning as the displaced specular image of 'masculine'

subjectivity.¹⁰² As representative of the countering 'feminine', Suzanne produces the spectacle which contrasts with, but which also defines, the masculine, revolutionary subject.

The spectacle of the countering feminine is also paradoxically reproduced within the main narrative line, this time in the collision between the inner circle of the Banque Mercure and the always excluded customers' man, Aristide Raccamond. As in the previous example, a masculine preserve - a golden realm of community - is fatally disrupted when an alien, chaotic, 'feminine' force is unleashed. Aristide Raccamond, the scourge of the bank, embodies the contradictory forces of historical transformation and destruction. He is also the site of historic overdetermination: Raccamond can plausibly be read as catalyst or embodiment of the historical dialectic and also as the blind agent of extra-human, supernatural forces of fate and destiny. As discussed earlier, the imagery of *The Communist Manifesto* proves a salient comparison. Marx's admiring depiction of the bourgeoisie also refers us, in Berman's words, to the 'moral, social and psychic abyss' opened up when the forces of production are unleashed. Expanding on *Manifesto's* sorcerer image, Berman writes that it:

... evokes the spirits of that dark medieval past that our modern bourgeoisie is supposed to have buried. Its members present themselves as matter-of-fact and rational, not magical; as children of the Enlightenment, not of darkness. When Marx depicts the bourgeois as sorcerers ... he is pointing to depths they deny. Marx's imagery projects, here as ever, a sense of wonder over the modern world: its vital powers are dazzling, overwhelming, beyond anything the bourgeoisie could have imagined, let alone calculated or planned. But Marx's images also express what must accompany any genuine sense of wonder: a sense of dread.¹⁰³

What Henri Léon, Jules Bertillon and Aristide Raccamond share is precisely this sense of dread, evidenced in their untrammelled superstition about the forces of luck, fate and

¹⁰² Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp 26, 55.

¹⁰³ Berman, *All That Is Solid*, p. 101.

destiny, rather than confidence in modernity's rational order. Aristide comes to embody destiny itself. Riddled with irrational fear, he is a driven man, undergoing an involuntary transformation into a monster-machine of destruction, a Frankenstein figure.¹⁰⁴ Perversely his increasing weight, fleshiness and hysteria mark him out as the destructive feminine - the embodiment and agent of the bank's downward destiny. According to Stead's 1936 diary, as she drafted the novel her 'blackmailer' took on 'rolls of flesh' while 'Mme Barras' became 'involuntarily more sinister, driving'.¹⁰⁵ These very feminine 'rolls of flesh', whipped along by the 'masculine' wife, Marianne, serve as both representation of and as punishment for a sinister past. This past, intimated on several occasions in the novel, had involved Raccamond deeply in prostitution:

'I think I know women- as merchandise.' He said it not obscenely but with bitter coarseness. Léon drew down his brows and gave him a close look: instinctively he took a step back. (55)

Pimping, or flesh-dealing, metonymically produces Raccamond's imprisonment within the flesh. The dinner-party scene at the Hallers marks an unmistakable turn in his representation in the narrative: from this point on, Raccamond's unfortunate flesh seems to dominate his character, suppressing other modes of apprehension. Force-fed on ritual gourmet fare by the savagely attentive hostess, Sophy Haller, Raccamond corresponds to the ceremonial carp laid out on the platter. Stuffed near to bursting point, he becomes helplessly corporeal, his subjectivity is overwhelmed by flesh, body, digestion, consumption. The description of the suffocating Raccamond, with 'his mouth half open, his eyes bulging and his pendulous cheeks some pale shade between French blue and mauve ...', suggests the gasping of the snared and landed carp itself. As Anderson has commented, along with the

¹⁰⁴ Berman, in *All That Is Solid*, p. 101, suggests that Marx's sorcerer descended from two significant literary figures, Goethe's Faust as well as Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, who were expressive of the ambiguous modernist dream/nightmare.

¹⁰⁵ See Stead's 'Journal of "The Blackmailer"', published in *Christina Stead: Selected Fiction and Non Fiction*, eds. Geering and Segerberg, p. 203. Also cited in Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 212.

nexus created in the scene between 'food/capital/politics/sex', attention is also drawn to 'the absence of eructation or defecation'.¹⁰⁶ This 'containment' within the body, aside from evoking the idea of the hoard, corresponds with other aspects of Raccamond's presence, such as his volcanic behaviour, his impending eruption. Manray warns Alphendéry, with mock theatricality:

'Aristide is in a jam of some sort, acting frantic: look out for him. He's ready to blow' (578)

Watching and waiting for Raccamond 'to blow' maximises suspense as the bank is slowly plunged towards inevitable disaster. The alignment between Raccamond's flesh and the destructive feminine represented by Suzanne Constant, is explicitly articulated by the smoothly masculine and aristocratic Jean de Guipatin:

'Aristide, it would be foolish to behave like a jealous woman: blot out the whole show for self-justification and a sort of pitiable notoriety; you would be like a woman who jails her husband for alimony or shoots her husband and so abolishes all husbands, present and future. You can realize that you would be committing suicide yourself, and no one would take you for the instrument of eternal justice.'

'You threaten me with a boycott?'

'Yes. If you do this, I will let everyone within earshot hear about it and the way you went about it, your belly growing bigger and bigger, your appetite getting more monstrous, until you wanted everything in the bank for your own... .' (715-6)

Parasitism, hysterical pregnancy and gross consumption are correlated in Raccamond's flesh. He could not be more alien to the masculine lightness of being of the members of the bank's inner sanctum. From the beginning, Jules's dislike of Raccamond is not only based on Raccamond's implication in the ruin of his previous employer, the Claude Brothers, but is predicated on the temperamental and instinctive response of masculine subjectivity to its abjected other: 'He smells wrong. I don't like that type' (27). Raccamond, with his fleshy,

¹⁰⁶ Anderson, 'Christina Stead's Unforgettable Dinner-Parties', p. 45.

nervous femininity, is the antithesis of the mercurial, airborne Jules, who represents lightness of intellect, masculine freedom from the earthbound, and the distance of the 'pure artist' from the vulgar marketplace. Thus the structuring ideology of *House of All Nations* accommodates the apparently mutually exclusive fields of Marxism and 'pure art', by reference to the principles of the 'aesthetic', and a binary logic founded on masculine forms of subjectivity.

In conclusion, *House of All Nations* is informed by and extends Marxist debate about the relation between the individual subject and the social realm. The text's ideology also informs, and is informed by, gender issues. Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production, furthermore, allows articulation of the novel's apprehension of the social positioning and dynamic action of individual agents. Bertillon, the 'pure artist' situated symbolically at the point of greatest distinction from the material 'economy', is a tactician of the economic game. As an intellectual and theorist of Marxism, Alphendéry's position, at a critical remove from both capitalists and communists and yet structurally dependent on the former, similarly corresponds to the site of 'pure artist' in bourgeois society.

The imperative for writers and artists to take a stand in the politically aroused 1930s is thus reworked in Alphendéry's distanced and intellectual mode of appreciation of Marxist theory, his reluctance to commit himself either to an engagement in the front-line of revolutionary struggle or to a thoroughgoing incorporation of capitalist values. Ambiguously situated, he is connected with recurring metaphors of the threshold, his anguished dilemma consistently inviting reader identification. It is to a similarly detached vantage point, established by the gaze of the naturalist observing the hive, that the authorial narrative ultimately withdraws.

In the observation of the hive, however, Marxist principles of analysis are at work, anatomising contradictory relations between and within fields of production.

Demonstrating the dialectic of history through the downfall of the bank, its seeds of destruction already present from the beginning, the text is also produced through binaries present in Western European, including Marxist, thought. This tendency is most obviously seen in the novel's portrayal of men and women - in its logic of the masculine and of the countering feminine. 'Masculinity' is the chief characteristic of the public realm; it is the realm of modernity, progress, production, comradeship, orderly civilisation and that which could better it - an active, revolutionary striving for the utopian community. As a premodern, dark, destructive, countering force which arrests the forward motion of time and abandons civilised order to the primitive, 'femininity' constitutes the antithesis of 'masculine' progress and revolution. Superficially resembling revolutionary forces, 'femininity', in this text, is a reactionary principle which ultimately calls up the necessity for its own containment. Unleashed, it sets up a powerful challenge to communal order and harmony, an energy outside the masculine spaces of city and bank, and excessive of rational logic. While the novel, with its inversion of gendered categories in some of its 'feminine' men and 'masculine' women, seems to repudiate any simple equation between biological sex and socially gendered attributes, the assignment of 'masculine' and 'feminine' properties to these individuals is nonetheless constituted by binary structures of thought traditional to a Western epistemology. Marxism reproduces rather than undermines these structures in the text.

In her very next novel, *The Man Who Loved Children*, Stead shifts the terrain from the public, 'masculine' world of the bank to the private, 'feminine' domain of the family. Suzanne Constant's irrational rage against her husband's imagined infidelity is converted, in *The Man Who Loved Children*, into Henny's outlawry and her pitched battle against patriarchy. Despite the narrative's implied criticism of the patriarch, however, it is a masculine script - appropriated and performed by the adolescent daughter - that enables

the revolutionary subject to emerge, as my next chapter's discussion of this culminating novel of the 1930s will demonstrate.

Chapter 4.

She casts herself as revolutionary:

The Man Who Loved Children.

... with a cheek of burning pride, full of playwright's defiance, she waited for his verdict.¹

The hero is to them an affliction and a terror ... do not reject the hero in your soul!²

Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!³

Preamble

In my reading of *The Man Who Loved Children*, 'performance' is the vehicle of a revolutionary praxis informed by both Marxist and Nietzschean discourse. In contrast to female characters in Stead's earlier fiction who, despite their desires, remain caught within patriarchal structures, Louisa Pollit's struggle - though beginning with domestic entrapment - becomes an active, outward-moving, socially-oriented struggle, possessing overt political dimensions. In a vision both suggestive and reinscriptive of Marxism's dialectical

¹ Christina Stead, *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940; London: Penguin Modern Classics edition, 1981), p. 409. All subsequent page numbers in the chapter refer to this edition.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (1961; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 71. Louie Pollit's version of this Nietzschean aphorism (340) would have come from the 1907 Levy edition. See Shirley Walker, 'Language, Art and Ideas in *The Man Who Loved Children*', in *Meridian* 2. 1 (May 1983), p. 16: 'Throw not away the hero in thy soul'.

³ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 362.

materialism, the novel's utopian moment of 'freedom' is wrested from 'necessity' through the performance of Louie's self-scripted drama. This performance is at once willed and determined, so that the novel can also be read for its exploration of historic tensions in Marxist thought between free will and determinism. The notion of 'performance' provides for a convergence of the text's apparently disparate spheres of the emerging artist, the political activist and the gendered subject. Indeed the fusion of these spheres of contradiction within Louie's performance produces the narrative's moment of revolutionary rupture, itself a literary gesture which prefigures Althusserian notions of overdetermination.

The possibility of such prolepsis, however, should be held in tension with other features which decisively mark *The Man Who Loved Children* as the product of a particular historic juncture in Western Marxism. As I will show, Louie's performance is richly contradictory, like the currents of Marxism of its time, both foreshadowing poststructuralist apprehensions of the subject and endowing that subject with utopian possibilities of individual agency and will. Contemporary debates within poststructuralist discourse have also crystallised around such issues, as exemplified in debate between Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler on the uses and meaning of 'performativity'. This debate, though primarily oriented to the politics of gender identity, provides fresh perspectives on how both Nietzschean and Marxist discourses, far from being mutually exclusive, are - in Stead's novel - potentially combined resources for a vigorous cultural-aesthetic practice.

Firstly, in 'Performance and performativity: figuring revolutionary praxis', I examine the work of Butler and Sedgwick, establishing a relevant framework for reading *The Man Who Loved Children*. A straightforward Marxist reading is rendered problematic in view of the narrative's vigorous appropriation of Nietzschean discourse. To situate - despite their differences - both queer theory and Stead's novel within a Nietzschean tradition which emphasises the will, is to grapple with and to recast the problem of agency. In the context

of determinist Marxist (or indeed poststructuralist) understandings of the subject, little scope appears to exist for the individual actor as a source of political agency. 'Performance' and 'performativity', however, offer useful perspectives for rethinking Stead's treatment of the individual in history, while retaining the specifically Marxist orientation of Stead's understanding of the subject within the social realm. As discussed in chapter one, the trend in Western Marxism after the Russian Revolution, and still current at time of Stead's writing in the 1930s, was constituted by an intersection of discourses that made historical materialism compatible with vanguardism, valorising the interventionary role in revolution of key individuals, under the auspices of the Party.⁴ In the light of these perspectives, how does *The Man Who Loved Children* envisage its revolutionary hero, and what blueprint for revolutionary change does it offer? How radical a rupture does it perform?

In my second section, 'The Spectacle of Pollitry', I examine how the 'theatrical', as a sign of the performative, establishes and reveals the world of the Pollits. Sam and his antagonist, Henny, are of course theatrical performers who, like many of Stead's characters, dominate the fictional stage. The way that 'performance' works in this narrative, however, enlists a materialist understanding of the mechanism whereby patriarchy is reproduced and, ultimately, a revolutionary rupture achieved. Examining the contingent idea of 'performativity', I suggest that a critical perspective, derived from both Marxist and Nietzschean sources, functions in the narrative to undo the inevitability of the reproduction of patriarchy and of patriarchal subjectivity.

If the goal of 'revolution' depends on the work of critical destabilisation of hegemonic structures, this goal is implied in the narrative organisation of *The Man Who Loved Children*, with its inexorable accumulation of contradictions. Through strategic reader

⁴ This point is made by Gottlieb, 'Introduction', in *An Anthology of Western Marxism*, p. 11.

positioning, the narrative shifts reader attention from the charms of a prevailing 'false consciousness' to the demonstration of the falsity of that 'consciousness'.⁵ In other words, an anti-reificatory impulse directs the sequencing and manipulation of narrative viewpoint. This is effected by a narrative strategy of repeatedly shifting from apparently even-handed overview, to immersion in the family drama, to the destabilising comparison of individual viewpoints. This shifting structure, which imports dramatic models of both character and plot, works to triangulate perspectives. In the manner of montage, this pattern of intensive immersion, repetition and interruption of narrative sequences both fractures and re-engages reader identification. Initial, conflicting identifications give way to a reading position that finally accords with the protagonist's 'revolutionary consciousness'. For example, although Sam's performances initially dominate and mesmerise, a subversive sympathy is correspondingly enlisted for Henny. The thesis and antithesis of the parental battle is superseded, however, by the narrative's emerging focus on Louie's challenge. Although Stead may not have encountered them directly, a comparable network of ideas was circulating in Europe in the 1930s; aiming to activate the critical capacity of theatre audiences, Brecht's revolutionary theatre of alienation, as theorised by Walter Benjamin, significantly furthered the anti-reificatory project of the politically-committed artist.⁶ Moreover, in view of its crucial attribute of 'repetition', 'performativity' provides an opportunity to articulate, in poststructuralist terms, Stead's narrative project of anti-reification via the spectacle of the Pollit family drama.

⁵ See Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness*, for the argument that whereas both bourgeoisie and proletariat are caught up in a reified consciousness essential to and determined by capitalist processes of commodification, the bourgeoisie is structurally unable to break free because it is necessarily the subject and beneficiary of the structure. The worker, however, 'forced into becoming the object of the process by which he is turned into a commodity', is potentially able 'to surpass the immediacy of his condition.' (pp.165-6)

⁶ See also Jonathan Arac, 'The Struggle for the Cultural Heritage: Christina Stead Refunctions Charles Dickens and Mark Twain', in *Cultural Critique* 2 (1985-6), pp 171-189. Arac suggests that Walter Benjamin's notion of 'refunctioning' describes this novel's political use of its literary precursors.

'She casts herself as revolutionary', the title of this chapter, asserts the polysemic character of the cultural performance represented in and through this novel. Whilst other critics have indicated the political aspect of Louie's struggle for independent and authentic subjectivity, along with her strategic appropriation of male text and discourse, what I want to call the 'performance' of this struggle is yet to be articulated. This 'performance', in tandem with Louie's theatrical deployment of both prior and scripted discourse, is a representation and protofeminist reinscription of the historically male-oriented revolutionary struggle. Louie's grandiose dream is to become not a retiring writer but a performer on some kind of world stage. Her audacity in the text resides in her hyperbolic act of self-casting and self-scripting. Her performance is politically sharpened by struggle and directed towards an audience beyond the limits of the narrative's familial stage, 'enacting' a dialectical process of development and revolutionary transformation. Stead continually cast and recast characters in 'narrative[s] of revolution'.⁷ As I argue in the third section, 'Shame and performance: Louie as revolutionary figure', Louie is cast, and casts herself, in certain roles, in dramatic revolutionary postures, which display, prefigure and enable her culminating performances.

Furthermore, as argued also in chapter five, Louie's fictional struggle is a fictive refiguration of Stead's own somewhat overdetermined struggle as artist within the literary field: the struggle within and against literary precursors; the struggle for a politically authentic but aesthetically autonomous position; and the struggle for cultural recognition in the form of a true readership. That is, Stead's biographical narrative is in part effected by this novel, which not only inscribes but also performs, through a polysemic act of self-casting, the author's struggle of emergence from provinciality and oblivion into a wider

⁷ Harris writes, in 'Christina Stead' (*The Age: Monthly Review*), that 'Stead's account of history is a narrative of revolutions' (p.8).

cultural space. In the last section, 'Closure and escape', I return to the text's Marxist frame and consider the impact of the narrative's last moments, as well as the issue of whether or not any 'cultural performance' - including Stead's own - can really exceed the 'performativity' of signifying processes.

1. Performance and performativity: figuring revolutionary praxis

And life itself told me this secret: ...

'...That I have to be struggle and becoming and goal and conflict of goals: ah, he who divines my will surely divines, too, along what *crooked* paths it has to go!'⁸

Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure.⁹

To introduce into the study of a Stead novel ideas from 'queer theory' is to perform a gesture which seems 'queer' in itself, given Stead's notorious and vehement dislike of lesbians.¹⁰ Employing queer-theoretical models in a deconstructive analysis, Kate Lilley has shown that Stead's fiction can be productively interrogated from a position that refuses its latent homophobia.¹¹ In deploying aspects of queer theory in this reading of *The Man Who Loved Children*, however, my own aim is to articulate what is radical, or potentially radical,

⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 138.

⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 241.

¹⁰ See letter to Ron Geering (13 July 1967), in *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, in which Stead writes, 'I detest lesbians' (p.287). This is cited by Rowley, *Christina Stead*, who asks: 'Why was Stead - who had always vigorously championed sexual freedom - so hostile to lesbianism and bohemia? ... Why did she react so violently to something that surely did not threaten her? Or did it?' (p.442).

¹¹ Kate Lilley, 'The New Curiosity Shop: Marketing Genre and Femininity in Stead's *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)*', in *Southerly*, 53. 4 (December 1993), pp. 5-12.

in Stead's apprehension of the individual's struggle in and through the forces of determination. Consideration of the distinction between notions of performance and of 'performativity' will illuminate the narrative portrayal of Louie's often 'Nietzschean' struggle against Sam and, along with its potential for emancipatory 'resignification', its forging of these significations from 'resources inevitably impure'.

The idea of 'performativity' has recently become salient in queer theory through Judith Butler's post-psychoanalytic theorisation of gendered and sexed subjectivity. To provide a longer view, Butler establishes her idea of performativity through the strategic conjunction of several significant sources, including, among others, Joan Riviere's (1929) essay, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* and Derrida's 'Signature, Event, Context' which focuses on the work of linguist, J. L. Austin.¹² In his 1962 book, *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin developed an idiosyncratic theory of speech which radically contested philosophical assumptions about language.¹³ Reasoning against the philosophers that statements cannot be judged reductively - in isolation - as true or false, Austin argued that speech acts should be judged according to their social efficacy, or in his own distinctive terminology, according to their 'felicity'.¹⁴ That is, do they achieve their desired goal? Do circumstances within which they are uttered by the speaker coincide happily to effect the intent? A powerful speech act category for Austin is that of the performative, where the utterance coincides with - or rather constitutes - the performance of an action. *I do*, in the context of the marriage ceremony, performs the social act of the

¹² See Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' (1929), in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Burgin et al. (London and New York: Methuen, 1986); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (1978; New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Jacques Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context,' in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982.), pp. 307-330.

¹³ J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

¹⁴ Austin's lectures, in *How To Do Things With Words*, proceed from various kinds of 'infelicity' (Lectures I-III), to an elaboration of and distinction between various categories of the performative (Lectures IV-VII), and then analyse the efficacy or force of speech acts (from Lecture VIII ff).

marriage contract. More mundanely, words like *I bet*, *I dare you*, *I challenge you*, uttered in the appropriate context, do not simply make statements, but perform actions.

Noting the Nietzschean tenor of Austin's attack on philosophy, Derrida finds the performative useful in contesting normative concepts of signification.¹⁵ In Austin's prime example of the performative, the *I do* of the marital ceremony does not just describe the ritual taking place, but efficaciously performs the social force of ritual. Derrida, however, revises and reverses Austin's terms: according to Derrida's theorisation, when the subject says *I do* - in the context of a marriage ceremony - the *I do* is not performed by the subject, but rather the *I do* performs the subject; that is, the performative is an iterative, discursive site of reproduction of the subject. Derrida shows, nevertheless, that the performative also marks as unstable its function of reproducing ideology and the social; as the place of reiteration, and of the potential failure to reiterate, the performative signals the possibility of interruption of the smoothness and self-evidence of reproduction. The performative, for Derrida, is the place where denaturalisation can occur and where *différance* can be produced, in and through the very process of its compulsive repetition.¹⁶

According to Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, gender is an act which is performative. Drawing on Foucault's theorisation of the body as a socially signifying surface, Butler proposes the phenomenon of drag performance as a site of inquiry into psychoanalytic explanations of the basis of a gender construction that supports the hegemony of heterosexuality. Butler analyses how drag performance plays upon, renders distinct and denaturalises 'three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance', thus exposing gender itself as 'performative'. By

¹⁵ See Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context': Derrida writes that Austin's project of freeing 'the analysis of the performative from the authority of the *value of truth*' and 'substituting for it the value of force ... seems ... to beckon toward Nietzsche ...' (p.322). See also Timothy Gould, 'The Unhappy Performative', in *Performativity and Performance*, eds. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York: Routledge, 1995), esp. pp. 24-8 - for a discussion of Derrida's reading of Austin's attack on the philosophers.

¹⁶ Derrida, 'Signature', pp. 326-7.

identifying as 'imitative' and 'performative' - rather than essential or natural - the process of gender construction, Butler situates gender firmly within the political field of signification. Far from being expressive of a prior or natural inner identity, gender is an act requiring repeated, socially ritualistic performance to reinforce its already culturally-determined meanings. Butler suggests how this insight offers a potential for subversion of 'frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality':

The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such [stylized repetition of] acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction.¹⁷

Like Derrida, Butler suggests the unwittingly subversive potential of performative repetition, and this offers a new perspective on the implications of Sam Pollit's discourse as 'performance'. The arbitrary nature of patriarchal power and of the family structure is fundamentally exposed through narrative attention to his performance, and its repetitive character. This gives rise to a further set of questions: does the narrative exceed its critical exposure of patriarchal discourse as 'performative' to suggest, through the playing out of Louie's countering role, the intervention of a practical agency? If so, what are the terms of this intervention?

In her subsequent book, *Bodies That Matter*, Butler rethinks the relation between bodies and signification, showing how 'bodies', as well as social and political structures, might be open to resignification. Contesting the essentialism that presumes that 'matter' is prior to language, Butler argues that, rather than being simply representational or mimetic of matter, language is:

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.141.

... productive, constitutive, one might even argue *performative*, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification.¹⁸

If the body is not prior to language - not simply described by it, but an effect of signification - then signification itself becomes the determining principle of the social and political realm. This is crucial in considering *The Man Who Loved Children* in which the terms of Louie's challenge to patriarchal power, though primarily symbolic, have a material dimension. Butler traces the etymology of 'matter' and its relation to the 'feminine' in classical discourse in which notions of 'the indissolubility of ... materiality and signification' are suggested. She also considers briefly the complexity of the category of 'matter' in Marx, where:

... 'matter' is understood as a principle of transformation, presuming and inducing a future.¹⁹

The traditional, metaphysical relation between matter and signification is implicitly interrogated in Nietzsche's work, which has informed much poststructuralist thought, from Lacan to Foucault. Stead, as is well known, was very familiar with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: despite her assertion that she knew nothing of Nietzsche's philosophy - she claimed that it was his language which fascinated her²⁰ - several studies have demonstrated the presence of Nietzschean thought in *The Man Who Loved Children*.²¹ What remains to be explored, however, is the way in which Nietzsche's attack on hegemonic thought - encoded in his rhetoric - permeates the novel's narrative strategy. Far from working in antagonism to Marxism, Nietzschean discourse provides the rhetorical framework of *The Man Who Loved*

¹⁸ Butler, *Bodies*, p.30.

¹⁹ Butler, *Bodies*, pp.30-31.

²⁰ See Stead's letter to Leda and Stanley Burnshaw (30 July 1976), in *Selected Letters, Vol 2*, in which Stead comments on an invitation to talk to the Newcastle Philosophy Club: '... it is only because I loved Nietzsche in my youth and I have already explained all that to them, that it was not his philosophy if he had one but his poetics ...' (p.141)

²¹ For example see Walker, 'Language, Art and Ideas in *The Man Who Loved Children*': 11-20; Ken Stewart, 'Heaven and Hell in *The Man Who Loved Children*', in *Meridian* 2. 2 (October 1983): 121-7; Rebecca Baker, 'Christina Stead: The Nietzsche Connection', in *Meridian* 2. 2 (October 1983): 116-20.

Children, furthering its anti-reificatory impulse and informing its deconstruction of the transcendental mind/body dichotomies which support Sam's discourse.

The body of the performer, moreover, may become a site of interrogation and challenge to the symbolic order. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, arguing against 'the despisers of the body', Zarathustra addresses the question of the unspoken multiplicity of matter, of the body:

Your little intelligence, my brother, which you call 'spirit', is also an instrument of your body, a little instrument and toy of your great intelligence.

You say 'I' and you are proud of this word. But greater than this - although you will not believe in it - is your body and its great intelligence, which does not say 'I' but performs 'I'.²²

This passage alludes to the opacity of the self to the self's consciousness, and to a signifiatory excess generated through bodily performance. Signification performs the 'I' and is in excess of it. Here, in the possibility of excessive signification, and of 'resignification', lies a tension between a linguistic determinism and the utopian potential of Nietzschean thought. Conducting one of his pseudo-Darwinian and egotistical monologues on the future good of the species, Sam Pollit's verbal flow is interrupted by the children's restlessness. Meanwhile, Louie, who has been 'staring at her father absently', surveys the body from which clichéd discourse so repetitively pours and, from her viewpoint, a disturbingly measured appraisal of Sam's physical presence is offered:

The morning was hot, and Sam had nothing on beneath his painting overalls. When he waved his golden-white muscular hairless arms, large damp tufts of yellow-red hair appeared. He kept on talking. The pores on his well-stretched skin were very large, his leathery skin was quite unlike the dull silk of the children's cheeks. He was not afraid of his effluvia, thought it a gift that he sweated so freely ... (84)

²² Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, pp.61-2.

Unknown to him, a plenitude of meaning is released through Sam's performance as Louie's gaze, implying forbidden desire, begins to circulate meanings in excess of his monologic speech. The narrative focus on Sam's body interrogates the illusion of coherence of thought and consciousness experienced by the self-present, speaking subject.²³ This strategy opens up a space for resignification in and through the performativity of the signifying process; meanings about sensuality, age, time and space; material signs of vitality and mortality - the forces of matter which constitute and frame Sam's idealism. The 'I' which is Sam is already spoken and superseded by these forces: he is performed. Louie's gaze, and the reader's, looks through and beyond Sam's discourse.

Different possibilities for 'resignification', through the recognition and redeployment of the 'performative', are canvassed by both Sedgwick and Butler. Butler's use of 'gender performativity' is taken up in Sedgwick's 'Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*'.²⁴ Sedgwick responds to Butler's ideas about performativity, but focuses instead on possibilities enabled by individual performance. Can an individual subject's *performance* potentially exceed the scope of the performative, with its constitutive and determining function? Finding Austin's emphasis on the marital 'I do' intriguing, Sedgwick suggests an alternative formulation, 'Shame on you', to conjure up the experience of social censure attracted by a de-formed, or queer identity. This leads to discussion of the relational, and transformational grammar of a 'performatively efficacious' shame. Sedgwick advances a model of emerging subjectivity different from one which plots the shame affect 'along a notional axis of prohibition/permission/requirement':

It seems to me that the great usefulness of thinking about shame comes ... from its potential *distance* from the concepts of guilt and repression, hence

²³ See Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 22. Derrida comments that 'in speech, the voice and consciousness of the subject seem to coalesce, producing the alluring sense of a "pure and free spontaneity, requiring the use of no instrument, no accessory, no force taken from the world..."'.

²⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*', in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1993):1-16.

from the stressed epistemologies and bifurcated moralisms entailed in every manifestation of what Foucault referred to as the repressive hypothesis.²⁵

Using the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins, Sedgwick describes certain identity-shaping implications of the experience of shame: as an affect, shame is potentially linked to a differential process of identity formation. This attribute resides in its intimate and structuring relationship to an intersubjectively sited 'performance':

... shame effaces itself; shame points and projects; shame turns itself skin side outside; shame and pride, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove: shame, it might finally be said, transformational shame, is *performance*.²⁶

Sedgwick characterises shame as an affect which both displays and institutes the difference of identity. This strategy provisionally recuperates the role of the individual subject whose identity is laid open to transformational possibilities. In response, however, Butler insists upon the implausibility of the self-knowing, voluntaristic subject. Arguing that the 'reduction of performance to performativity would be a mistake', Butler distinguishes between the limited potentiality of an individual performance, compared with the effective range of 'performativity' which:

... consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's 'will' or 'choice'; further, what is 'performed' works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable.²⁷

The disagreement between Butler and Sedgwick suggests that one should be guarded in seizing on 'performance' as a category somehow enabling of a utopian future. Although 'performativity' can be applied to the dynamics of the relationship between Henny, Louie

²⁵ Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p.6 [emphasis in original].

²⁶ Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p.5 [emphasis in original].

²⁷ Butler, *Bodies*, p.234

and Sam in *The Man Who Loved Children*, in that the spectacle of Sam's repetitive performances creates the scene for the destabilisation of patriarchy, to align 'performativity' unproblematically with 'performance' oversimplifies the problems of agency, of free will and determinism. To what extent, in other words, can an individual, who knowingly sets out to perform a radical escape, escape being 'performed' by prior and disavowed discourses, structures and experiences? Rather than being merely reproduced, is it possible that the subject, through some kind of bodily performance, might mobilise a certain agency? Can the individual actually perform an interruption to or subversion of the apparently seamless system of ideological reproduction and subjectification?

The Man Who Loved Children, I suggest, affirms the operation of a limited agency, precisely through a performance which is both willed and determined, and through its mustering of 'resources inevitably impure'.²⁸ Louie's rebellion against Sam - characterised by an interplay of shame and performance, promoting her emergence through the shame of difference, and constituted by but also harnessing processes of signification - is also a decidedly Marxist, dialectical overcoming of oppositions between idealism and materialism. In *Theses on Feuerbach*, emphasising the 'this-sidedness of [man's] thinking in practice',²⁹ Marx orients philosophy away from idealism and towards practical life, declaring that 'philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point however is to *change* it.'³⁰ A combination of intellectual reasoning and political urgency also characterises the theatrical rhetoric of *The Communist Manifesto*; its declarative prose does not merely describe or embody revolutionary fervour, but also musters the workers of the world, thus approximating the performative (felicitous or not) in Austin's sense.

²⁸ Butler, *Bodies*, p. 241.

²⁹ Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 108.

³⁰ Marx, *Feuerbach*, p. 109.

Stead's recourse, in *The Man Who Loved Children*, to the revolutionary energy of the writings of both Marx and Nietzsche is practical and strategic. In proclaiming her literary kinship with Nietzsche's figure of Zarathustra, a move that situates the text's interrogation of a complacent middle-class morality, Louie also casts herself as revolutionary. Both Louie's (and Stead's) acts of self-casting, moreover, can be read as performative invocations, reducible neither to simple voluntarism nor to crude determinism; thus performance produces a tension that requires consideration of otherwise anachronistic theoretical models. Similarly, the novel's conjunction of discourses prefigures Althusserian overdetermination, the principle of multiple, condensed, contradictory causes which, in their fusion, give rise to revolutionary rupture.³¹ Although both 'performativity' and 'performance' indicate potential sites of an alternative subjectivity, the degree to which a revolutionary subjectivity is capable of being represented is an issue to which I return in conclusion. At the very least, this theoretical perspective foregrounds the political significance of Louie's rebellion as a performance which aims theatrically to mime and to perform revolutionary possibilities, and enables discussion of the performative workings of patriarchy, to which I now turn.

³¹ Althusser, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination,' in *For Marx*, esp. pp. 99-101.

2. The Spectacle of Pollitry

In this light, Louie and clever Ernie, who observed and held his tongue, saw, in a strange Punch-and-Judy show, unrecognizable Sams and Hennys moving in a closet of time, with a little flapping curtain, up and down. (71)

The Man Who Loved Children is about the clash of competing discourses and world views, about the struggle for symbolic dominance. The struggle to negotiate conflicting fictions is felt not only by the children, but also by the reader; historic shifts in the reception of the novel, locating first Sam, then Henny and, more recently, Louie as the central subject of the narrative, manifest the difficulty for readers in privileging any one particular perspective in this text.³² Joseph Boone argues that Sam Pollit's domineering presence is a major source of textual obfuscation, that his 'incessant stream of badgering, coaxing, engulfing words overpowers the third-person text with a monologic intensity that elicits Henny's derisive characterisation of her husband as "the Great Mouthpiece"'.³³ According to Boone, Sam's dominance extends from his tendency to engulf and consume the identities of his children, to his 'overbearing textual presence' that 'threatens to undo the reader's autonomy, forcing our submission while straining our patience to the breaking point'. What finally contends against both the thematic and textual dominance of Sam, in Boone's argument, is the figure of Louie:

For with the waning of Henny's power as Sam's principal antagonist ... her stepdaughter, the adolescent Louie, increasingly assumes the role of primary blocking figure. As the escalating conflict between father and daughter comes to dominate the last third of the novel, its volatile tensions increasingly expose the rents in the fabric of Sam's fictions of

³² See Yelin's 'Fifty Years of Reading', pp. 472-98, in which are traced various emphases in reading the text, since its first publication in 1940, in the context of social, cultural and literary trends and predominant 'horizons of interpretation'.

³³ Joseph A. Boone, 'Of Fathers, Daughters, and the Theorists of Narrative Desire: At the Crossroads of Myth and Psychoanalysis in *The Man Who Loved Children*', in *Contemporary Literature* 31. 4 (Winter 1990), p.515.

domestic bliss and strip bare the dangerous nature of his all-engulfing love.³⁴

Rather than assigning the third person narrative a passive role in representation, Boone's analysis highlights its dramatic structure - with its deployment of primary blocking figures - suggesting that the narrative reproduces, for the reader, the position of threatened engulfment by the paternal text, while dramatising the process of critical penetration produced by that experience. Apparently withholding any overt criticism of Sam's discourse, the narrative itself, at first, seems to invite its own engulfment. Such a narrative frame is already dialogical, however, fostering readerly detachment, observation and interrogation. In this respect, the narrative design could also be identified as Hegelian, as it is projected from the position of the apparently weak but dialectically potent position of the omniscient slave, who observes the powerful but self-deceived master.³⁵ Lukács uses this same Hegelian formulation of the master/slave dialectic to theorise the proletariat's position as structurally productive of revolutionary consciousness: it is only from standpoint of the worker, whose labour is appropriated and whose very being is commodified, that the experience of alienation can produce a revolutionary consciousness which can supersede the reified consciousness of the bourgeoisie. As mentioned in chapter one, Lukács emphasises that '*only the practical class consciousness of the proletariat possesses this ability to change things*'.³⁶ Although Lukács's works may not have been directly available to many Western Marxists at the time of Stead's writing,³⁷ Boone's reading of the workings of the narrative of *The Man Who Loved Children* lends weight to the view that the

³⁴ Boone, 'Of Fathers', p.515.

³⁵ Compare with G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, foreword. J. N. Finlay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp.111-119.

³⁶ See Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p.205.

³⁷ See entry on 'reification', in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, p.464, in which Gajo Petrovic suggests that 'the problem of reification was somehow in the air in the early 1920s'. Lukács's *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (1923) is listed in Blake's bibliography as '[by] far the most audacious and critical effort to place the theory of class consciousness in the forefront of history, to explain its mechanics, and to identify its relationships exactly': see Blake's *Elements of Marxian Economic Theory*, p.686.

narrative design of the text is, in Lukácsian terms, anti-reificatory. The novel cannot be reduced, however, to a theoretically 'pure' position; it also departs from the work of Lukács - who, in the 1930s, was theorising and promoting the official Soviet doctrine of socialist realism - and reveals, as I will show, certain affinities with the modernist politics and aesthetic embodied in Brechtian-style drama.

From the beginning, the narrative tactic of exposure to Sam's monologism heightens and dramatises the representation of patriarchal power. The ambiguously comic spectacle of Sam's 'plot-making' progressively alienates and constitutes as critical the gaze of its audience/reader; in addition, the narrative's changing focal-point of opposition - Henny is superseded by Louie - creates the scene of a collective, generational, and gendered injury and rebellion which is relayed, despite their differences, from stepmother to daughter. The idea of 'audience' is concretised in the narrative's immediate audience of children, who appear to soak up Sam's charisma, but who also elude his influence in ways which alert the reader to his narcissism. Sam always speaks to an audience; when unfolding his plans before the children, however, he is really rehearsing for a projected, imaginary future audience of sympathetic and likeminded patriots. Even his private thoughts and daydreams, where articulated in the novel, are never innocent, undirected or creative, but function as exercises in self-justification before possible interrogators. It is not just through the gradual realisation of other versions of the family plot that Sam works so hard to suppress, but also through the repetitive spectacle of his own performances that the grandiose political role he imagines for himself is characterised as confined to a shrinking and tawdry stage. Ultimately it is Sam's performance, rather than Henny's or Louie's, which constitutes the 'melodrama' that the daughter's text supersedes.³⁸ Thus the narrative

³⁸ See Louie's outburst following her staging of 'Tragos: Herpes Rom', in which she fears that she is merely melodramatic (410).

employs Sam's performance against him, suggesting the arbitrary and permeable nature of patriarchal familial and social structures, by constituting Pollitry itself as a spectacle to be superseded.

Three 'performers' - Henny, Sam and Louie - compete in the narrative for pre-eminent attention. Although concluding with the daughter's perspective, the narrative opens with a detailed observation of Henny, the mother trapped in domestic space. The third person narrative description of Henny cues reader identification, representing her with a sympathy that mitigates the scandal of her vitriolic performances. Henny also appears through an aura of nostalgia which inscribes her entrapment in the house, and in the past. Grotesquely beautiful, she is represented as an object already relegated to the past, prisoned in melancholy space rather than developing through time:

Cells are covered with the rhymes of the condemned, so was this house with Henny's life sentence, invisible but thick as woven fabric. Here she sat to play solitaire, the late sun shining on the cards and on the green and red squares of the linoleum. (45)

In the first chapter, with its resonant use of the preterite tense, Henny is re-constructed through a process of adult recollection which mediates and processes that which was viewed - in the past - from a child's vantage point: her habits, postures, attitudes, her particular world view, her tirades. At times, the narrative returns to this mood, sketching both parental actors in the manner of briefing notes:

...their father was the tables of the law, but their mother was natural law; Sam was household czar by divine right, but Henny was the czar's everlasting adversary, household anarchist by divine right. (70-71)

The narrative viewpoint thus supplies and supplements the child's view, achieving a pattern of triangulated perspectives exploratory of how children both perceive and remain separate from their warring parents:

The children tried to make head or tail of these fatal significant sentences, formed in the crucible of the dead past, and now come down on their heads, heavy, cold, dull. Why were these texts hurled at them from their parents' Olympus: Louie tried to piece the thing together; Ernie concluded that adults were irrational. (71)

Here the narrative represents childhood as susceptible to familial experience and as a site of resistances to and refusal of adult meanings. Children, in the novel, are the active ground of interpretation and construction of significance. This device underwrites the reconstructive opportunity of reading and interpretation offered to the reader. While relaying the words, thoughts and activities of Sam and Henny, narrative focalisation is always shifting, suggesting the constant availability of sites exterior to and critical of their interests.

With the children functioning as their audience and trying to make sense of their repetitively 'strange Punch and Judy show' (71), Sam and Henny are constituted as performers who are also - ultimately - objects of narrative gaze. Henny's tirades are consistently patterned and repetitive: she appears to be driven by discourse, at its mercy rather than in control. Fury speaks Henny as it speaks Suzanne Constant in *House of All Nations*, her most virulent attacks produced by Sam's virtuous mission to reproduce himself in and through his role as head of the family, or paterfamilias.³⁹ Like Adam Constant, Sam Pollit has noble ideals, grand plans and a sense of destiny. Otherwise, Adam and Sam are very different: Sam has no comprehension of his own part in the production of Henny's angry performances and he fits Butler's account of the inherent instability of the masculine subject, as theorised by Lacan. The fact that his originality - his 'seemingly self-grounded autonomy' - is radically dependent on the woman-as-other who reflects his power, ironically reveals this subjectivity as grounded on a 'failed model of reciprocity'.⁴⁰ Genuinely bewildered, Sam cannot fathom how he, a benevolent and loving man, could

³⁹ See Sheridan, following Arac, who uses this term in relation to Sam, in *Christina Stead*, p.28.

⁴⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.45.

have provoked Henny's rage. And yet it would seem that his performance of the virtuous father role produces her position and conditions her rage:

Henny was annoyed to see the tribe bow before herself in the role of virago; she had not been brought up to think that she would succeed because of a mean disposition. (94)

The phrasing here - 'the role of virago' - suggests the involuntary and scripted nature of Henny's performance. The antithetical term produced by and constitutive of patriarchal subjectivity, Henny rails against master, focusing with her slave's insight particularly on the gap between Sam's grandiose vision and mediocre earning power. Thus, through the 'false consciousness' of its privileged subjects, patriarchy reproduces its hierarchies and exacts its toll. Henny's bitter feelings of slavery are materially founded, her dependence on the male breadwinner (whether as daughter or wife) inevitably producing the disappointment of both her material and sexual expectations, the iron grip of her debts and the phenomenon of Sam's unchanging incomprehension. Henny's performance is bounded by, produced in and through her subordinate role. Perversely, she derives her only gleam of hope from continued conformity to the patriarchal system. Contemplating her wedding ring, she finds in it both the symbol of her slavery as well as her grim solace, meaning and destiny:

... to her alone this potent breadwinner owed his money, name, and fidelity, to her, his kitchenmaid and body servant. For a moment, after years of scamping, she felt the dread power of wifehood; they were locked in each other's grasp till the end - the end, a mouthful of sunless muckworms and grass roots stifling his blare of trumpets and her blasphemies against love. (173)

Theatrical terms mark the narrative representation of Henny. She is usually a background figure, off-stage in her room, whose absence from the world of Sam emphatically announces her criticism. When she does erupt into view, her performance, even when physically violent, retains a melodramatic quality which dramatises her

powerlessness. Her 'strangulation' of Louie (which Sam views in dumbshow through the window) and her 'beating' of Ernie are displays that evoke horror, but not readerly condemnation. Sam reads her fainting fits as merely an act, but Louie's persistent sympathy and support in these moments suggest a counter-reading of the performance of feminine hysteria.

The world of men and women, as Henny describes it, is theatrical too, a carnivalesque parade of strange creatures:⁴¹

... there were ... women thin as a rail and men fat as a pork barrel, and women with blouses so puffed out that she wanted to stick pins in, and men like coalheavers, and women like boiled owls and women who had fallen into a flour barrel ...

What a dreary stodgy world of adults the children saw when they went out! And what a moral, high-minded world their father saw! But for Henny there was a wonderful particular world, and when they went with her they saw it (46-7)

Henny's colourful grotesqueries enchant the child audience ebbing and flowing around her. As a number of critics have observed, Henny's rhetoric is ambiguously textured, laced with the vile and the abject, entailing a vividly particular imaging which cuts through social pretension.⁴² Henny's obscene language also suggests the déclassé experience of a marriage which has dragged her from a life of elegant leisure into the close-up 'physiological' and 'excremental' experience of motherhood, with all its "'darn muck of existence'".⁴³ The déclassé wife serves to illustrate one of feminism's interventions within Marxist thought, in the understanding that women's experience of class mobility, through their status as objects

⁴¹ Bakhtinian theories of polyphony and of the carnival have also been invoked to describe the excess produced by Henny's voice. See, for example, Julia Duffy, 'The Grain of the Voice in Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*', in *Antipodes* 4. 1 (1990): 48-51.

⁴² See, for example, Judith Kegan Gardiner, 'Male Narcissism, Capitalism and the Daughter of *The Man Who Loved Children*', in *Daughters and Fathers*, eds. Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). Gardiner writes that 'Sam's language is the dominant one, the voice of society ... Henny's muckslides under it without confronting it ...' (p.397)

⁴³ Jarrell also makes this point. See Jarrell's 'An Unread Book', introduction to *The Man Who Loved Children*, pp. 9-10.

of exchange within patriarchy, interrogates androcentric conceptualisation of class as the foundational axis of oppression.⁴⁴

The outlawed feminine principle, the disavowed matter upon which patriarchal signification relies, gives rise to Henny's oppositional discourse, which also functions as a fecund source of linguistic richness in the narrative. Like the treasures in her 'cave of Aladdin', Henny provides a seam of vivid language readily appropriated by the artist, and mined by the narrative. While not a 'revolutionary' subject, Henny nonetheless functions as political resource - 'a brackish well of hate to drink from ...' for the text's emergent revolutionary, Louie, '... to resist the depraved healthiness and idle jollity of the Pollit clan' (274-5). Deviant and depraved from the viewpoint of patriarchy, Henny's discourse reverses the normality, coherence and power of Sam's discourse. According to Wendy Woodward, Henny and Sam 'seem unable to find a common tongue, because they come from different classes':⁴⁵

He called a spade the predecessor of modern agriculture, she called it a muck dig: they had no words between them intelligible. (167)

Their difference, however, is the difference of an otherness produced in patriarchy, which upholds the principle of sameness of identity. As inverse of Pollitry, Henny's discourse expresses the structural mutuality of seemingly dichotomous terms. Blasphemous, vulgar and furious, erupting through the enclosed narcissism of Sam's sacred vision, the sole object of Henny's speech is to profane and to undermine Sam's claim to legitimacy as patriarch. Sam, by contrast, exerts all his discursive power to protect the children and himself from

⁴⁴ See Lynnette Finch, *The Classing Gaze: Sexuality, class and surveillance* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1993). Finch summarises the classic Marxist-feminist debate and points out that '[w]hile not all labourers are, or have ever been, male, Marxist sociology has assumed them to be, and women's location in class has been by proxy. Women become identified as being in the same class as their husbands or fathers' (p.11). See also 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), pp. 10-11.

⁴⁵ Wendy Woodward, 'Calling a Spade a Muck Dig: Discourse and Gender in Some Novels by Christina Stead,' in *Crisis and Creativity in the New Literatures in English*, eds. Geoffrey V. Davis and Hena Maes-Jelinek (Amsterdam- Atlanta: Rodopi, 1990), p.262.

what he sees as the negative and corrupting canker of Henny's perpetual discontent. '[L]ocked in each other's grasp till the end' (173), they are the polarised but interdependent terms of thesis and antithesis.

The third person narrative representation of Sam's performance, although distinguished from Henny's, corresponds with her view in significant ways. Determined by the specular principle of sameness, Sam is caught up by the magic of his own performances and can think of himself only in relation to a projected audience. His interiority is fended off through the narrative's presentation of his thoughts in monologic form, often in quotation marks. Conversational interaction (whether spoken or thought) is the major medium of Sam's subjectivity. Narrative attention, moreover, is focused on the effects of father-daughter conversations upon Louie rather than Sam. The absence of narrative representation of Sam's inner responses compounds the sense that his world is solipsistic, that he does not imaginatively penetrate the world view of another; although a naturalist, he is no novelist. After one intimate father-daughter 'talk', Sam typically concludes with an unwitting narcissism, provoking Louie with the words, 'You are myself; I know you cannot go astray':

'And learn to hold your shoulders straight,' he said, turning away from her and turning on the radio. 'You know Looloo, I'd like to get half an hour on a station and get direct contact with a broader audience: imagine talking to your fellow man from coast to coast!'

She went up to bed insulted again. (164)

Uninterrupted passages of Sam's voice, unmediated by authorial comment, achieve a dynamic and ironic relation to Sam, mimetic of the children's view. The struggle to understand Sam, to pierce his meaning and significance, is constituted as both the child's and the reader's struggle. The generation of an exterior, critical understanding is precisely facilitated through the sheer repetitiveness of Sam's discourse. His Artemus Ward rhetoric,

at first enchanting as he entices the children to participate in his tireless word gaming, becomes an object of curiosity and revulsion as he uses it to channel his prudish energies, to subvert, conspire and seduce:

'Whop you tee-heein' at, Bluebeak?' he asked.
 'You always know what I think!' she said and shouted with laughter.
 'You think Sam-the-Bold can't fathom your great thoughts?'
 'No.'
 'Then whop you larfin at poor Sam fower?'
 'You don't always know what I think.' She became even more hilarious.
 'Don't be a goat, Bluebeak.'
 She kept on laughing.
 'The way you think you're so clever,' she managed to get out between explosions.
 He frowned, 'Stop that hysterical tee-heeing, Looloo.' (366-7)

Sam's register shifts manipulatively within a single conversation according to need, from cajoling to intimidating, also indicating the work he must do to keep control over the drama. His reiterated monologues about utopian schemes for humanity - the 'Monoman' and 'Pangea' schemes - derive from an authoritarian and pseudo-Darwinian doctrine which underpins his obsessive, exclusionary politics. The didactic nature of these monologues, their 'public meeting' quality, jars with the audience of children to whom they are addressed. A repository of humanist commonplaces from the discourse of early utopian socialists of the nineteenth century, Sam's blueprints for a better world implicitly contrast with a Marxist model of class conflict. Advocating a utopian brand of communal organisation - and demonstrating both cultural imperialism and narcissism - Sam refuses to legitimate communism, with its program of revolutionary struggle against the dominant classes:

... and eventually the religion of all men will be one and the same - world peace, world love, world understanding, based on science and the fit education of even the meanest, most wretched. Not the communism of today, which is a political doctrine - not of hate, I wouldn't say that - but of war, class war, hatred sound - the doctrine of misguided but certainly well-meaning men, for I have met some of them and there are fine

fellows in it, though not fitted to be leaders, because not understanding human love - but a doctrine of confusion, let us say, and confusion is not based on science. (84)

According to Barbara Taylor, nineteenth-century Owenite utopian socialism, with its collective humanist vision, fostered the concerns and projects of early feminism. The subsequent historical advent of Marxism as the predominant influence upon radical left-wing British groups, prioritised class struggle over 'the Woman Question'.⁴⁶ The portrait of Sam Pollit, however, suggests that liberal versions of ideal community may also rely upon misogyny. While Marxist models of oppression have posed historic difficulties for feminism, *The Man Who Loved Children* represents the problems for women produced by the liberal-humanist discourses of utopian socialism, which were ill-equipped to recognise economic and structural causes of inequality.

Jonathan Arac reviews the critical relation of *The Man Who Loved Children* to the 'Popular Front left humanism' of the 1930s American cultural and political scene, through the former's discursive construction of a composite figure, 'Samuel Clemens Pollit', from two left-humanist literary idols, Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. Arac argues that through its critical redeployment of dominant male cultural resources, Stead's novel models the emancipatory role of an aesthetic strategy of 'use, revision and transformation'.⁴⁷ Applying the Brechtian/Benjaminian concept of 'refunctioning' to the study of Stead's fiction, Arac attributes to Stead's use of these cultural artefacts the design of a 'more conscious revisionary polemic'.⁴⁸ The most telling omission from the cultural resources Arac lists as 'refunctioned' by the narrative is Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. To include this text poses a potential problem for Arac's argument which enlists Stead's novel for the radical

⁴⁶ Barbara Taylor, 'The Lords of Creation', in *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge*, ed. Sneja Gunew (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 360-5. See also Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Virago, 1983), esp. pp. 285-7.

⁴⁷ Arac, 'The Struggle for Cultural Heritage', p.189.

⁴⁸ Arac, 'Struggle', p.175

left. It is possible, however, that Stead's recourse to her favourite childhood text also represents a deliberate recuperation of Nietzsche whose work, in the 1930s, had been hijacked by the Nazis, and that the novel revives and celebrates Nietzsche's critical, anti-bourgeois project.⁴⁹ There is also an argument for viewing the 'Nietzschean' aspects of Louie's performance as strategically-oriented towards revolutionary goals. Additionally, with daughter as protagonist, the novel dislocates the androcentrism of both Nietzsche and Marx.

Further, the theatrical context of the term 'refunctioning' enhances my own emphasis on the narrative's performances. Arac argues that there are 'different ways of using cultural objects' and that, politically, what is required is:

... abandoning 'literature' as an autonomous sphere of aesthetic contemplation, and ... instead thinking about 'media' as potentialities for mediation between the parties in particular cultural transactions. Dickens and Twain, of course, never distanced themselves from either journalism or the speaker's platform, and Sam Pollit's move onto the radio charts the next step.⁵⁰

Benjamin's study of Brechtian epic theatre, from which Arac derives 'refunctioning', describes how the revolutionary producer may engineer the apparatus of production so that, by continually interrupting the action, it can militate against 'creating an illusion among the audience'.⁵¹ The theatre of naturalism, says Benjamin, with its 'complex machineries, gigantic armies of stage extras and extra-refined stage effects' competes hopelessly in a losing battle against the mass media of film and radio.⁵² Producers no longer control the apparatus; they merely receive it and supply it. In bourgeois theatre, the audience is constituted as passive consumer of what is produced. In Brecht's epic theatre, however,

⁴⁹ Stead would not have been alone here: in Lévy's *Adventures on the Freedom Road*, a conversation with Michel Leiris suggests that the rehabilitation of Nietzsche by radical intellectuals such as Bataille, at this time, represented 'an attempt to claim him back from the fascists' (199).

⁵⁰ Arac, 'Struggle', p.187

⁵¹ Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Western Printing Services, 1973), p.99.

⁵² Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p.99.

through techniques of montage appropriated from film and radio, 'interruption' exposes the 'conditions of our life':

Epic theatre does not reproduce conditions; rather, it discloses, it uncovers them ... It brings the action to a standstill in mid-course and thereby compels the spectator to take up a position towards the action, and the actor to take up a position towards his part.⁵³

The 'naturalism' of Stead's own approach to delineation of character has more in common with naturalism as science rather than with naturalism as an aesthetic. As readings by Wilding and Reid have demonstrated,⁵⁴ the aesthetic of naturalism is inadequate to describe the narrative organisation of Stead's fiction; Benjamin's description of Brecht's politically-nuanced modernist aesthetic, on the other hand, and his notion of the 'interruption' which cues critical response, are applicable to the structure of *The Man Who Loved Children*.

The scene of the Pollit family's dramatisation of the myth of its origins serves also to illustrate the theatrical repetition which both installs and interrupts Pollitry,⁵⁵ revealing the apparatus of patriarchal reproduction to the reader. A Pollit family 'corroboree' takes place at Tohoga after Sam returns from Malaya, and several generations of Pollits ritually exhibit themselves as bombastic performers. It is indicative of the character of Stead's modernist project that their chosen milieu is that of popular rather than high art. This characterises the Pollits - in contrast to Louie - as mouthpieces of a clichéd demagoguery rather than as critical practitioners of 'art'. Sam admiringly declaims Aunt Jo's pretty but banal verse which provokes Louie's contemptuous resistance:

Sam was pleased, 'It's very nice, Looloo. Why don't you try to write something like that too, Looloo? All of us Pollits are a good hand at a

⁵³ Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p.100.

⁵⁴ See Wilding, 'Christina Stead's *The Puzzleheaded Girl*', p. 172; and Ian Reid, 'Form and Expectation in Christina Stead's Novellas,' in *An Introduction to Australian Literature*, ed. C.D.Narasimhaiah. (Brisbane: John Wiley and Sons, 1980): 48-58.

⁵⁵ This is also mentioned by Arac in 'Struggle', pp.174-5.

jingle: we can all turn out a rhyme. I think you could, and they might publish it too.' ...

... In a choking voice, Louie said quickly, 'Oh, I don't think I could write like that.' (273)

Sam and the family then entreat the paternal grandfather, Charles, to do his 'stunt', an imitation of Dickens, 'the act he had worked up himself from *Great Expectations*' (276). The narrative account of Charlie's performance is suspended as an offended Louie slips out to drink from the 'brackish well' of Henny's hate. The Dickensian performance is in full swing when the narrative, aligned with Louie, returns with her to watch:

The little ones sat round like idols in front of the throng or on their relatives' laps, with carved smiles on their faces and round, floating eyes. The old man, with nothing but a red bandanna, which he ordinarily used to brush off his snuff, became alternately Mr Wemmick and The Aged, Old Grandfather Charlie, through some trap door of the imagination, disappeared until the act was over; when he suddenly popped up again with a here-we-are-again, crowing and stumbling into his little buck-and-wing dance. (276)

The scene of the grandfather's magical but absurd act which bedazzles the children is a contextualising reminder, placement and parody of Sam's continuing performances. His conjuring tricks suggest the seductive veneer of patriarchy, an act supported by the machinery and contrivance of the stage. It performatively exercises ritualistic power to enchant the audience, to establish patriarchal 'reality', even as it is denaturalised before the text's implied critical reader. Old Charlie's act is followed by 'Cousin Sid doing his Yacht Club Boys, Mammy-Minstrel Act', Uncle Leonard's song, and a 'Snake dance', in which all the Pollits form a human chain in order to dance and weave around the garden and house. The jubilant human chain figures the snakelike movement through Eden of Sam's own recurrent dreams of snakes. The meaning of these snake dreams eludes Sam, troping, as they do, repressed guilt and desire. Louie later surfaces Sam's dreams in her 'Snake-Man' play, 'Tragos: Herpes Rom'.

Interruption of patriarchal performance extends beyond this scene to the overall narrative organisation of *The Man Who Loved Children*, fostering the critical and 'collaborative' stance of the reader.⁵⁶ Conventional plot-lines are interrupted by the novel's middle section, which is comprised of scenes external to the immediate domestic drama. Seeking formal, stylistic and thematic unities, earlier critics had found fault with such features, complaining of 'natural excess and lack of discrimination'.⁵⁷ Graham Burns argued that Sam's trip to Malaya was '... an over-abundantly detailed, independent episode that one could conceivably have done without'.⁵⁸ On the other hand, Burns conceded, there were certain advantages achieved by the dramatic arrangement of the narrative:

For one thing, nearly all [the novel's] major significances are contained, in a highly selective way, in only three days in the life of the Pollit household. These three days are densely recorded, and their events organized in such a way that dramatic crisis moments are clustered together almost as chain-reaction sequences ... so as to produce progressively more powerful and unbearable climaxes in the lives of the characters.⁵⁹

Although Burns, finding the middle section less compelling, privileges the 'three days' of drama within the Pollit household, his commentary usefully identifies the dramatic organisation of the novel, with its clustered and resonantly theatrical scenes.⁶⁰ If read according to a Brechtian model of drama, however, the middle section's interruption of the intense drama at Tohoga House works not only to enrich thematic elements but also to

⁵⁶ See Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*: 'This apparatus [model of production] will be the better, the more consumers it brings in contact with the production process - in short, the more readers or spectators it turns into collaborators' (p.98).

⁵⁷ See Jarrell's introduction (33-34); and Yelin, 'Fifty Years of Reading', which notes that Sam's trip to Malaya had been 'an episode generally ignored or regarded as an excrescence' (p. 487).

⁵⁸ Graham Burns, 'The Moral Design of *The Man Who Loved Children*', in *The Critical Review* 14 (1971), p.40.

⁵⁹ Burns, 'Moral Design', pp.39-40

⁶⁰ See also Margot Horne's 'A Family Portrait: Christina Stead and *The Man Who Loved Children*', in *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters* 11 (1981), in which a different division of the narrative is proposed, paralleling the structure of a classical five-act drama. Noting Louie's assertion that her play is only one-act, Horne proposes that, despite this, the novel adheres to the classic form of a drama in five acts. (pp. 218-219).

block the reader's threatened absorption into the Pollit drama, refusing easier consumption of the narrative.

A comparison of the first narrative sequence, at Tohoga, with the narrative's last sequence, at Spa House, reveals that the latter constitutes a detailed repetition and enlargement of the former. Through repetition, familiar routines become sinister. Some of these repetitions include the two scenes involving bananas; Sam's two great 'world-making' projects (house-painting at Tohoga and the marlin-stew at Spa House); Louie's ambiguous performance of the role of 'murderer' (the Kydd's cat and then Henny); and the two bitter scenes of conjugal union between Henny and Sam.⁶¹ As narrative strategy, repetition cues significances and invites interpretation, by Louie and by the reader; textual order is thus inscribed on the unreadable 'real' of family life. Constructing and reading this meaning, with the help of alternative cultural texts, is the indispensable step which enables Louie's rebellious articulation of what the other children feel, 'something they were dimly groping for' (315), and her consequent move to free herself, as artist and subject, from Sam's symbolic control.

Meanwhile, the middle phase of the narrative, comprising three excursions - Louie's visit to the Bakens, Sam's to Malaya, and Henny's visit to Monocacy - installs a symbolic interlude of nine months.⁶² This seeming digression provides for an elaboration of individual themes which interrupts the binary logic of Sam's and Henny's combat, as well as the hierarchically-ordered plot of conventional narrative. This middle movement thematises the three major characters, Henny, Louie and Sam, in terms of their interaction with worlds

⁶¹ Sam and Henny's night-long conflict is told from the perspective of Louie, who hears but cannot see the conjugal struggle (438).

⁶² In a paper given at the 1993 Christina Stead conference, Joan Kirkby indicated the significance of Henny's pregnancy in *The Man Who Loved Children* and suggested the possibility of tracing the missing discourse of the mother through a number of Stead's narratives: Joan Kirkby, 'The Call of the Mother: A Kristevan Reading of *The Man Who Loved Children*', paper presented at the 1993 Christina Stead Conference, hosted by English Department, Sydney University and the State Library of NSW. This paper is forthcoming in *Southerly*, 1997, as 'An Australian Eleusis: Mother/Daughter Rites in *The Man Who Loved Children*'.

both external and germane to Pollitry. Sam is represented in the Malaysian meridian, amidst a different 'otherness', his benignly patriarchal, imperialist tendency to fetishise and co-opt the otherness of Asia appearing as a logical extension of his narcissism at home with his children. His temporary disorientation in the tropics prefigures the swelling undercurrents of resistance in the family, and - in the dream-like heat - he suffers the emergence of the body, which he would deny. Henny's visit to Monocacy aligns her with decaying aristocracy - its stoic acceptance of the master-slave ethos - which nonetheless dialectically produces the illegitimate and carnivalesque voice of its lewd matriarch, Old Ellen Collyer:

'Let her stay, let her hear the dirt ... Well, I've got a head full of dirt. You could comb it out. These windy days I don't wash it for a sixmonth. Life's dirty, isn't it, Louie, eh? Don't you worry what they say to you, we're all dirty.' (206)

Old Ellen's grotesque, amoral decadence is a fertile source of rebellion which frames Henny's bitterness; their discourse combines to mock the sanitised pretensions of Sam's puritanical world view. Thirdly, Louie's visit to her dead mother's family at Harpers Ferry provides her with alternative texts, and significantly connects her with a triply inscribed lineage of resistance and revolutionary tradition.⁶³ This middle sequence culminates in the generational relay of patriarchy, in the death of David Collyer and the birth of Henny's seventh child, Charles. The legitimacy, however, of patriarchal rites of passage aimed at securing Sam's ascendancy is ironically undercut by Henny's adultery.⁶⁴

As mentioned earlier, the last phase of the narrative, from the move to Spa House onwards, repeats and enlarges vignettes from the first phase. After Louie's symbolic challenge to her father during the gift-giving on his return from Malaya, the narrative

⁶³ See Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, for the argument that the link with the Bakens situates Louie's struggle in a 'longer historical perspective' which challenges 'the eternal present tense constructed by Sam's scientific discourse' (pp. 34-5).

⁶⁴ See *The Man Who Loved Children*, Chapters 5-7, pp 177-325.

produces cumulative evidence not only of Louie's increasing creative command, but also of her critical penetration of the repetitive and reductive workings of Sam's 'plot'.⁶⁵ The narrative's view and Louie's view are increasingly conflated as Sam's objectifying discourse is relentlessly displayed. Louie's play - discussed in my next section - inaugurates a climaxing cluster of events, around Sam's fortieth birthday, which dramatically produce the downfall of the fictional world of Pollitry. Intensifying the narrative's critical frame and mediated by Louie's performances, these scenes include - in quick succession - the preparation for the visit of Miss Aiden, the story of Hawkins, Sam and Henny's bitter conjugal row, the marlin project and Louie's murder plot.

The events surrounding Miss Aiden's visit, on Sam's birthday, as Boone observes, cumulatively work to expose the 'rents' in the fabric of Sam's version of the world.⁶⁶ In discussing how Brechtian theatre functions to uncover 'the conditions of our life', Walter Benjamin's example revealingly corresponds to Stead's novel:

Picture to yourself a family row: the wife is just about to pick up a bronze statuette and hurl it at the daughter; the father is opening a window to call for help. At this moment a stranger enters. The process is interrupted; what becomes apparent in its place is the condition now exposed before the stranger's view: disturbed faces, open window, a devastated interior.⁶⁷

Benjamin's scenario, ironically, naturalises gendered stereotypes even as it purports to be critical about the patriarchal family; his example, however, of familial conflict frozen and interrupted by an outsider's view, suggests a particular rationale for the ordering of the 'last' events of *The Man Who Loved Children*. The visit of Miss Aiden - the stranger who intrudes on the scene of family disorder - entails the narrative's revelation of the extent of

⁶⁵ Boone's ambiguous usage, in 'Of Fathers', p. 516. As mentioned earlier, Boone also discusses the development and contestation of 'Sam's plot', though with a different emphasis on the reader's role. A similar point is made by Walker in 'Language, Art and Ideas in *The Man Who Loved Children*', although Walker does not discuss the relation between Louie's perspective and the narrative structure.

⁶⁶ Boone, in 'Of Fathers', refers to 'the potential rents in Sam's paternal narrative' (p. 523).

⁶⁷ Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 100.

the poverty into which, by gradual degrees, and without being aware of it, the Pollits have slipped. Ernie's shocked discovery, while he helps to lay the table for their guest, of the disappearance of all the precious things of his childhood, leads to his devastating realisation that his mother has not only sold off the family heirlooms to serve an increasing debt, but has pillaged his own small but careful savings and replaced them with fake coins. These revelations culminate in Miss Aiden's own cool appraisal of the socio-economic state of the Pollit household:

... they were a raggedy, rackety family, too big for their father's means, and living was hard with them ... 'Decayed gentility,' now thought Miss Aiden, 'and in what a state of decay!' (422)

Miss Aiden's is the first and only outsider's perspective on the Pollit family home to inform the narrative. To Miss Aiden's eye, Henny appears as 'a black-eyed, feverishly rouged hag with pepper-and-salt hair drawn back into a tight knot' while Sam deflatingly appears as 'a tall, yellow-haired, red-faced man, with sparkling, self-satisfied eyes, rather heavy cheeks and nose and teeth well met in a kind of religious mouth ... ' (421-2). Miss Aiden's observations of the family home, according to Boone, bring about a shock of reality.⁶⁸ In comparison with previous description which has emanated from viewpoints within the family, Miss Aiden's is an uncensored appraisal:

She was shown the bathroom, and found herself in a shanty with wooden walls and a roughly cemented floor. One end of this was filled by a cement tub about five feet long by three deep; but the cement had a surface as rough as a coconut cake; Miss Aiden thought of submitting her soft, sleek, spoiled flesh to its grey rasping ridges and, thinking it impossible, looked about for a rubber sheet - they must use something to cover the cement when bathing. (422)

⁶⁸ Boone, 'Of Fathers', p.526.

Miss Aiden's view not only prompts a new recognition of the Pollit's poverty but also functions as commentary on social positioning, as the narrative registers her conventionality, thus interposing a further critical perspective. Louie is quite oblivious (as is Sam) to the picture Miss Aiden sees. She does, however, detect and find fault with Miss Aiden's patronising attitude towards Sam. Louie's view is still organised according to Sam's: the father's fictions are not so readily demolished. The destabilising refusal entirely to privilege either Louie's or Miss Aiden's view, at this point, fosters the reader's critical judgement in a Brechtian sense.

That evening, distracting the children from the escalating parental battle downstairs, Louie recounts 'Hawkins, The North Wind', the story of a traveller who allows himself to be distracted from his quest, and his horse to be stripped from underneath him and stewed. Set as a metanarrative element in the midst of seemingly unconnected events, Louie's story provides their thematic connection, bleakly reiterating Miss Aiden's shattering perspective on the family and prefiguring subsequent events. The tale escalates narrative critique of Sam and fictionalises, in comic form, terrifying familial antagonism. Louie's role in representing this truth indicates her heightened powers of authorship. The story begins with a reflexive, childlike version of the narrative's frequent motif of the sun⁶⁹ - but this time setting rather than rising:

'... the sun was a flare burning up the trees and smoke and flames came from it. That was because it was cold. Now a warty horse came up through the hill, with a man on its rumpbones; the sun was so low and red, it looked - I don't know what.'

'My money box,' said Ernie: 'it's low and red.' (432)

Ernie's addition to Louie's story, investing it with the tragedy of his despoiled moneybox, makes the tale an act of collaboration. It functions as a strangely articulated commentary on

⁶⁹ Stewart points out that Sam is mockingly associated with the sun, along with other celestial imagery: 'Heaven and Hell in *The Man Who Loved Children*', p.122.

the apparently indecipherable text of the parents' conflict. For the duration of the tale, Sam and Henny are downstairs, 'going at it hammer and tongs ... but the children paid no attention to it' (432). Ambrose, the rider diverted from his journey by hunger and thirst, encounters the Peaslops, a couple whose 'blackness' is bizarrely emphasised, satirising Sam's idealised, exotic encounters in 'foreign parts' and invoking stories of voodoo, and suppressed narratives of the American slave community.⁷⁰ The piece by piece dismemberment of the horse for stew tropes consumption at a number of levels: the family's heedless dissipation of its resources, the cannibalistic consumption of the body of the mother, and the father's incestuous consumption of his children's lives. The story concludes enigmatically, with shack and occupants vanishing, leaving the bereft rider exposed to ghostly reminders of his horse and the desolate north wind which mockingly shrieks the mysterious name, 'Hawkins'. Although Louie's story does have a 'consolatory and mediating role',⁷¹ it is even more significant for its critical power; its absurd, child-like character masks the structured logic which corresponds to Louie's developing consciousness. The tale's enigmatic conclusion, blending seamlessly into the parental battle-cries below, blocks easy consumption of meaning. Enigma mirrors enigma as the story presented to the children mirrors the spectacle of antagonism between their parents, the rider's dismemberment of his horse paralleling the parents' dismemberment of their marriage over the legitimacy of Charles-Franklin. This fight repeats the marital struggle of the first section, but exceeds it in horror and intensity and initiates Louie's nightmare of her parents' mutual murder - a dream which subsequently forms the basis of her murder 'plot'.

⁷⁰ See Yelin, 'Fifty Years of Reading', for the argument that the novel's suppressed narrative/s of race remain to be discussed. A postcolonial critique would refer us not only to the story of the rebellion of black slaves at Harpers Ferry, but to the 'displaced narrative of Australian colonization on which all these other stories depend' (p.496).

⁷¹ Gribble, *Christina Stead*, pp.58-60.

'Hawkins, The North Wind' also allegorises the episode, some thirty pages later, of the boiling down for oil of the marlin. The fish is reduced to its constituent parts, and its permeating stench, like the ghostly horse, lingers about the house as a reminder, not only of Sam's obnoxious tyranny, but also of his project's ultimate futility and waste. The description of the captured marlin, tethered while still alive to a stake in the creek, represents Henny as exhausted victim and consumed, discarded female body:

Its great eyes were sunken; it looked exhausted from its battle for life;
there was a gaping wound in its deepest part. (466)

The boiling of the marlin brings the narrative to a climactic point, drawing together in macabre, ritual form the inexorable, psychotically repetitive dynamics of the family. While the marlin's body is reduced to a foul, liquid stew, Henny, symbolically, plays out her life's game. After years of playing, the cards in her perpetual game of patience come out all at once. She has been consumed - as woman and as textual object - entirely. This card game prefigures the termination of her life, and signals the narrative's finale. Although Henny occupies the house and Sam the washhouse and night garden, it is Sam who presides over the grotesque stew, displacing the old 'black' woman in Louie's story, as well as Angela Kydd, whose witchlike stew attracted Louie's interest early in the novel. The pre-enlightenment, primitive magic of the witches' brew invokes the 'feminine' as that which both underwrites and subverts Sam's masculine, rational, scientific endeavour, while fatal forces simmering away within the family are also 'brought to the boil'. Anderson remarks that the communal feast, based on classical and European literary tradition, is often grotesque and parodic in Stead's fictional dinner-parties, at which 'the characters, so to speak, eat one another rather than the food'.⁷² The marlin stew, although not mentioned by

⁷² Anderson, 'Christina Stead's Unforgettable Dinner-Parties', p.29.

Anderson, also belongs in Stead's collection of culinary travesties. The stew is not destined to meet the needs of the hungry, but to fulfil Sam's desire for dominance over nature - an avowedly misogynist desire:

What Sam-the-Bold cooks up ain't a angry stew like womenfolks.
Sam-the Bold cooks what air useful to man en horse en motorbike:
the essential oil!' (474)

Sam's disavowal of the domestic meal cooked by women also represents a denial of necessity and a refusal to supply the family's most basic needs: his projects both supplant the domestic and refuse to recognise economic and physical necessities. His denial of the domestic economy, coupled with his inevitable reliance on it for the renewal of his labour, recalls a similar failure of recognition of this economy in Marx's *Capital*, a blindness which conditions Marxism's historic failure adequately to theorise gendered oppression. Undoubtedly, Sam's sense of greatness and destiny, his calling, is premised on a failure to recognise his own material reality, his inconsequential position as an unemployed, minor bureaucrat. If he experiences doubt, he immediately diverts it through determined rationalisation:

Wasn't his life empty, always amusing the kids, thinking up projects for them, teaching them to be good men and women when they ran off upon their own bents and a woman was always twisting them away from him?
I musn't think that, thought Sam, shaking himself ... (474-5)

Sam's repressions are achieved through an escalating, interior rhetoric of destiny. He envisages a messianic future role, moving outwards from the 'little community' of his family, to local area projects, towards a vaguely defined national- or species-destiny:

Man is the symbol of fertility, and increase is his job. (475)

Sam's Darwinian theory is ironically co-opted by Biblical rhetoric, which hijacks science in the service of reproduction of capitalist patriarchy. With narcissistic blindness, he fails to recognise the origins of his own text:

It seemed to Sam that nature was licking at his feet like a slave, like a woman, that he had read of somewhere, that washed the feet of the man she loved and dried them with her hair. (475)

Unwittingly scripted by Biblical source texts, Sam casts himself in the role of Christ figure to nature's Magdelene.⁷³ Sam's rationality, his idea of himself as secular scientist, is thus performed by a disavowed belief structure of Biblical narrative and patriarchal Christianity, which also objectifies and exploits nature as 'feminine'. In the promotion of masculine control over the feminine, Sam teaches his small duplicate, Little Sam, self-control and denial of bodily experience. Coerced by his father but repelled by the business of shoveling the fish remains into the offal heap, Little Sam shows signs of resistance. Provoked by Henny's intervention on the child's behalf, Sam makes an example of Little Sam, pouring the stinking liquid over him and reproducing the lessons of his own youth:

I made myself stronger, when a lad, because I recognized my weakness, by boiling the flesh off carcasses for their skeletons and articulating the skeletons - also taught myself anatomy. (490)

Sam's dictum that the naturalist must develop a strong stomach accords with the masculinist quest for knowledge of and domination over the world and the flesh, the overcoming of the nausea and abhorrence produced by the flesh, by matter, by the feminine. Abjection, in Julia Kristeva's terms, is the reminder of this primal and continuing task of

⁷³ Walker also notes this image, in 'Language, Art and Ideas', p.17.

repression which is constitutive of the (masculine) speaking subject; similarly, Sam's naturalist project thrusts out, even as it is founded on, the feminine as object.⁷⁴

As a culminating scene, the marlin-boiling is a repetition - a performance scripted by prior, disavowed and structuring discourses - which serves to classify the classifier, to interrupt and subvert Sam's dominant discourse, even as he goes about the daily business of installing its power. Thus the magic of Pollitry is exposed as a sham. Patriarchy, through a narrative strategy of repetition and interruption, is 'caught in the act' of its self reproduction, calling into profound question both its necessity and its inevitability. What remains to be discussed is how, and with what effect, the forces of rebellion cluster around the figure of Louie, and how her shame and her performance augment her status as the text's revolutionary subject.

3. Shame and performance: Louie as revolutionary figure

Against him, the intuitions of stepmother and stepdaughter came together and procreated, began to put on carnality, feel blood and form bone, and a heart and brain were coming to the offspring. This creature that was forming against the gay-hearted, generous, eloquent, goodfellow was bristly, foul, a hyena, hater of woman the house-jailed and child-chained against the keycarrier, childnamer, and riot-haver. (72)

With a certain melodramatic irony, the image of the 'foul', hidden animal invokes apocalyptic monsters of counter-revolutionary discourse against liberal-minded Sam.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ I explore the workings of abjection in some detail in chapter seven. Joan Kirkby has also discussed the importance of abjection in *The Man Who Loved Children*, although primarily in terms of Louie and Henny rather than Sam, in her paper, 'The Call of the Mother'.

⁷⁵ See Greg Kucich, 'Ironie Apocalypse in Romanticism and the French Revolution', in *Revolution and English Romanticism: Politics and Rhetoric*, eds. Keith Hanley and Raman Selden (Hertfordshire and New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf/St Martin's Press, 1990), p.76. Kucich suggests that apocalyptic rhetoric depicted the French Revolution as either the father devouring the redemptive son, or in reverse, as redemptive son destroying the people and usurping the father's authority.

Echoing Burkean fears of anarchistic forces unleashed, the narrative theatrically conjures the spectacle of a monstrous terror, procreated by collective female antagonism to patriarchal law. In Sam's eyes, this female progeny is perverse, the creature of an illegitimate challenge to order. The terms of the imagined threat, however, are dialectically transformed into the utopian image of Louie not as monster, but as elegant, mobile, marine creature, metaphorically excessive of the bounds of patriarchal law. Thus the fearful rhetoric of counter-revolution is emptied of value. In becoming the hero, however, the danger is that Louie is merely performed by a prior script, thus inverting and perpetuating patriarchal oppression. If the narrative does make use of the Marxist revolutionary subject, how does it address the problem of individual agency?

The structure represented by the relation between Henny and Sam conforms to a psycho-analytic narrative of prohibition and repression. Henny's perpetual projection of rage against the vile world is symptomatic of repression and guilt. Locked into the slave position, able to perceive, as the master cannot, the objective, material conditions of her oppression, Henny is trapped in the logic of an eternal duality. She reserves her most abject terminology for Louie and, projecting the terms of her own enslavement in the familial reproductive machine, interprets Louie's developing sexuality as monstrous, as a mirroring performance of her own subjection to patriarchy. In front of Louie, Henny screams hysterically at Sam about the 'great big overgrown wretch with her lolloping breasts ... the streams of blood that [pour] from her fat belly' (422). This virulently articulated horror of Louie's body uncovers the repressed in Sam's sexually sanitised universe. Louie's and Sam's reactions to Henny's outburst are in suggestive contrast:

Sam had come into the house when Henny began her screams and stood there goggling, while Louie, going paler, stood petrified with horror and pride, looking reproachfully at her father and expecting him to scold Henny. But Sam goggled like some insignificant wretch crept in secretly on the Eleusinian mysteries, frightened but licking his lips. (442)

Sam's guilty fascination with evidence of his daughter's sexualised body reveals his own vulnerability to the abject, feminine power suppressed in the construction and maintenance of his masculinity. Though also caught within the drama, Louie nonetheless resists the narrative of sexual guilt within which both Henry and Sam are constructed. Louie's petrified 'horror' connotes shame rather than guilt, being accompanied by the counterpart of the shame-affect, pride. Louie's shame (and pride) are attached to an emergent identity which dislocates her position in relation to the Oedipal narrative. Sedgwick argues for the open-endedness of the experience of shame, its potential for a multiplicity of ways of becoming, because of its attachment to identity:

Part of the interest of shame is that it is an affect that delineates identity - but delineates it without defining it or giving it content. Shame, as opposed to guilt, is a bad feeling that does not attach to what one does, but to what one is.⁷⁶

Shame is produced in and through performance of differential identity, producing growth and transformation. To read the surface of the body - the blush - as socially signifying, rather than to posit interior depths, is to embed matter and sensuality in the theoretical and political work of social transformation. The blush of shame, contagiously suffusing the skin, is felt at the moment of performance. Via the skin, it directs the performer inwards, but also outwards. Performance produces the pride and embarrassment of self-display. Guilt, however - as in Sam's case - remains an inhibitive force, disciplining and policing the boundaries of subjectivity.

A notable absence of guilt attends Louie's 'murder' of the Kydds' cat.⁷⁷ This strangely surrealistic scene which, as Jennifer Gribble writes, is reminiscent of a fairy tale

⁷⁶ Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p.12.

⁷⁷ One occasion on which Louie does feel guilt is when she unthinkingly turns on her younger sister, Evie, and bellows at her. Evie shrinks back in fear and Louie resolves 'never to let Evie see her anger again' (87). Louie's resolution is not evidence of 'repression', but evidence of refusal to participate in and perpetuate the repressive force of that anger, which would participate in the hierarchical adult world.

or fable in which Louie 'discovers her role as resourceful and clever creature, prefigur[es] and illuminat[es] her decision to kill her parents'.⁷⁸ Even more than this is implied in the narrative context of this scene, which serves to interrupt one of Sam's narcissistic orations. With practical force, Louie's murder of the cat counters Sam's fantasy during 'a fatty, dreamy hour' (105):

'Hear in the Buzzum of my famerly I am enjoyin' myself at peas with awl mankind and the wiminfolks likewise,' Sam quoted dreamily. (107)

Unlike the sons, to whom Sam directs his vain plea to 'stand together and look after the house for me, not only the female hanni-miles mentioned and aforesaid, but the real honest-to-goodness hanni-miles ... ', the daughter reveals her resourcefulness when, at Angela Kydd's request, she traps and kills the cat. Louie's emotions during this murder range from 'fear of the mad beast', to 'a wicked lust to drown it', to 'a sort of sickness'. Finally she is merely annoyed to have been exploited in such an unpleasant task, and disappointed not to have obtained the imagined reward of cake. Her pragmatism, and her lack of conventional sentiment, dramatises Louie's status as the narrative's revolutionary figure. Meanwhile, in the orchard, a fight erupts between Ernie and Saul, egged on by Sam who, with typical conventionality, avails his sons of an object lesson in masculinity. Louie's purposeful murder of the cat transgresses sentimental fictions about childhood, ironically framing Sam's socially legitimatised brutality towards the boys. This scene also provides a context for a subsequent conversation between Sam and Louie about the morality of murder. The presentation of Sam's morality, which on the one hand allows him to argue a form of cultural relativism - 'murder depends upon the meridian, so to speak: the thousand and one tables of morality' (163) - and on the other hand to recoil from its consequences - 'murder

⁷⁸ Gribble, *Christina Stead*, p.57.

was a really serious thing, because it meant hate, and hate produced all the wickedness of the world' (162) - effects a Nietzschean exposure of the self-serving morality of the bourgeoisie.⁷⁹

'Murder might be beautiful, a self-sacrifice, a sacrifice of someone near and dear, for the good of others - I can conceive of such a thing, Looloo! The extinction of one life, when many are threatened, or when future generations might suffer - wouldn't you, even you, think that a fine thing?' (163)

Sam's argument merely allows him to recapitulate one of his favourite schemes for humanity: the promotion of eugenics and the use of lethal chambers to dispose of the unfit. Mounting a Marxist critique of poststructuralism which nonetheless acknowledges its power in describing the dissolution of the bourgeois subject, Fredric Jameson points out that ethics, rather than metaphysics, is the target of Nietzsche's attack on the binary of good and evil - ethics being 'the ideological vehicle and the legitimation of concrete structures of power and domination' - and that Nietzsche's solution to this problem is to 'discredit and to transcend the ethical binary'.⁸⁰ At the historic juncture of Nazism's crude appropriation of Nietzschean discourse, Stead's novel reappropriates Nietzsche's critique of morality, revealing that it is middle-class morality itself which leads to the gas-chamber. Sam's self-serving morality underpins his discourse on eugenics, evidence of a master/slave mentality which, in the guise of nobility, is constitutively blind to its exploitations. As the plot unfolds, moreover, Louie dialectically appropriates Sam's idealised argument for her own radical practice, moving beyond the limits of conventional morality, exposing its arbitrary rather than universal nature. Sam's discourse thus provides Louie with the impure resources

⁷⁹ Compare with Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, intro. Michael Tanner (1973; London: Penguin Books, 1990). Nietzsche writes of 'the morality of mediocrity' which 'can never admit what it is and what it wants' (p. 202).

⁸⁰ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, pp. 114-5.

out of which to fashion her counter-performance. Her own murder script is ironically underwritten by Sam's relative morality, and characterised by similarly split motives:

She never once doubted that the right thing to do was to use cyanide tomorrow morning, or that she must liberate the children: it fell to her, no one else would do it or understand the causes as she did. Then she would at once be free herself. (501)

Of course it is clear that Louie's sense of righteousness is both somewhat deluded and necessary to her resolve. In its actual performance, however, Louie's script - as I show in the concluding section - undergoes unexpected revision which problematises the agency and freedom she anticipates.

How Sam sees Louie contrasts with how she sees herself. While Sam is the socially legitimated 'performer' who assumes the right to control the family drama, Louie's desire is to occupy that symbolic role beyond the family, within a wider community:

She was glowing with pleasure and imagining a harlequinade of scenes in which she, Louie, was acting, declaiming (but not, not like the Pollits, nor like comic-opera Auntie Bonnie), to a vast, shadowy audience stretching away into an opera house as large as the world (86)

Where Sam's grandiose destiny remains a fantasy exercised over those under his control, Louie's adolescent fantasy, an offspring of Sam's, rejects its local parameters. Not yet in control of her destiny, Louie is at first prey to Sam's wicked humour, which can make her 'giggle and bob about helplessly like a jelly' (100). She is made to perform against her will, unable to resist his seductive performances. Increasingly, however, she contests his power, not only in terms of control of discourse and narrative but also in terms of performance and audience, bringing the language of the body into play. This is a crucial distinction: through the text's theatricality, bodies as well as words are enmeshed in the signifying process. The interconnection of signs and matter - the materiality of signs -

establishes that a Marxist understanding of practice as 'human sensuous activity' - aided by a Nietzschean rhetoric - closely approximates the form of Louie's rebellion.⁸¹

As Sam's surveillance of Louie's habits increases, along with his exhortations and unsolicited intimacies, their confrontation sharpens. Resorting to the children who share the site of oppression, Louie recites to them, trying 'to get them to act with her':

Sometimes, Sam would creep in, unexpected, in this verdant theatre at the orchard's end, and would stand quietly at the back, rather surprised at his daughter. On these occasions only did a kind of humility creep into him; and Louie, seeing it, would strike at him verbally, or flash him a look which said, plainer than speaking, 'I am triumphant, I am king.' (351)

Earlier in the narrative, Louie learns aphorisms by heart, her melodramatic rehearsal of these sayings evoking individual, masculine courage and destiny, and inscribing the genre of emergence, or *Bildungsroman*.⁸² Susan Midalia argues that the *Bildungsroman* has traditionally relied upon an 'ideology of selfhood' which privileges individual agency, 'the self as potentially self-determining, as capable of choice and change, as constitutive as well as constituted.'⁸³ The potential political conservatism of this genre, however, is averted through the melodramatic quality of Louie's performance, which excessively gestures to its prior derivations. Louie nonetheless brazenly reserves to herself the right of critical interpretation. She resists Sam's interpretations of her authors, and generates, directs and performs her own personal understandings. Her well-known Nietzschean appropriations are both prophetic and performative, mobilising Sam's repressive attitude to the female body:

⁸¹ See Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p.107.

⁸² For discussion of this novel as a *bildungsroman*, see Rudolf Bader, 'Christina Stead and the *Bildungsroman*', in *World Literature Written In English* 23. 1 (Winter 1984), pp. 31-39.

⁸³ Susan Midalia, 'The Contemporary Female *Bildungsroman*: Gender, Genre and the Politics of Optimism,' in *Westerly* (Autumn 1996), p.89. See also Elizabeth Abel et al. *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983) for the argument that in the study of this traditionally male genre, gender 'has not been assimilated as a pertinent category, despite the fact that the sex of the protagonist modifies every aspect of a particular *Bildungsroman*: its narrative structure, its implied psychology, its representation of social pressures' (p.5).

'But I know something else: if it is chaos, it will not be chaos forever: "out of chaos ye shall give birth to a dancing star!" Nietzsche said that.'
 Sam blushed, and he said gently, 'You mean, out of confusion we will bring order.'
 'No,' cried Louie, 'no, no; you understand nothing.' (314-5)

The image of birth, offensive to masculine propriety, effects a sudden wound, relayed in Sam's corresponding blush, signalling the intersubjectivity of sudden recognition. Thus Louie increasingly seizes symbolic dominance over Sam through performance, and through its attendant affect, shame.

After returning from Malaya, Sam presents Louie with 'a mandarin gown of celestial blue' and Louie reciprocates with her own re-inscription and performance of an 'oriental' text. Louie's 'poem after Confucius' ritualistically asserts her claim to equivalent, if not superior, social power; her performance and Sam's angry reaction reveal the politics of gift-giving.⁸⁴

A yellow plum was given me and in return a topaz fair I gave,
 No mere return for courtesy but that our friendship might outlast the
 grave. (290)

Belittling her display, Sam enlists the Pollit audience against Louie, his ungenerous vision of Louie as 'both ludicrous and lachrymose' fuelling his vengeful desire 'to strike her across the face to obliterate that execrably bizarre tragi-comic mask which disgraced him'. Sam's non-recognition of Louie's attempted reciprocity in the text induces the shame accompanying her performance, through which she forges a transformative identity. Sedgwick refers to models of infant psychology to describe the identity-forming role of the shame-humiliation circuit:

⁸⁴ This episode illustrates some of the principles underlying systems of social reciprocity as analysed by Pierre Bourdieu in *The Logic of Practice*, pp. 98-111.

Blazons of shame, the 'fallen face' with eyes down and head averted - and to a lesser extent, the blush - are semaphors of trouble and at the same time of a desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge.

But in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity ... shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating.⁸⁵

Rowley's biography reads the fiction for evidence of David Stead's preference for beautiful women and his humiliation of his daughter, Christina, on the basis of her appearance. Rowley suggests that an unresolved father/daughter complex, stemming from the importance to Stead of her father's negative assessment of her appearance, was the productive source of a creative fury. *The Man Who Loved Children*, considered as autobiography, appears to support such an interpretation. To understand shame and performance, however, as enabling of a differential identity, renders problematic the coherence of Rowley's psychological reading. Siding with the father's narrative, Rowley's reading promotes a pathological view of Stead's character - the artist as a creative oddity, the artist as monster. Further, Rowley's account fails to question its own suppressive relation to the possible cultural significations of 'monstrosity'; monstrosity as display, as exhibition, as mirroring and de-forming apparently fixed or natural cultural categories.⁸⁶ It risks ignoring or devaluing the politically potent nexus explored in Stead's fiction between 'aberrant' display and personal transformation. Louie's writing specifically celebrates and appropriates monstrosity:

'There was a wedding at the circus! The hermaphrodite married the bearded, the giant the dwarf, the fat lady the hungry wonder, the clown in bags the lady in tights, the flea the elephant, the tiger a lily, the tent a Pole, the wind a Russian, the Hairless Mexican a hair tonic, the barfly a pony' (347)

⁸⁵ Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity', p.5.

⁸⁶ I owe this point in part to a seminar - and ensuing discussion - presented by Jennifer Gribble at Sydney University, on 20 July 1993, in which she prefaced her discussion of *The Man Who Loved Children* by taking Rowley's biography to task on the issue of its representation of the writer as monster.

This carnivalesque story, which Louie writes at school, re-presents as fiction the discursive resources provided particularly by Henny's world view. Both Henny's grotesque vision of the world and Sam's noble vision of the utopian community are constitutive and enabling of Louie's performance.

Sam's repressed Oedipal guilt and his non-recognition of Louie are also targeted in her production of the play, 'Tragos: Herpes Rom'. Driven, as Sheridan suggests, by repressed desire to penetrate his daughter's sexual secrets, Sam demonstrates the phallogocentric and narcissistic structure of hegemonic masculinity in his irrational rage about a scandalous local newspaper report of incest between father and daughter, misreading it, in his identification with the father, as media persecution of an innocent man.⁸⁷ Louie potently combines this media story with the three books Sam had given her, including Shelley's *Cenci*, scripting her own version of the family drama. Performing the Oedipal drama of incest taboo, Louie's play, according to Sheridan:

... could be said to enact the nullification of female subjectivity demanded by the feminine resolution of the Oedipus complex: the conversion of her active sexual desire to a passive aim, and her submission to patriarchal law.⁸⁸

'Tragos: Herpes Rom', Louie's birthday gift to Sam and the strategic and illuminating centrepiece of her battle against his dominion, represents the flowering of her art. It is also a culminating 'performance'. Amy Richlin reasons that Louie's play deploys classical languages and literature in a project common to a number of twentieth century postcolonial women writers, whose work gestures towards the history of British colonisation:

All these women and writers, looking for a language in which to speak, seize on the classical tongues as languages both powerful and arcane; for all of them, the new language thus formed both fails, because arcane,

⁸⁷ Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, p. 45.

⁸⁸ Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, p. 48.

and triumphs, by their very act of appropriation. Like a box in the shape of what it contains, Louie's language instances what it signifies.⁸⁹

Richlin elaborates the nexus between the linguistic resources deployed in Louie's play and their symbolic and political resonances. Richlin's illuminating comment that 'Louie's language instances what it signifies' can also be adduced as a sign of the play's performativity. In both its theme and in the theatrical context of its performance, which throws down a challenge to the father, the performative 'box' of Louie's play effectively repeats the Oedipal drama of guilt and repression, clearing a space for strategic resignification. Not only does Louie re-read and return Sam's gift of *The Cenci*, but she co-opts the children as performers. Situated in a long tradition of subversive political theatre, akin to Hamlet's play-within-a-play which displays the scene of regicide and incest before the usurping king himself, Louie's play dares Sam to recognise himself. The play's implied verbal structure - 'I dare you' - invokes a perlocutionary force in Austin's sense.⁹⁰ Like the travelling players in *Hamlet*, the other children are unaware of the full meaning of their performance, but chorus-like respond excitedly to the air of rebellion. Richlin notes that the precise point of escalation of the father-daughter confrontation coincides with Louie's personal intervention as performing protagonist:

... *timer este rom y este heinid pe ibid fill*. ... 'Fear to be a father and to be hated by your daughter' ...⁹¹

Louie's intervention sharpens the reflexive, political edge of the performance, the coded language of the play putting the drama into effect as a mediation between playwright and audience. The insertion of English stage directions within the coded dialogue reminds the

⁸⁹ Amy Richlin, 'Striking Back at the (Roman) Empire: The Artist as Classicist in Stead and Others', in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 11. 2 (Fall 1992), p.283.

⁹⁰ See Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, in which, distinguishing between two kinds of utterances, Austin identifies: '... the illocutionary act which has a certain *force* in saying something; the perlocutionary act which is *the achieving of certain effects* by saying something' (p. 120) [Austin's italics].

⁹¹ Richlin, 'Striking Back', p.281.

reader that, for the duration of the performance, non-verbal apprehension of meaning is privileged: bodies and voices rather than words carry the significance. The code prevents immediate penetration of meaning, demonstrating the playwright's refusal to surrender the authorial right of elaboration and interpretation. Initial obscurity works to defer the ridicule it must inevitably attract, both warding off and producing, therefore, the shame of performance. In command of her own meaning, Louie locks her immediate audience, Sam, out of the meaning-making process so that he must struggle simply to grasp the obvious. Thus, in a gesture imitative of the coloniser, Louie asserts symbolic superiority. The language of the play performs the imperialistic potential of the cultural sign, its ability to exclude and hierarchise, and to constitute subjectivity. In establishing and deploying the sign as arbitrary rather than natural and inevitable, the play simultaneously rehearses a potential for resignification of the hegemonic Oedipal narrative. This is what disorients Sam who relies on a belief in the self-evident and straightforward connection between the signifier and the signified:

After this striking scene in double-dutch, Sam, looking with pale annoyance on Louie, asked what the devil was the use of writing in Choctaw. What language was it? Why couldn't it be in English?

'Did Euripides write in English?' asked Louie with insolence, but at the same time she placed the translation in front of her father, and he was able to follow the *Tragedy of the Snake-Man, or Father*. (408)

Despite the proffered translation, however, Sam still fails to comprehend Louie's narrative. His rejection of her effort of self articulation escalates the cycle of shame and humiliation, but Louie's desire to go on performing, despite her uncomprehending audience, is perversely stimulated:

Louie began to squirm, and, unconsciously holding out one of her hands to him, she cried, 'I am so miserable and poor and rotten and so vile and melodramatic, I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. I can't bear the daily misery. I can't bear the horror of everyday life.' (410)

These words, echoing her growing kinship with Henny, suggest that the staging of her 'melodramatic' script has been insufficient to produce the change she desires. The next step for Louie is to script the end of the 'family drama'.

4. Closure and escape: elusive or illusory freedom of the subject?

'I suppose, if I had any decency,' said Louie slowly, 'I'd think of my little sister and brothers, but there's Auntie Bonnie. No, there are plenty of them. Well - good-bye.' (522)

As events cluster together and the parental struggle intensifies, Louie is impelled to script the end of the family drama, resolving to become not just protagonist, but author of events. Sheridan comments, drawing on Irigaray, that Louie proceeds to thwart her own play's fatalistic resolution of the Oedipal narrative by embarking on the plan of killing her parents, and further, that Louie's aim is not only to script the end of the futile marital battle destroying them all, but to shortcircuit 'the endless repetition of desire and denial in the familial triangle'.⁹² Why is it, then, that Louie's script, when enacted, diverges from its planned outcome, so that she ends up not by killing Sam, but instead stands by somewhat helplessly as Henny drinks knowingly from the poisoned cup? Is Louie thus rescued from entrapping guilt, or from unsavoury complicity in repetitive violence? Critics have varied in response to the playing out of Louie's murder plan. For Gardiner, Louie's act of matricide is necessary because the stepmother represents what the daughter, in her quest, must not become - that is, a slave to masculinist reproductive order.⁹³ Sheridan disagrees with

⁹² Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, p.51.

⁹³ See Gardiner, *Rhys, Stead, Lessing*, p.142; and also Gardiner's more recent essay, 'Male Narcissism', p.396.

Gardiner's focus on lines of female identification in the text, choosing instead to emphasise the Oedipal character of the father-daughter struggle.

It may well be problematic to seek to ascribe too logical a coherence to the evasive climax of *The Man Who Loved Children*, a moment which seems deliberately elusive of interpretation, and which seems to position itself beyond the reach of ready consumption. As the drama which Louie has carefully prepared and scripted unfolds, it assumes its own dynamic which plays with and teases reader expectation, defying critical control. All three players in the drama - Sam, Louie and Henny - perform in character, but simultaneously gesture to the limits of narrative in their renewed responses to unpredictable, unfolding events. Louie, as her performance begins, is suffused by the bodily blazon of shame, 'a scarlet blush that covered her entire body'. Gripped at first by fear, Louie passes into speechlessness (503-4). Wordlessly gesturing to Henny, indicating the poisoned cup, Louie offers her at least a choice in the scripting of her life. Henny's words to the last express her divided affinities and the split self-knowing of slavery:

'... I can't stand it any more - she's not to blame, she's got guts, she was going to do it - she's not to blame, if she were to go stark staring mad - your daughter is out of her mind -' Sam looked at Henny with hatred. 'All right,' said Henny, 'damn you all!' (504-5)

And in this moment of narrative transformation, Louie's authorship vanishes:

[Henny] snatched the cup and drank it off quickly, a look of horror filling her as if she would have stopped herself but could not arrest the motion. She made a few steps with the cup, while Sam said, very puzzled, 'What is this? What is going on?' Louie tried to explain but could only shake her head: even in her mind she could not think of any words. (505)

For Sam, who looks on in puzzlement, access to immediate signification is once again blocked, as it had been during the performance of 'Tragos: Herpes Rom'. For Louie, however, and for the reader, the spectacle of Henny's death both invites interpretation and

remains in excess of interpretive activity. As Sheridan emphasises, the subsequent disagreement between Louie and Sam over the meaning of this scene, the reinstatement of Sam's power and reputation, and the evidence that Sam will never change, combine finally to convince Louie of the futility of remaining. Sam continues to misread and to misinterpret, trapped in a reified consciousness, unable and unwilling to perceive beyond his own objectifying categories. Refusing to credit Louie's interpretation of the doll, which her younger brother Ernie has hung as a suicidal effigy of himself, Sam says:

'That only goes to show how far out of your senses you are, Looloo, that in a little joke like that you see melodrama. I am going to take you away from all this foolery, this drama and poetry and nonsense they are putting into your head.' (520)

So at the end, Louie simply leaves home, to walk around the world. Evaluating the significance of the novel's remarkable utopian ending, Sheridan suggests that Louie somehow emerges, momentarily, beyond gender into 'an ungendered space', as figured in her transformed body and new vision:⁹⁴

She smiled, felt light as a dolphin undulating through the waves, one of those beautiful, large, sleek marine mammals that plunged and wallowed, with their clever eyes. (522)

This image, inaugurating Louie's 'walk around the world', is the transformative moment which serves as the text's decisive interruption to patriarchy. It also fuses Marxist and Nietzschean discourses in a proleptic trope of overdetermination.⁹⁵ The image condenses many layers: it looks to the past, evoking texts of classical antiquity in which the female subject eludes rape through a divinely-assisted metamorphosis, and it also activates the beautiful and intelligent body posited in Nietzschean discourse. Most importantly, the

⁹⁴ Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, p.52.

⁹⁵ Some of these ideas were refined as a result of questions from the audience, on presentation of a paper from this chapter at the 1996 ASAL Conference in Brisbane. I would particularly like to acknowledge the helpful points raised by Kate Watts, Susan Sheridan and Cath Ellis.

dolphin image activates, displaces and transforms the narrative's previous images of Louie's body as monstrous, representing the transformed third term of dialectical materialism, the negation of negation, the synthesis which is more than merely an inversion of the old order, and which it supersedes. Louie embodies the moment of radical historical change in thoroughly Marxist terms. She is the moment of revolutionary rupture.

The brief optimism of the interwar years - which now seems naive - is figured in this conclusion. Citing Louis Aragon on the class betrayal required of the revolutionary intellectual, Walter Benjamin describes the task of the writer as one of 'adapting [the production] apparatus to the ends of the proletarian revolution.'⁹⁶ Louie's departure from home at the conclusion of the narrative echoes the involvement of artists and intellectuals in the revolutionary movement. Ejecting herself from her original social and class position, Louie had not only to leave behind the provincial world of family, but to shrug off guilt and remorse. Such a decision to leave is marked by clarity of mind and crisp, determined action. There could be no looking back. In *Capital*, Marx writes:

The realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper ... The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it, though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis.⁹⁷

Louie's departure repeats the terms of the Marxist revolutionary narrative which remains problematic for feminists in its residual hierarchisation of freedom over necessity, leisure over work and mind over matter. Stead's use of this narrative enables Louie's struggle to be read as representative of a collective struggle. For contemporary feminists, this deployment is what makes reading the novel both productive and problematic, and it is Marxism, as

⁹⁶ Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p.102.

⁹⁷ Marx, *Capital*, Vol 3, pp.958-9.

discussed in my next chapter, that colludes problematically in the construction of counter-revolutionary female subjects in Stead's postwar fiction.

To Western intellectuals in the 1930s, especially those who, like Stead, were steeped in radical discourses, the impetus of the avantgarde was as much attended by the erotic energy of *The Communist Manifesto* as by *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. *The Man Who Loved Children* co-opts the critical and transformative energies of both books. It is certainly Marxist in spirit, insofar as it exercises a dialectical critique of the patriarchal economy, and performs the workings of dialectical materialism. Louie's individual supersession of that economy, however, is aided by a Nietzschean performance, scripting a mobile, progressive subjectivity. While emancipation is only ever provisionally achieved in Stead's fiction, its lyrical representation also functions as prophecy. Momentarily - in the end of the novel - an unrepresentable post-revolutionary future is prefigured. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx talks about the inadequacy of language to represent an as yet unrealised future:

There the phrase went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the phrase.⁹⁸

The absence of any definitive representation of a post-revolutionary future in Marx's work is mirrored in Stead's novels, too. *The Man Who Loved Children* suggests but does not dwell upon such a place or state of being. In her struggle to emerge from the patriarchal family, Louie first proclaims and then performs her literary kinship with Nietzsche's figure of Zarathustra. Not only does this strategy further the text's interrogation of complacent middle-class morality, but Nietzschean discourse becomes a vital resource for the scripting of Louie's increasingly sophisticated and effective counter performances. So while the momentum of revolutionary change is initiated through performativity, and through the

⁹⁸ From Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, cited in Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Eagleton comments: 'What is in question here is the whole concept of a representational aesthetics ... The content of socialist revolution ... is excessive of all form, out in advance of its own rhetoric' (214).

text's destabilisation of normative, patriarchal values, beyond that it is the body of the performer that speaks to possible alternative futures, alternative subjects.