Chapter 5.

Females who can wreck the revolution:[1]

the American years and the postwar era.

> *The Fiends*: (delirious): It's selling! It's a seller. It's everywhere. If they haven't read it, they're going to read it because EVERYONE KNOWS IT'S A SELLER. It's selling, it's SELLING, it's SELLING ...
> *Minstrel*: You ins-s-sult my s-s-soul![2]

> Flaubert could not say: 'Fréderic, *c'est moi.*' By the very act of writing a story which could have been his, he shows that this story of a failure could not be the story of the person who wrote it.[3]

> '...I know the seamy and the glossy side, I know what the market wants. I've given a lot of time and thought to the marketing of ideas, and I'm sure I can pick a winner, and weed out the wheat from the chaff.'[4]

Conflicting pressures on the serious-minded writer - on the one hand to conform to commodifying market forces and on the other to seek a discerning audience - are recurringly canvassed in Stead's authorial production, especially from the late 1940s onwards. According to Geering, Stead's satiric playlet, 'Did it Sell? (or, Was it Hell)', was written in 1947, following the publication of *Letty Fox: Her Luck*, just before Stead and Blake left America for Europe. As Geering observes, this short script, probably intended for private

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[1] This subtitle, as mentioned previously, revises a phrase from Kristeva's *Powers of Horror:* the specific chapter is entitled 'Those Females Who Can Wreck the Infinite'. Kristeva's work on 'abjection' is discussed in the study of *I'm Dying Laughing*.

[2] Christina Stead, 'A Short Play: Did it Sell? (or, Was it Hell)', in *Southerly* 44 (1984), p. 108. Later published in Stead's *Ocean of Story* (1985; Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Australia, 1986), pp. 521-6.

[3] Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 26.

[4] Christina Stead, *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)* (1976; London: Virago, 1979), p. 207.

circulation amongst friends, pungently expresses Stead's determination not to make money from writing 'best sellers'.[5] The dialogue between fiends and minstrel represents the polarised interests of marketplace forces and autonomous artist, the minstrel figure (traditionally male) reviving Stead's favoured motif of the wanderer or Nietzschean free spirit.[6] In later interviews, Stead would reiterate that she cared for neither 'fame' nor 'money', that public recognition of her work meant nothing to her and that her writing was 'simply an outflow' - that she wrote 'naturally'.[7]

Stead's continuing formulation of an authorial persona situated at a distance from the mass-marketplace is as justified by political value as it is by morality and ethics. As Robert Fagan reasons, Stead's 'indifference to fame is not false modesty but is a part of her radical political and psychological world view'.[8] Indeed, in the context of modernist understandings of mass culture, a Marxist perspective required such distancing; as suggested in chapter one which referred to Bourdieu's analysis of Flaubert, Stead's distanced position is the necessary condition of her narratives' relentless drive towards an objectively 'truthful' or realistic social critique. Engaging in this chapter with the chronology and development of Stead's fiction from the American satires to the fiction of the Cold War, I trace the direction of Stead's treatment of subjects in the social web, as well as her performance of an authorial persona consistent not only with Marxist political values but with the artist's desire for recognition. Stead's Marxist critique of commodification is, moreover, implicitly challenged by the imperative to engage in the marketplace in quest of both economic and symbolic reward.

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[5] See Geering's note on the play in *Southerly* 1 (1984), p. 104.

[6] For a discussion of this motif in Stead's work, see Hazel Rowley, 'Christina Stead: The Voyage to Cythera', in *Span* 26 (April 1988): 33-45.

[7] Stead interviewed by Susan Molloy, 'Christina Stead debunks some myths: she is neither bitter nor a recluse', in *Sydney Morning Herald* (20 Jan 1983), p. 8.

[8] Robert Fagan, 'Christina Stead', in *Partisan Review* 46. 2 (1979), p. 262.

Attention to 'gender' in Stead's authorial production of the 1940s and 1950s further illuminates these issues. Whereas, during the American years, Stead seemingly represents both men and women evenhandedly, this trend alters after 1947. While the increasingly cosmopolitan and satirical American fiction augments Stead's articulation and production of a politically-oriented narrative aesthetic, the problem of 'femininity', and its relation to 'revolution', remains unresolved, only to emerge later, in the postwar fiction, as the ambiguous locus of Stead's analyses of the failure of revolution. Stead's assumptions about and representations of mass culture are the gendered signs of an underlying historic correspondence between Marxist and modernist discourses, as I argue in chapters six and seven in relation to the novels *Cotters' England* and *I'm Dying Laughing*. Stead's postwar fiction relays the historic relation, theorised by Andreas Huyssen, between 'mass culture' and 'woman'.[9] The 'gendering of mass culture as feminine',[10] although primarily relevant to the historical avant-garde, lingers in Stead's postwar representations of would-be women writers. These female protagonists range from wreckers of revolution, like Nellie Cotter and Emily Howard, to political reactionaries, like Eleanor Herbert (in the third epigraph), who unashamedly markets her knowledge of 'the seamy and the glossy side', addressing her mediocre talents to the task of winnowing out the creative efforts of fellow writers.

In discussing the treatment of the revolutionary subject in Stead's authorial production in the postwar era, it is important to review Stead's engagement with Marxist discourse and political activity, as well as the fiction and non-fiction she produced during her nine year stay in the United States. Following *The Man Who Loved Children* and including the cluster of satires of American life, *Letty Fox: Her Luck, A Little Tea, A Little Chat* and *The*

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[9] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 44-62.
[10] Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, p. 62.

People with the Dogs, the American fiction forms a distinctive period in Stead's work.[11] In this period, Stead's experience of communist and left-wing literary circles is refracted in and interrogated by her fiction. Evidence of Stead's connection with politically active circles in the 1940s in the United States has been documented in biographical accounts by Anita Segerberg, Chris Williams and Hazel Rowley, who discuss Stead's response to American radicalism as well as to faction-fighting in radical organisations. Except for short periods in New Jersey and Hollywood, Stead and Blake lived mainly in New York, from 1937 to 1946. During their preliminary visit to the States in 1935, and under the wing of their friend from the 1935 Paris Congress, American writer and activist, Mike Gold, Stead and Blake established contact with the editorial staff of *New Masses*, a journal of the American Communist Party, to which Stead contributed a number of book reviews between 1935 and 1942.[12] Lasting friendships with a group of left-wing literary writers were forged in this period: apart from Mike Gold, Joe Freeman and Isidor Schneider, significant long term correspondents of Stead's included Ettore and Jessie Rella and Stanley and Leda Burnshaw.[13] According to Williams, Stead and Blake maintained a distance from Greenwich village, but Segerberg points out that at this time Stead felt the need of support from literary friends, uncharacteristically complaining to Nettie Palmer of the envious silences of non-literary, middle-class friends.[14] Although Stead 'did not move actively in literary circles in New York, any more than she had done in Europe',[15] these left-wing literary connections, in

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[11] See Margaret Harris, 'Christina Stead's HumanComedy: The American Sequence', in *World Literature Written in English* 32. 1 (1992), p. 42. Yelin also suggests that this is period is central to Stead's work, 'both chronologically and thematically': see Louise Yelin, 'Sexual Politics and Female Heroism in the Novels of Christina Stead', in *Faith of a (Woman) Writer*, eds. Alice Kessler-Harris and William McBrien (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 192.

[12] Williams, *Christina Stead*, p. 125.

[13] As listed by Anita Segerberg, 'Christina Stead in New York', in *Antipodes: A North American Journal of Australian Literature* 3. 1 (1989), p. 17.

[14] Williams, *Christina Stead*, pp. 123-4; and Segerberg, 'Christina Stead in New York', p. 16.

[15] Quote from Segerberg, 'Christina Stead in New York', p. 16.

particular with Stanley Burnshaw, were to be indispensable in reviving Stead's career and reputation in the mid sixties.

As also noted by Williams and Rowley, and as witnessed in her letter of support to Ettore Rella in 1942, Stead was highly critical of *New Masses'* editorial policies, provincial politics and bureaucratic maneuvering.[16] It had become a source of irritation to Stead that a prevailing climate of party orthodoxy had led to what was, it seemed, an aesthetically impoverished view of literature. Opposing true artistic talent to a dull, bureaucratic mindedness, Stead expressed the view that the natural detachment of true artists and intellectuals from petty game-playing, their indifference to power politics, had resulted in their gradual exclusion from the journal's review pages:

> The [*New Masses*] is merely the radical version of the Guggenheim: if you are dull, settled, have a position and don't need their help, they are willing to do something for you: but if you have talent, or are a genius, God forbid, you won't get inside the door ... This is without bitterness: for every nation has the *New Masses* it deserves, and we can't expect a small party to have the insight of a national party (as in the Soviet Union), for here they are absorbed with politics and nothing but politics: everything else - art, letters, and botany seem to the politicos, naturally in place, a mere waste of time. The politically minded poets and writers, who are invariably those with least talent ... what I mean is the *bureaucratic* poets and writers ... swarm into all the places and the rest who don't give a hoot do not get their works in.[17]

Beyond disillusionment with narrow politics, this strongly-worded letter of support to a fellow writer emphasises Stead's privileging of the autonomy and independence of the artist. Stead's criticism of bureaucratic orthodoxy within a radical organisation near to hand constructs her position as that of critical insider and scourge of its 'pompous and conceited ... priest[s] of revolution'.[18] Similarly, Blake's talent as an outspoken intellectual,

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[16] To Ettore Rella (16 April 1942), in *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, p. 97 ff; Rowley, *Christina Stead*, pp. 194-197; and Williams, *Christina Stead*, p. 152 ff.
[17] To Rella, *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, pp. 97-8.
[18] To Rella, *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, p. 99.

economist and Stalinist had led on the one hand to his frequent engagement as a speaker and lecturer at American Communist Party functions, and on the other to his near expulsion, because of this 'very dedication and wide knowledge of Marxism', from the American Party which he had recently joined: 'Bill would not be corrected by some ignorant branch head,' comments Williams, based on Stanley Burnshaw's recollection.[19]

The critical stance adopted by Stead in relation to party-political orthodoxies is implied in her formulation and articulation, in the 1940s, of what might be described as a critical-realist narrative aesthetic. Although later endowed with some respectability by the theoretical labour of Georg Lukács,[20] 'socialist realism' (or 'Zhdanovism', as it was known under Stalin's regime) dictated conventional and formulaic (as opposed to experimental, critical or high modernist) treatment of revolutionary themes in fiction: these included the depiction of the labours of revolutionary characters representative of the collective aspirations of the working class, and favoured the partisan ending which positively envisaged class struggle. As Rowley notes, the 1930s and 1940s in left-wing literary circles saw the search for the great proletarian novel.[21] Rowley cites Stead's comment to Burnshaw, that 'party politics cramps a poetic mind', to support the view that Stead's written contributions on behalf of the relation between good writing and socialism were 'more a matter of peer pressure than personal conviction'.[22] Although Stead made use of documentary realism in *House of All Nations*, it is true that her fiction is fundamentally incompatible with the narrow strictures of 'socialist realism', drawing rather upon Romantic and modernist perspectives of the artist as critic of conventional discourses. It is easy,

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[19] Williams, *Christina Stead*, p. 164.

[20] See Georg Lukács, in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1963), who valorises the revolutionary potential of realism over modernism, and who distinguishes between critical realism and socialist realism, advocating the latter (despite Stalinist prescription) as the most promising form for revolutionary literature, especiallly if emergentfrom critical realism: see especially pp. 133-5.

[21] See *Proletarian Literature in the United States: An Anthology*, eds. Granville Hicks, Michael Gold, Isidor Schneider, Joseph North, Paul Peters and Alan Calmer; intro. by Joseph Freeman (1935; London, Martin Lawrence, n.d.). See Rowley's biography for a more detailed discussion of 'proletarian literature': pp.195-8.

[22] Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 197.

however, to misconstrue Stead's attitude to the relation between art and socialism on the basis of her critical disposition. In her 1942 review of Louis Aragon's novel, *The Century Was Young*, and her rejoinder to Hannah Josephson's subsequent criticism, Stead repudiated the happy, uplifting ending and scoffed at mere subservience to 'political correctness':

> We hunger for the happy ending and the consoling 'Credo' of the dying, but we would laugh at the device in a religious novel and we cannot take that comfort to ourselves in a political novel.[23]

As noted in chapter three, Stead was an admirer of Louis Aragon, iconic hero of the literary left in France in the 1930s. Aragon surely represented the male revolutionary writer - to Stead, he was a key figure at the Paris Writers Congress.[24] Elsewhere in her review, Stead harks back to the thirties to contextualise Aragon's work:

> One could detail the writers and artists Aragon must have known in the thirties who dabbled in politics and even took sides in revolt and civil war, but after this momentary revelation retired into futility and despair. These great experiences were not enough to refire the souls of the Mercadiers. Some of these must have been his friends; he cannot have been blind to their utter failure. They were not saved. Then why his meaner Pierre?[25]

Stead's speculations, in pursuit of a rationale for the unflinching realism that she detects in Aragon's novel, are of interest for what they imply about her experiences of the 1930s, even as she recalls them nearly a decade later, and in another continent. She emphasises the significance - for her generation, for her political circle - of those times of revolutionary ardour, of the call to take sides. Stead intimates, here, her attitude to those artists from the 1930s who are no longer 'fellow travellers' and who have deviated from the revolutionary journey; this was a subject about which she would write with increasing intensity through the late 1940s and into the 1950s. Clearly, Stead also distances herself from, even while she

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[23] Christina Stead and Hannah Josephson, 'Pro and Con on Aragon', in *New Masses* (17 February 1942), p. 24.
[24] Aragon's speech is alluded to in *I'm Dying Laughing*, p. 32.
[25] 'Pro and Con on Aragon', p. 24.

is intrigued by, those who merely 'dabbled' and who later succumbed to 'futility and despair'.

As others have noted,[26] Stead rejects the consolations of the 'happy ending' in a reading of Aragon's novel which displays her own aesthetic views and provides an insight into her attitudes towards the artist's political commitment. Resisting 'socialist realism', Stead advocates a rounded, coherent, realist view of character, even where this appears pessimistic. It would be inaccurate to infer from Stead's privileging of critical realism a devaluing of political commitment. On the contrary, her argument is impelled by a characteristically political perspective:

> Men, races, suns have died. It is not futile to chronicle them, and the wherefore. Out of their deaths we extract the science of living; but not out of deathbed lights. I fancy socialist writers are of sterner stuff than those who only let their characters steeplechase through trouble in order to come out first in the happy ending of the moral uplift.[27]

Stead's argument forcefully returns to the rhetoric of her 1935 congress report which depicted the writer as social vivisectionist, adding to it the requirement of the writer's fortitude in prosecuting a 'sterner', more rigorous, socialist practice.[28] As her last major contribution to *New Masses*, this review indicates the political formulation of Stead's narrative aesthetic, evincing her direct and deliberate engagement in the debate about 'proletarian' versus 'revolutionary literature'. Articulating these views in the context of *New Masses*, Stead's argument is firmly premised on an understanding of shared socialist goals: for Rowley, no doubt, this context could equally be construed as evidence of 'peer pressure'. Later in life, Stead was certainly reticent on the subject of whether and how Marxism influenced her work, and tended to avoid speaking of her narratives in political terms. The

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[26] See, for example, Williams, *Christina Stead*, p. 150.
[27] 'Pro and Con on Aragon', p. 24.
[28] See Stead, 'The Writers Take Sides', as discussed in chapter two.

articulation of such an aesthetic, out of its time and place, would perhaps not have been so readily grasped by a non-partisan audience. That Stead valued in fiction a serious critique which could nonetheless resist political disillusionment, or abandonment of socialist principles, is clear from her reading of Aragon's novel.

As well as demonstrating consistency with such a critical-realist narrative aesthetic, Stead's American fiction, in keenly satirical mode, continues to explore discursively and ideologically constructed subjects within social settings, achieving an almost dialectical novel-by-novel pattern of development.[29] *For Love Alone*, published in 1945 and in many ways resembling its immediate successor, *Letty Fox: Her Luck*,[30] develops the epic themes of *The Man Who Loved Children*. Having evolved from the earliest of Stead's drafts and jottings,[31] *For Love Alone* is generically distinct from the social satires. But in common with *Letty Fox: Her Luck* and *The Puzzleheaded Girl*, *For Love Alone* does explore the socially constructed roles of modern women, in ways which respond to and challenge contemporary views. These novels are singularly progressive explorations, for their time, of modern women negotiating their way through a changed and changing world. Narratives with male protagonists - such as *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* and *The People with the Dogs* - consider the puzzle of male desire in ways that parallel, complement and comment upon the representation of the female protagonists in, for example, *Letty Fox: Her Luck* and *For Love Alone*.

Mapping the twin gestation of *For Love Alone* and *Letty Fox: Her Luck*, Segerberg notes the intertwining of early drafts, a factor which suggests that the female protagonists,

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[29] For a 'dialectical' view of the pattern of production of Stead's novels see Gina Mercer, 'Christina Stead - A Radical Author: Patterns of Thesis and Antithesis', *Span* XXI (1985), especially pp. 137-8.

[30] See Anita Segerberg, 'A Fiction of Sisters: Christina Stead's *Letty Fox* and *For Love Alone*', in *Australian Literary Studies* 14. 1 (May 1989), in which Segerberg asserts that '[p]arts of *Letty Fox* must have been written at the same time as *For Love Alone* ... [and that] ... Stead originally planned to write a book about two sisters, Teresa and Letitia' (p. 15).

[31] See research on early manuscripts by Anita Segerberg, in 'Getting Started: The Emergence of Christina Stead's Early Fiction', in *Australian Literary Studies* 13. 2 (October 1987), pp. 124-5.

Letty Fox and Teresa Hawkins, can be compared as 'revolutionary' figures in a dialectical relationship. Segerberg emphasises that, in both fictions, 'marriage' constitutes the object of the female quest,[32] a move which seems at once 'conventional' and 'critical'. Deployment of these themes in the fictions, however, is very different: where Teresa's story casts in epic mode the emergence of the revolutionary subject, Letty's story, although narrated in the first person, paradoxically entails a relatively impersonal, panoramic social critique. Teresa's battle for love is also a battle for personal honour and creative autonomy: the doctrinaire, sadistic and provincial world of Jonathan Crow must be shed for the cosmopolitan, 'international' spirit of James Quick. Through shame and the ordeals of the quest, Teresa's union with her 'true companion' is in excess of a conventional 'middle-class' notion of marriage, promoting rather than hindering the continuation of Teresa's questing desire, as in her affair with Harry Girton. The name 'Girton' represents an intersection of ideals which, in loving him, Teresa also negotiates: most significantly, the ideal of egalitarian access of the young, provincial and obscure female writer to the high bastion of English culture (symbolised in 'Girton' college) and the collective vision of the masses in struggle, projected through the romantic figure of the male revolutionary. In the Girton affair, which is consciously elected, and then set aside in the renewal of her commitment to Quick, Teresa symbolically masters these scripts, as does Stead in the writing of her narrative. Importantly, however, the narrative nowhere questions what is presumed as 'natural': the ideal of heterosexual coupledom. The major object of narrative critique is conventional, middle-class morality and its restrictions on the development of an emancipated, autonomous self.

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[32] Segerberg, 'A Fiction of Sisters', pp. 17-19.

In her quest for a suitable marital partner, however, and unlike her 'fictional sister', Teresa Hawkins, Letty Fox pragmatically accepts social convention. Although Letty's quest is just as protracted as Teresa's, her journey assumes the antithetical shape of the generous exercise of a healthy promiscuity (which also functions to aid and abet patriarchy) rather than taking the artist's path of suffering, privation and self-restraint. Unlike Teresa whose quest is characterised by the artist's desire for distinction, Letty's quest is determined by a desire to merge into the common life. Whereas the narrative ultimately privileges Teresa's view in *For Love Alone* (although not without tinges of irony), Letty's first person narration, in picaresque mode, deflects close identification, producing the stasis which allows her to function as both mocking observer and as object of narrative irony. Admirably pragmatic, energetic and direct, Letty also typifies the superficially modern; a social and discursive type, her astute grasp of the politics of the game finally permits her conformity to its rules rather than her contest of them. Sheridan argues that Letty's contradictions, her 'cheerful acceptance of capitalist commodification', indicate the text's disruption of any 'established hierarchy of truths, weighing them all equally whether the language in which they materialize is banal or profound'.[33] Barbara Giles's early review of the novel in *New Masses*, registering bafflement about the positive attributes with which Letty is endowed (intellect, humour, a socialist background), fails to comprehend the dialectical representation of Letty as a contradictory subject. Noting that Letty is 'only a play radical' presented 'without the contrast of one genuine Communist', Giles's socialist realist expectations blind her to Stead's criticism of conformist types within the movement, such as left journalists jockeying for position in *New Masses*. The *New Masses* review of *Letty Fox: Her Luck* thus indirectly

[33] Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, p. 98.

confirms Stead's critical stance towards opportunism and bureaucratic wrangling within the American Communist party.[34]

In a gentler mood, *The People with the Dogs* revisits middle-class American family life, the informing context of *The Man Who Loved Children*, but this time engages with the quest for love in terms of a male protagonist. Edward Massine, as discussed in chapter one, is an affectionately rendered, unawakened man, in both personal and political realms. He does not, however, refuse the stirring of sleeping ardour, in such scenes as the May Day parade and Vera Sarine's farewell concert, but acts upon it, and the narrative leaves him at the beginning of a new life which, while not radical, promises personal integrity and satisfaction. Though he is by no means a 'revolutionary subject' in the sense of a Louisa or Teresa, Edward finally assumes his place in the family portrait as one among many, linked to but also separate from the fruitful community which, like the vine, still embraces him. This works as a prosaic and ambivalent recasting of earlier female characters' revolutionary ardour. Neither as ironic as Letty's narrative, nor an epic like Teresa's, Edward's story offers a gently satiric investigation of social mores and of the subject in the social web.

The economy of modern sexuality is observed in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* with more intensity, but this protagonist is the last, and in some ways most frenzied, of Stead's male monologists. A predatory capitalist, an incorrigible rogue, womaniser and seducer whose restless desires are chronicled with relentless detail, Robbie Grant performs his 'masculinity' with a serial zeal that hints at its 'performativity'. As Virginia Blain argues, the narrative (reproducing Grant's own compulsive seriality) produces excess through its repetitions,

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[34] See Barbara Giles, 'Destination: Nowhere: Letty Fox grabs at life in a world of greed and frustration. Christina Stead's new novel', in *New Masses* (10 December 1946), pp. 23-24.

providing opportunities for the reader's textual pleasure in decadence.[35] Generally negative reviews at the time of publication were compounded by later critical discussion, relegating *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*, with others of this period, to a minor status. Only recently, and with the benefit of poststructuralist understandings of textuality, have critics begun to focus on these books in their own right.[36] Like the capitalists in *House of All Nations*, Grant is in perpetual flight from the spectre of the angry masses, of coming revolution, and of death itself. Death, revolution and apocalypse are conflated in the avenging angel, Azrael, who materialises as Hilbertson, Grant's long anticipated nemesis: in the last pages, the ominous figure of Hilbertson, standing at the threshold, theatrically short-circuits Grant's seemingly unstoppable desire. In view of Peter Brooks's analysis of narrative desire, *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* invites consideration of the narrative process as a dynamic 'temporal unfolding', invested with erotic energies which perpetually constitute and displace unnameable desire.[37] Its relentless pursuit of this inchoate desire and its excessive emphasis on Grant's frantic consumption also signal the direction and pace of narratives to come, such as *I'm Dying Laughing* - the earliest notes for the latter text dating from 1946.[38]

A text which resists chronological positioning - being both difficult to date and offering a compressed version of the thematic and aesthetic trajectory of Stead's fiction - is *The Puzzleheaded Girl*. Although not published until 1967, it is likely that at least some material from its collection of novellas was drafted during Stead's stay in the States, while other sections were drafted later, in the 1950s and early 1960s.[39] Stead both fractured and

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[35] Virginia Blain, 'A Little Tea, A Little Chat: Decadent Pleasures and the Pleasure of Decadence', in *Southerly* 53. 4 (December 1993): 'the text becomes the embodiment of Grant himself as it chronicles in minute detail his moral decay' (p.22); it also encourages the reader's '"secret productivity" ... of a meaning that runs against the grain of the text's satiric design, tipping the balance past naturalism and toward the paradigm of decadence' (28).

[36] As well as Blain's reading, see Elizabeth Perkins, 'Learning to Recognize Wicked People: Christina Stead's *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*' and 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. 13-25 and pp. 2-12 respectively.

[37] See Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), esp. pp. 21-2, 34 and 47-8.

[38] See Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 329.

[39] Early versions of 'The Right-Angled Creek' probably date from 1938. See Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 439.

dialectically enhanced the unity of the novellas by including among them her earlier story, 'The Right-Angled Creek.[40] 'The Puzzleheaded Girl', 'The Dianas' and 'Girl from the Beach' are thematically parallel, foregrounding the disoriented sexuality of young American women, negotiating gender relations in a politically conservative postwar era. As Diana figures, the girls' chaste autonomy shifts from constituting evidence of their psychological dysfunction to their socially subversive potential. In 'The Dianas', Lydia's inability to separate herself from her mother erodes her capacity to function successfully in heterosexual coupledom, whereas, in 'Girl from the Beach', Linda's similarly stunted psychology emblematises the politics of postwar American imperialism and the lost idealism of the left. Her repetitive theft and fetishisation of hotel creamers (metonymically signifying mother's milk) duplicates George's displacements, his fascination with restless and manipulative young women. In the title story, 'The Puzzleheaded Girl', the virginal and elusive Honor Lawrence, who - as Judith Gardiner puts it - produces narrative puzzlement through the undecidability of her status as pathological liar or representative female victim, figures 'female hysteria as a form of political rebellion'.[41] Suggesting that authorial diagnosis of Honor's problems is implied in the story's demystification of her fabrications, Gardiner focuses on what remains in excess of Stead's 'puzzle dispelling pronouncements' - Honor's escape from the truth/falsehood dichotomy with her self-invention and the story's subtle complications about identity and recognition. Positing a break between the story's textuality and the authorial narrative (which is projected through its narrative frame and through metanarrative, biographical texts), Gardiner concludes that both 'author' and 'protagonist' are caught in ideology:

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[40] See letter to Stanley Burnshaw (22 July 1965), in *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, in which Stead writes about the need to break up 'the tightness of a single idea controlling the book' (p. 249). Also cited in Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 439. See also 'Christina Stead in Washington Square', Raskin interview, p. 71.

[41] Gardiner, '"Caught but not caught"', p. 28.

> The strength of the story lies in the political precariousness of the problem of women, the ideology of women, for Marxists and for society at large. It explores the complexity of alienation within capitalism for women both within and outside of the family. Stead and *The Puzzleheaded Girl* are 'caught but not caught' in the contradictions of women and ideology.[42]

Gardiner draws on tensions between poststructuralist emphases on textuality and a materialist focus on the production of text, its orientation towards worldly meaning. While an authorial perspective is registered, it is offset by consideration of contradictory textual elements, sometimes read in resistance to that perspective. This mode of reading productively co-ordinates the contradictions generated by the fictions themselves with the values projected through signs of the 'author'; similarly, to emphasise 'cultural performance' is to read the signs of 'authorial' value without necessarily denying the heterogeneous character of textuality.

'The Right-Angled Creek' radically contrasts with the other three novellas. Most obviously, the 'Diana' figure - Hilda Dilley (Poky, or Pocahontas) - forms a tale within the tale, her enigmatic ghost attending the story but blocking easy resolution. If the other three narratives foreground metonymy (in the pursuit of 'Diana', the repetition of desire, the linear traversal of time and space in the metropolis), this story functions to slow metropolitan time, to infuse a millenial space-time, to produce interruption and stasis, and to foreground metaphor. Ian Reid suggests that in 'The Right-Angled Creek' figural processes stand in, synecdochally, for the signification of the narrative as a whole.[43] At Dilley's Place, humans are transients, swept away periodically by fate - through addiction, madness or accident. Just as the abundant wildlife is swept away in the flood, only to return later, the social fabric also endures, despite the drama of individual subjects. Passages of intense

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

[43] 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), pp. 55-6.

description of the 'spellbound' place and its alien abundance invoke Stead's earlier lyricism, but also make this story work dialectically within the collection as a whole. The question of what is female sexuality - a category at the corrosive interface of natural/biological and historic/social realms - connects the imagery of the teeming, natural world of Dilley's Place with the violent and reproductive forces emblematised in the ghost of 'Poky'. The social and political consequences attending the full realisation of female sexuality form the perhaps unarticulated and certainly unresolvable tension generated by the collection of novellas overall. *The Puzzleheaded Girl*, in Harris's words, 'forms a kind of coda' to Stead's production of the American years, overlapping with the concerns of *I'm Dying Laughing*.[44]

I'm Dying Laughing records the contradictory position of leftist American writers caught up in the Hollywood mass-cultural scene in the 1940s - Stead herself was employed as a script-writer for a brief time in 1942. The novel satirises the crass, materialist lifestyles of the party faithful, dependent on the largesse of the film industry, and their resulting subscription to the narrow revisionism which allowed the party to survive within national and cultural boundaries. The hub of modern American culture in the 1940s, 'Hollywood' also symbolised and no doubt aggravated the struggle of the artist for autonomy within and against powerful market forces. In the spirit of Adorno and Horkheimer who, in the mid 1940s, were attacking the manipulations of the culture industry and characterising Hollywood's products as calculated 'mass deception', Stead's fiction also projects the view that mass-produced culture, whether filmic or printed, is antithetical to revolutionary purposes, functioning as the tool of oppression, through pacification, of the working classes.[45] While it does profit from the heteroglossia of 'popular' discourse, Stead's writing

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[44] Harris, 'Christina Stead's HumanComedy', p. 45.

[45] See Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'The culture industry: enlightenment as mass deception', in *The Cultural Studies Reader* ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.29-43, and Theodor Adorno, 'Culture industry reconsidered', in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991): 'The total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment, in which, as Horkheimer

obtains its symbolic unity through its putative distinction from its 'other', the field of 'mass-culture'.[46] In tandem with modernist values and the concomitant Marxist critique of a commodifying mass-culture, Stead constructs and explores, in her later fiction, female protagonists whose orientation to the mass-market becomes a gendered sign of political incorrectness. Paralleling 'Freud's privileging of the ego over the id' with 'Marx's privileging of production over consumption', Andreas Hussyen argues that modernist thought establishes a strong nexus between a fear of the masses and a fear of woman, and that this fear is inscribed in 'the masterworks of modernity':

> The lure of mass culture, after all, has traditionally been described as the threat of losing oneself in dreams and delusions and of merely consuming rather than producing.[47]

Narrative fascination, in *I'm Dying Laughing*, with Emily's powers to consume rather than to produce, for example, may be understood as an outgrowth of this nexus between modernist and Marxist thought.

Stead's postwar fiction also conducts an implicit defence of the Soviet Union, as evinced, for example, in her somewhat naive belief, articulated much earlier in 'The Writers Take Sides', that only in the Soviet Union was an appropriate value accorded cultural producers. In Stead's discourse, like that of many of her leftist contemporaries, the Soviet Union functioned as a kind of phalanstery. As suggested in chapter three, the phalanstery derives from utopian socialist discourse of the nineteenth century and recurs with some ambivalence in Stead's fiction. Although Sam Pollit's 'Pangea' or 'Manunity' schemes are dangerous parodies, ideal community is still invested in *The Man Who Loved Children*, in the

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and I have noted, enlightenment, that is the progressive technical domination of nature, becomes mass deception and is turned into a means for fettering consciousness' (p. 92).

[46] As John Frow demonstrates in *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, especially pp. 71-3, defining the 'popular' and its historic interrelationship with 'mass culture' can be problematic. In this argument, Stead's Marxism was what particularly encouraged her interest in 'the people' and their culture, as well as directing her criticism of 'mass culture' as the inauthentic 'popular', the tool of bourgeois hegemony.

[47] Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, p. 55.

utopian space towards which Louie travels. Like the phalanstery, which offers a blueprint for egalitarian community, the new Soviet State, at a safe distance from the scrutiny of its Western supporters, functioned as historical referent and exemplar for the discursive ideal of a world without capitalism. Neither Stead nor Blake ever came closer to immediate experience of the Soviet regime itself than two brief visits to East Germany, which did nothing to alter their beliefs.[48] In the fifties, however, it would appear that Stead felt increasingly compelled to consider and to combat emergingevidence about both Communist Party repression and tyranny under Stalin. Stead's papers contain, for example, detailed notes on the Lysenko scandal, which caused a rift between Western and Soviet scientists over the issue - in agricultural practice - of inherited versus acquired characteristics; Stead's parenthetical remarks display her support for the Soviet line, and her sympathy for a theory capable of refuting the omnipotence of genetic determination:

> Lysenko's theory refutes the genetic model which isolates the organism from environment, thus undercutting the role of history. If everything is determined from the beginning, inheritance is unalterable and this concept leads directly to reactionary politics and eugenics.[49]

The controversy must have put Stead's naturalist training in direct conflict with her political loyalties; her notes reveal, however, that she resolved the conflict by resorting to Darwin's own Lamarckian belief in acquired characteristics. Stead also made extensive notes, in preparation for *I'm Dying Laughing*, on *The God That Failed*, a collection of testimonials by prominent ex-Communists of her own generation, attesting to their loss of faith.[50] Her original papers, in which all but the first page are headed by her indignantly abbreviated

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[48] Rowley, *Christina Stead*, pp. 364-5 and 413-415. See also letter to Neil Stewart (6 March 1958) in *Selected Letters, Vol 1*:'Bill was there [East Germany] twice. He says it changed greatly: this time (when I went), it was very very pleasant; they have made strides, and one feels the fresh air of early morning, the very beginning of real life. I meanit; no propaganda' (p. 170).

[49] See Stead's unpublished notes on 'The Modern Quarterly - "The Biological Controversy in the Soviet Union and its Implications" by J. D. Bernal; and notes on a publication entitled 'Heredity. East and West. Lysenko and World Science. By Julian Huxley' in NLA MS 4967, Box 11, Folder 85.

[50] *The God That Failed: Six Studies in Communism*, by Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, André Gide, Richard Wright, Louis Fischer and Stephen Spender, ed. Richard Crossman (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950).

title, 'Eight Rogues', are littered with stinging parenthetical comment, particularly in response to Richard Crossman's introductory chapter, which likens the individual's conversion to Communism to conversion to Catholicism on the basis of the masochistic attraction of the demand to surrender spiritual freedom.[51] *I'm Dying Laughing*, as argued in chapter seven, becomes a narrative occasion for Stead's carefully controlled exploration of the thoughts of such renegades from the Party. Similarly, in a letter to Philip Harvey in 1970, Stead writes at length and with a defensive passion about her response to Alexander Solzhenitsyn's exposé of Stalinism, *The First Circle*. Although gripped by the narrative, Stead's vehement resistance to its representation of the Stalinist regime is markedly defensive:

> Though written with a lot of eagerness, skill, imagination ... and you are carried along by his energy ... and you are willing to accept his story, because of the effusiveness, you keep saying, 'But you must prove it.' There is no proof at all ... As it is, it remains a journalistic job, done to fit in with current fashion (very saleable, running down both Stalin and Soviet Union) ... .[52]

The thrust of Rowley's biography in respect of Stead's politics, the insinuation that Stead's attitude to socialism was inauthentic, that it had little to do with her aesthetic and that it was governed by her loyalty to Blake, is surely belied by the urgent tone of this letter, written several years after Blake's death.[53]

Discussing the political and aesthetic changes in Stead's fiction over three decades, Yelin argues that the late novels suggest the commodification and fragmentation of 'a world composed entirely of words' and that, over time, the novels '... mark the trajectory of a left-wing female intellectual through a literary culture initially somewhat receptive, later

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[51] NLA MS 4967, Box 12, Folder 87.
[52] To Philip Harvey (17 March 1970), in *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, p. 377.
[53] See Rowley, *Christina Stead*, pp. 394 and 411.

indifferent, and finally hostile to the left'.[54] If Stead's narratives, over three decades, trace 'the twentieth century's parabola of failed dreams',[55] the general contraction of optimism in the later narratives might be seen partly as a function of the hardships faced by left-wing activists and sympathisers in the Cold War era. As stated in my introduction, however, it may be misleading to suggest that a significant 'break' can be identified in Stead's production; many elements of Stead's later narratives are present even within her earliest work. Indeed determining the existence of a 'break' rests upon information, difficult to ascertain and far from self-evident, about the precise order of drafting and production of individual novels.[56] Angela Carter detects a change in mood and style in Stead's fiction after *The Man Who Loved Children*, commenting that Stead had stopped writing 'well' and had begun to 'hew her material more and more roughly'; for Carter, who likens it to the furious canvas of an Expressionist painter, Stead's 'bad' writing becomes compellingly truthful, unconcerned about appearance in its search for some fiery core of experience.[57] Rowley, as also noted in the introduction, dates the change in mood in Stead's fiction as well as in her personal correspondence, from 1947. Commenting that the angry, confronting character of Stead's postwar narratives 'did not appeal to 1950s war-scarred sensibilities, which celebrated femininity, family and hearth', Rowley attributes Stead's increasing pessimism to her disillusionment with the lack of recognition of her work:

> [Stead's] thirst to write someting so good that there would be 'no denying it on anyone's part', had remained unassuaged for two decades ... Stead had begun to refer to her writing quite disparagingly, as she had done early in her career.[58]

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[54] Yelin, 'Sexual Politics and Female Heroism', p.192.

[55] Gribble's phrase, referring to the historic trajectory in *I'm Dying Laughing*, in *Christina Stead*, p. 119.

[56] See Segerberg, for example, for a chronology of Stead's early writing, in 'Getting Started', pp. 123 ff.

[57] Angela Carter, 'Unhappy Families - Angela Carter on the scope of Christina Stead's achievement', in *London Review of Books* (16 September - 6 October 1982), p. 11.

[58] See Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 340, who quotes from Stead's letter to Nettie Palmer (8 January 1936), in *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, pp. 61-2.

During this period, as Rowley's account also makes clear, Stead and Blake suffered a high degree of transience and economic instability. Hoping to renew their European connections and to improve their earnings, they departed for Europe in 1946, having witnessed the beginning of the end of communist networks in the United States. This departure meant the loss of a solid base of support enjoyed in the American years, support which had been not only personal, but professional and economic; even the stint in Hollywood, for all its revelations of compromises and 'sell outs', had been a time of relative social and economic security in comparison with what was in store for them in Europe and England in the 1950s.

Furthermore, the cumulative effect of Stead's chequered relations with publishing houses was now to have devastating consequences; in the absence of patronage by a defined, or symbolically powerful literary community on the left, publishing would become almost impossible. Added to this problem, Stead herself eschewed crude self-promotion. Despite her claims to the contrary, however, it is evident that the status and reception of her fiction mattered to her greatly, and that, desiring a true readership as well as financial survival, she continued to seek publication of her manuscripts. By 1950, after great difficulty and many refusals, *The People with the Dogs* was finally accepted for publication by Little, Brown and Company.[59] After this, Stead was unable to find a publisher for at least a further four or five manuscripts produced during the 1950s and early 1960s.

Other factors have been cited to account for this period of literary obscurity, including the fact that both Stead and Blake suffered clandestine and overt CIA investigation.[60] After initial surveillance of Stead, investigators apparently lost interest and closed down her file, but Blake's file remained active for a number of years. Although no clear evidence exists that this surveillance adversely affected publication opportunities,

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[59] See Rowley, *Christina Stead*, pp. 356 and 366.

[60] See, for example, Fiona Capp, 'The spies and the writers', in *The Age: Saturday Extra* (9 April 1988), p. 8. Rowley and Williams also comment in detail on the nature and extent of CIA files on Stead and Blake.

publishing houses must have been nervous about Stead's and Blake's past political associations as well as sensitive to the changed mood of the market, which would hardly have been receptive to either the political flavour or the critical social perspective of Stead's narratives. In a thinly-veiled fictional account of his friendship with Stead, Michael Wilding intimates that the paranoia of the Cold War era may well have been justified, and that Stead's careful evasions on the subject of politics are its legacy; in even more sinister vein, Wilding implies that the Cold War legacy persists in the critical establishment's preoccupation with biographical surveillance and scrutiny of the radical writer's private life:

> For twenty years she could not get her novels published. When she was published again it was all old material, material she'd worked on during the blacklisted fifties, increasingly bleak, dark books, published out of their context, books without that earlier joy and energy. And now her books were back in view the biographers got to work. Was that all part of an agenda too - to present a negative picture, to resurrect all the secret-service lies, all the innuendoes, all the sex-life, drinking, quarrelling scuttlebutt, and rerun it, now there was no-one alive to refute it, to divert attention from the novels, to distract and defame and discredit? Was that possible? It was all possible, all too possible.[61]

In earnestly rebutting Rowley's portrait of Stead-as-monstrous, Wilding may well be overstating the case. His point, however, that the experience of the Cold War etched fear into the hearts of its victims, illuminates elements of a fiction like *The Little Hotel*, the atmosphere and structure of which reproduce such 'surveillance'. The apparently benign and disinterested narrator and hotel-keeper, Selda Bonnard, who retails the personal lives of her transient guests, feigns a warmth which belies her avid curiosity and unsavoury desire for gossip; her real interests lie elsewhere, detached from the individual fates of the inmates of the hotel. Nor does it strike Selda as inappropriate that her husband should eavesdrop on their guests' activities. Selda's narrative view vanishes during the middle section of the

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[61] Wilding, 'I Like Him To Write', p. 205.

narrative, supplanted by a third person frame which follows the protagonists outside the hotel's doors. Ostensibly a mere lapse in aesthetic control, this shift has a destabilising effect on the security of the reader's knowledge. Paranoia is a keynote of this narrative, as predatory men such as Mr Wilkins and Dr Blaise devise furtive schemes to prey upon their women. Lydia Trollope's narrow personal escape from her mercenary partner is a small triumph wrested from an otherwise uniformly dark picture of the relations between men and women, the oppressors and the oppressed, in fugitive-ridden Cold War Europe. The stage for the performance of a liberated female subjectivity truly shrinks in this novel, which was largely completed by 1952, prior to the full drafting later in that year of *Cotters' England*; the latter text is permeated by the horrors of surveillance and by a set of social, psychological and political dislocations.[62] In my deployment of Julia Kristeva's phraseology, the women of the last narratives are females who can wreck the revolution, representing an increasingly unresolved exploration, in gendered terms, of thwarted hopes and desires, both personal and political. The import of the representation of the lesbian who preys on the working class, in *Cotters' England*, is discussed in chapter six, whereas in chapter seven, Kristeva's theory of abjection is used to identify the limits of Western radicalism in Stead's ironic and passionate exploration of the conjunction between revolutionary commitment and excessive female desire in *I'm Dying Laughing*.

In *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)*, Eleanor represents, in antithesis, the political and cultural positions and practices which Stead most vehemently rejected for herself. Vacuously suburban but secretly lewd, shabbily genteel, beautiful and energetic but pedestrian in talent, conservative, politically ignorant and racially prejudiced, Eleanor Herbert delights in performing a destiny constructed by middle-class discourses. As a

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[62] The production history of these books is drawn from information provided in Rowley's account, see *Christina Stead*, esp. pp. 386 and 392.

'Venus unknown to Venus', Eleanor constitutes Stead's unkind parody and exorcism of a set of threatening aesthetic, moral, political and sexual improprieties.[63] Perversely invested with details of Stead's own economic circumstances during the period, Eleanor's experience represents the lived contradiction of a middle-aged and obscure female writer, aspiring to greatness, but crucially economically dependent, like any other worker, upon the vagaries of the marketplace. Stead, as well as Blake, scratched out a meagre living, for a time, on 'Grub Street' and suffered its ignominies.[64] Unlike the 'author', however, Eleanor possesses neither artistic genius, moral vision nor political theory enough to see what binds her to a narrow life. Initially conceived of as '"the girl at the switchboard," ... [one of the] ... little ladies who pursed their lips and refused to switch Lenin through on the fatal day',[65] Eleanor's apolitical conservatism is a special target of narrative scorn, her sturdy obliviousness to social and political alternatives suggesting the meagreness of British survival through Cold War privation. Although Eleanor's own perspective interrogates the unity of the narrative, a privileged view of Eleanor is constructed which fosters negative criticism and judgement. The final pages contain, for example, a cryptic reference to Mt Athos, a mountain sacred to Zeus, also famous for its monastery which reputedly contained ancient, sacred texts, and which was looted by Communists who raided the area after the war. Dr Mack's plan to try 'to get to the forbidden territory', therefore, resonates politically as well as spiritually, and in pointed contrast with Eleanor's life choices.[66] Eleanor's few encounters with great passion are mediated through inauthentic popular discourses which effectively prohibit

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[63] This view has been persuasively argued by Lilley, in 'The New Curiosity Shop', pp. 5-12.

[64] See letter to Kate Stead (8 December 1955) in *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, p. 153. For further detail about this period, see Williams, *Christina Stead*, pp. 205-8; and Rowley, *Christina Stead* (pp. 398-400).

[65] See letter to Stanley Burnshaw (5 February 1969), in *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, p. 339. In a letter to Elizabeth Harrower (26 April 1975), in *Selected Letters, Vol 2*, p. 72, Stead expands on this comment, referring to an account in John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World*, of a telephone girl who 'fought the revolution' by refusing to put through Lenin's call.

[66] Christina Stead, *Miss Herbert*, p. 307. Information about Mt Athos obtained from Robert Payne, *The Isles of Greece* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965), p.114.

even as they point towards 'authentic' desire for a fully sensual and awakened existence.[67] The self-satisfied child of the British middle-class, Eleanor is thus paradigmatic of Stead's female wreckers of revolution, and of Stead's increasingly contradictory project of exploring but also containing these women within a moral framework. As Bourdieu reveals (in this chapter's second epigraph), Flaubert's confession of identity with 'Emma Bovary' also conveys the relation of non-identity between Flaubert and the story of his own failure, represented in the character of 'Fréderic'; for similar reasons, 'Eleanor' cannot be 'Stead'. Eleanor's story, however, performs a strategic 'exorcism' of the probable anxieties of an author who, seemingly forgotten, was struggling for her own secure footing within the cultural field.

It was not until 1965 and the relaxation of Cold War suspicion that Stead's career received a long awaited fillip. Introducing, at Stanley Burnshaw's behest, the 1965 reissue of *The Man Who Loved Children*, Randall Jarrell's enthusiastic 'new critical' reading was not only significant in shaping the novel's ensuing reception, but also illuminates Stead's authorial performance and positioning in what Bourdieu calls 'the field of culture'. Contrary to the commonly articulated view that the novel had been 'neglected',[68] many early reviews were positive, if uncertain as to its genre.[69] Critical interest grew most strongly, however, after the novel's reissue, and in response to Jarrell's construction of the novel as a neglected

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[67] See Sheridan, *Christina Stead* (p. 104) for discussion of Stead's satire of commodification in popular culture. Lilley, in 'The New Curiosity Shop', reads against the narrative's implied values, and challenges the legitimacy of Stead's attack.

[68] See Elizabeth Hardwick's (1955) essay on Stead which canvasses this neglect: 'The Neglected Novels of Christina Stead', in *A View of My Own: Essays in Literature and Society*, by Elizabeth Hardwick (1962; London: Heinemann, 1964) pp. 41-48.

[69] Although most of the following reviews offered some criticism of the book, they also recognised its power: M. H., 'Christina Stead's Fantastic Gallery', in *New York Times Book Review* (20 October 1940), p. 7; 'New Novels: Family Portraits', in *Sydney Morning Herald* (20 September 1941), p. 10; 'Faults of People in Cool Analysis', in *Springfield Republican* (20 October 1940), p. 7e; N. L. Rothman, 'Enter "Pollitry"', in *The Saturday Review* (16 November 1940), p. 12.

masterpiece. Stanley Burnshaw, left-wing American poet, journalist and close friend of Stead and Blake, negotiated the reissue, organising Jarrell to write the introduction.[70]

The story of the championing of the novel by an already 'consecrated' American male poet and New Critic, as well as Stead's response to this generous support, not only confirms the relevance of Bourdieu's theorisation of the struggle for symbolic power within the cultural field but also indicates the potential for 'gender' to play a role in this struggle. Firstly, Bourdieu's analysis of the artist's logic in disavowing certain kinds of critical and popular success can be used to deconstruct Stead's frequent denials of interest in the critical after-life of her texts. These persistent disavowals of concern for success markedly conflict with her response, in 1965, to Jarrell's warm reading of *The Man Who Loved Children*, which fell on her like a revelation of love, and of which she wrote to Burnshaw:

> With this I had the feeling one has about someone who truly loves you - 'How can it be? How can he love me? How puzzling!' It's not quite the same, I'm not pretending it is; it's a different matter: but I have the same feeling almost - the perfect reader, the real reader. Who does one write for? Oneself - and the true reader. It's no use saying one writes for the public. (Well, I can't say it.)[71]

Stead's correspondence with Burnshaw about the novel's reissue and about Jarrell's introduction reveals how she conceptualised her readership, as well as indicating her desire for an honourable 'place' in the cultural field.[72] Her language suggests a strong inclination to distance herself from sites of institutional transmission of texts and to favour a romantic model of unmediated interpersonal connections between author, text and 'true reader'. Secondly, this exchange between producers may be seen as heavily gendered, the

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[70] Robert L. Ross, 'Christina Stead's Encounter With "The True Reader": The Origin and Outgrowth of Randall Jarrell's Introduction to *The Man Who Loved Children*', in *Library Chronicle of the University of Texas at Austin* 42-43 (1988), p. 161.

[71] See letter to Stanley Burnshaw (7 December 1964) in *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, p 220.

[72] Ross, in 'Christina Stead's Encounter with "The True Reader"', discusses the history of the reissue of *The Man Who Loved Children* in the context of the Stead/Jarrell correspondence and highlights Stead's emergence from 'obscurity'; this account, proposing the significance of the patronage of Blake, Burnshaw and Jarrell, does not probe what emergesabout the socio-cultural relations between text, author and critic.

consecrated male author sponsoring the previously neglected female author; gendering is integral both to Jarrell's sensual reading of the text and to Stead's effusive and grateful response, as she recounts it to Burnshaw:

> The *book*, I of course, cannot read and never could since it was printed; but I can read - or rather did read - R. J.'s wonderful introduction, with tears pouring out of my eyes, a regular fountain. That's his wonderful sympathy ... I have such a curious feeling, as if he has written me the one letter of a lifetime, as if one was born to get one letter and I have got it. And then he understands me so well! It's not exactly difficult; it's delicate. You can't say, Thank you so much for wrapping me in rose and gold - as it were.[73]

While it seems churlish to dissect such personal prose, it is precisely in reading the language of personal exchange as a socially-oriented practice that Bourdieu's model finds its force. Stead's emotion testifies to her realisation of the symbolic importance of Jarrell's introduction: 'his' private letter to 'her' is simultaneously available to the readership, and to the critical establishment. It vindicates and legitimates Stead's artistic talent, bestowing on her the right to (an admittedly slightly qualified) place in the order of the high canonical tradition, while also treating her as a 'proper' woman.[74] Had Jarrell been female, Australian, an unknown writer, or even an academic, for example, it is questionable whether the same level of response might have been evoked, either from Stead herself or from other readers. Indeed, the flurry of critical and popular interest that ensued might have been of a different order. Moreover, in contrast to his academic role, Jarrell's reading is undertaken from the perspective of poet-producer, addressing himself more 'naturally' to fellow readers and writers and maintaining a distance from the academy. Written in a personal mode (its universalising personal pronouns also patriarchally subsuming other reading possibilities[75]),

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[73] See letter to Burnshaw (23 February 1965), in *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, p. 227.

[74] See Ross, 'Christina Stead's Encounter with "The True Reader"', for the comment by a 'New England professor' who criticised Jarrell's introduction for 'making hysterical claims' and failing to observe the proprieties of a more cautious academic criticism: p. 169.

[75] Jarrell, 'An Unread Book', *The Man Who Loved Children*: 'And yet as we read we keep thinking: "How can anything so completely itself, so completely different from me and mine, be, somehow, meand mine?" The book has

Jarrell's reading constructs its implied addressee as belonging to an intimate, 'true' community of 'individual' readers who would be instantly receptive to his personal persuasion. Simultaneously, from his position as 'new critic', Jarrell's discourse could also reach into the institutional academy and stimulate new interest in Stead as a neglected author, ripe for critical appropriation.

Bourdieu's understanding of cultural practice, which I have applied in describing Stead's authorial production from the 1940s through to the end of the Cold War, can also serve to remind us that, like Honor Lawrence in 'The Puzzleheaded Girl' who is 'caught, but not caught', not only fiction writers but also academics and cultural commentators are caught within ideological webs. To observe this does not necessarily, however, pre-empt the open-endedness of the actions of such agents:

> It is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know.[76]

Demonstrating critical conversance with Marxist discourse, Stead's fictions explore the conundrum of subjects as they perform and are peformed. They perform ambiguously, blindly and at times apparently in excess of social regulation. The way in which her texts position the reader in relation to these performers may be read as evidence of Stead's own strategic practice as a cultural producer. Bourdieu's model of the logic of practice, in the sense that it is 'post-Marxist', thus enables an anti-reificatory and materialist reading of Stead's authorial production and performance, particularly in its contradictory development over three decades, while remaining sympathetic to but observant of the constitutive limitations of her critical Marxist world view. This world view, tested in the postwar era by the experience of political marginality in the West, and perhaps also

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an almost frightening power of remembrance; and so much of our earlier life is repressed, forgotten, both in the books we read and the memories we have, that this seems friendly of the book, even when what it reminds us of is terrible' (p. 5).

[76] Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*, p. 69.

embattled against the rumours circulating about Stalinist Russia, lends an intensifying ferocity to Stead's depictions of her female protagonists, such as Nellie Cotter, whose counterfeit and coded performance is discussed in my next chapter. Whether these women are failed revolutionaries, or the active perverters and wreckers of revolutionary possibilities, their contradictory performances interrogate both the conservative political climate and the failure of the radical left, as well as alerting us to the contradictions implicit within Stead's own ideological position. This ideological position, supportive of Stalinism till the end, was maintained in the teeth of all evidence, just as Eleanor Herbert's optimism continues to characterise her performance, long after opportunity has gone:

> 'I kept to the rules, but the rules didn't keep me. But I hewed to the line; I cultivated my garden. So let us work, my pet. Soon I will have my pension and then I am going to write the story of my life; then I will really get down to it; and it will open some eyes.'[77]

[77] Stead, *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)*, p. 308.

Chapter 6.

'Closeting' revolution in *Cotters' England*

> Sex is ... devious, subtle, and everywhere like the filaments of the mushroom bed.[1]
>
> What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the* secret.[2]

Preamble

The interrelation between individual subjects and their environment is nowhere more intense in Stead's work than in her bleak postwar novel, *Cotters' England*. The Cotters, in particular, appear as strangely shaped specimens stubbornly clinging to their niche, with its hostile social, economic and physical contours.[3] The intricate social web depicted in Stead's earlier novels has become here an entrapping 'spider's web' within which the inevitable struggle for agency and control leads to a further entrenchment of self-delusion. Groping in a swampy terrain, subjects in *Cotters' England* are the determined products of a cramped and distorting environment. Although there are marginal characters whose psyches provide evidence of a possible normality, or ground exterior to the world of the protagonists, the text's foregrounding of the troubled and dysfunctional Cotter family, in

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[1] Christina Stead, referring to the portrayal of lesbian sexuality in *Cotters' England*, in her letter to Ron Geering (13 July 1967), in *Selected Letters Vol.1*, p. 287.

[2] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, p.35.

[3] For a reading of the specificity with which *Cotters' England* evokes both the shaping environment of Tyneside and its working class inhabitants, see Rodney Pybus, '*Cotters' England*: In Appreciation', in *Stand* 23. 4 (1982), pp. 40-47; and Ann Blake, 'Christina Stead's Tyneside Novel: *Cotters' England*', in *The Durham University Journal* LXXXVI. 2 (July 1994), pp. 271-9.

particular, its concentration on the wiles of the self-deceived and charismatic Nellie, ensures the sense of an historical intractability, and of revolution permanently thwarted or wrecked.

The materialist examination of the relation between individuals and history, however, is conducted in shadowy ways in this novel, where the spectacle of a deviant, predatory sexuality not only tropes a wider scene of social and political disorder, but curiously displaces it. Indeed, the text's political analysis of the state of British socialism both competes with and is problematised by its construction of the spectacle of aberrant female sexuality. Questions arise - despite and because of various signs of authorial intent - about the effects of this conjunction in the novel between private secrets of sexuality and the public realm of history, the dialectic and revolution. The conjunction of these terms founds a shifty and recursive narrative, in which Cold War politics and deviant sexuality threaten to double back into each other's territories.

Both Christina Stead and Ron Geering, her key Australian critical advocate, intervened in the early critical reception of *Cotters' England*, emphasising the thematic significance of disorderly sexuality. In correspondence and in critical discussion, Stead and Geering marked out the signs of Nellie's lesbian orientation, concerned to stem what they saw as a major misinterpretation amongst readers and critics:

> Nellie's lesbianism is, it must be insisted, the centre of the characterization and, in a sense, the centre of the whole book.[4]

Setting forth in logical order the narrative's clues to Nellie's true sexual identity, Geering was moved to express concern about the haphazard way in which he felt that readers had approached Stead's exacting novel:

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[4] R. G. Geering, 'Christina Stead in the 1960s', in *Southerly* 28. 1 (1968), p. 29.

> If on top of all this the reader is still unable to draw the right conclusions from Nellie's appearance, dressed in an airman's uniform, before Caroline on that fatal night, he has obviously not reached first base. In such circumstances, the novelist might be excused from wondering whether her readers really read at all. Certainly many people do not read her books carefully enough and hers are novels which, because of their unconventional structure, do require close attention to detail.[5]

What interests me here is not the rights and wrongs of any individual reading of *Cotters' England*, but the critical and authorial emphasis on correctly 'decoding' the narrative. It seems that *Cotters' England* is a novel that does not deal plainly or openly with its subject, deploying instead a range of hints and clues. Why this careful coding? And why was it deemed necessary to assert so forcefully a 'correct' version, thus stemming the circulation of the aberrant readings that such coding can only proliferate? Subsequent to its publication, the concern that many readers had failed to 'get' its meaning prompted Stead to explain the novel's nexus between the figure of the lesbian and the political left:

> To put it briefly, and first in the words of one of my NY friends just over here 'it is a picture of how a Lesbian operates in left circles - I've seen a lot of them' (she said). And from the first utterance to the last she is that and nothing else, a determined Lesbian, so mad about it, she doesn't understand any other views.[6]

If for no other reason than its perverse reductiveness, this reading raises more questions than it answers. For example, does emphasis on Nellie's 'aberrant' sexuality work to circumscribe or to enable Marxist interpretation? Jose Yglesias's discussion of the novel's political analysis of the postwar English working-class movement underplays (though still acknowledges) its thematic of disorderly sexuality. Stead, with evident reluctance, credited Yglesias's reading of *Dark Places of the Heart* (the American issue of *Cotters' England*) as somewhat 'better' than Jarrell's essay on *The Man Who Loved Children*, but

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[5] Geering, 'Christina Stead in the 1960s', p. 30.
[6] To Ron Geering (13 July 1967), in *Selected Letters Vol.1*, p. 286.

expressed discomfort at the idea that people would begin to look 'askance' at her, thinking: 'Is that really what she is up to?'[7] Encouraged, according to Stead, by her assent to his identification of a Marxist viewpoint underpinning *The Man Who Loved Children*,[8] Yglesias reads *Cotters' England* as a forceful inquiry into the failure of revolutionary struggle in hungry, postwar England:

> The questions [Stead] makes the reader ask are always social and revolutionary in intent. In the present novel it is obvious (though one should be wary of this adjective when dealing with so neglected a great novelist) that she has asked why the English working-class movement has not made the revolution.[9]

Stead's discomfort with this forthright clarification of the novel's political project is consistent with her tendency to characterise her fiction as non-partisan. The apparent critical distance, however, between choosing to read the novel for its social and political exposé and reading it for its coded depiction of lesbian predation thwarts closer consideration of why the two domains are entangled. Explanations citing 'bohemianism' and 'deviant sexuality' as the basis of the novel's political analysis have also effected a symptomatic closure. During her writing of earlier drafts, in the fifties, Stead expressed a desire that the narrative should evoke a sense of mystery and enigma:

> What is really their game? What is their game grows out of a complex childhood story, poverty, riffraffish bohemianism, a family history ... and in fact I do not want people to know it but for it to be borne in upon them ... .[10]

Long before the novel's publication, therefore, Stead was hoping to effect a reading experience which would forestall objectivity, thrusting the reader towards an intimate

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[7] To Leda and Stanley Burnshaw (10 November 1966), in *Selected Letters Vol.1*, p. 271.

[8] See letter to Burnshaws (10 November 1966), in *Selected Letters Vol.1*, p.271. See Jose Yglesias's review, 'Marx as Muse', p. 369.

[9] See Yglesias, 'Marking Off A Chunk of England', p.421.

[10] To Charles Humboldt, editor of *Mainstream* (26 January 1957), in *Selected Letters Vol.1*, p. 159.

relation to her characters, a device that would postpone certainty in the interest of an emotional proximity and dramatic revelation. The reader's position, in other words, was to correspond with the position of various characters in the text, such as the women who are both charmed by and wary of Nellie's and Tom's 'minnesinging'.[11] Such a reading position would surely mime the way subjectivity and sexuality is represented in the novel: the project (for reader and character alike) of trying to pin down the secret history of sexual identity recreates 'sex' as, in Stead's words, 'devious, subtle, and everywhere like the filaments of the mushroom bed'.[12]

This Foucauldian idea of secret sexuality as a ruse or technology of power is prefigured in the text by way of a Nietzschean paradigm. Nietzschean discourse is manifested (and distorted) in Nellie's voice and presence; but these Nietzschean potentialities are bounded by the narrative's inscription of a position of 'truth' and 'judgement' which owes more to Marxism than to Nietzscheanism. While the means by which truth is attained are devious and subtle, the question of 'what' the reader is to know is nonetheless projected within the text. Discussing the threat that Nietzscheanism represents to the objectivity of Marxist rhetoric, Christopher Norris discusses Said's observations about insistent authorial attempts to achieve 'narrative veracity':

> Fiction has always involved this sense of an 'unwillingness to cede control over the text ... to release it from the discursive obligations of human presence' (Said 1979, p. 177). The control may indeed be illusory, a wishful projection of authorial power; but it reflects an awareness that texts exist from the outset as ground to be competed for by various strategies of self-promoting knowledge.[13]

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[11] Stead uses the term 'minnesinger' to describe Nellie and Tom: in her letter to the Burnshaws (14 September 1965), in *Selected Letters Vol.1*, p. 257. The term also occurs in the novel, on page 254.

[12] To Ron Geering (13 July 1967), in *Selected Letters Vol.1*, p. 287.

[13] See Christopher Norris, 'Between Marx and Nietzsche: The Politics of Deconstruction', p. 88.

Recognising the 'human presence' enmeshed in Stead's text, my reading presumes, similarly, that a certain 'authorial control' is projected within the narrative, favouring a final position of judgement against Nellie on moral and political grounds. The efficacy and coherence of such control, as I will show, is nevertheless debatable.

Despite political differences, both Geering and Yglesias produce markedly humanist readings that highlight Nellie's eccentricity and 'obscure desires', and accept these as a plausible reason for the emasculation of revolutionary energies. These readings happily coexist because they comply with the values projected by the authorial narrative. In view of this, the novel may be claimed either way: as humanist and apolitical, or equally, as undertaking a 'Marxism of Marxism' which critiques a foundering revolutionary movement. Not all readers are equally compliant, however, or willing to be guided towards a 'correct' view, and tactical or resistant reading practices may seek out the text's incoherences and gaps.[14] Indeed, the narrative structure itself enables a fracturing of view. Although its palpable design is to elicit the reader's ultimate assent about moral and political 'truth', in fostering the reader's temporal suspension of judgement this same narrative structure works to dialogise this truth.[15] The resistant reader may therefore come to view the narrative's performance as ambiguously 'staged'.

In the first part of my argument, 'Strange familiars, or the familiar estranged', I consider the 'uncanny' world of *Cotters' England* and its characters, its shifting and shifty subjects. The novel's apparently realist representation is co-ordinated by a network of strange perversions and dislocations, culminating in theatrical 'revelation' rather than 'revolution'. The ambivalent framing of Nellie's performance compromises the coherence and

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[14] See Anne Cranny Francis, *Engendered Fictions: Analysing gender in the production and reception of texts* (Kensington, Australia: New South Wales University Press, 1992), pp 184-196, for a discussion of at least three kinds of reading practices or positions: compliant, resistant and tactical.

[15] See Michael Holquist's definition in 'Glossary' in M. M. Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*: 'A word, discourse, language or culture undergoes "dialogization" when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same things. Undialogized language is authoritative or absolute' (427).

neutrality of the authorial narrative. Nellie's ingenuous promise to reveal the truth about England is itself an instance of this ambiguous narrative 'staging':

> 'I'd like to take ye with me, show you a bit of England with the lid off, no Roseland, the furnace beneath the green moor that'll blow up into a blistering volcano one of these days. Aye, it's a bit different from your green and pleasant fields. But it's a very normal tragedy.' (46)[16]

Who is lifting the lid, and on what or whom? Nellie's prurient desire to uncover secrets mirrors and distorts the authorial project, promising a detour into dramatic territory, its volcanic properties pertaining less to revolution than to an unspecified scandal, promising penetration into some underlying reality concealed beneath the commonplace surface of things. In this example, as in many others, the truth of Nellie's lie suggests, paradoxically and parodically, the deceptiveness of novelistic truth. Although presented as a fiction, as an untrustworthy performance, Nellie's version of the truth effectively competes with and contests the legitimacy of the authorial project. The narrative, establishing its truth by means of this contest, purports to outperform Nellie by exposing her 'truth' as 'performance' and by dissembling its own, aiming to label and contain her within the category of perversity.[17]

The second section, 'True lies, secret circles: the power of (un)knowing', develops these themes by looking at the novel's representation of history and ideology through its detour into secret sexuality, its coded positing of the improper lesbian who travesties the implied and privileged terms of the text - the 'proper' figures of revolutionary Marxism and heterosexual coupledom. By keeping the truth of her identity well closeted, the narrative marks Nellie as the origin, container and generator of a powerful (un)knowing in the text.

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[16] Christina Stead, *Cotters' England* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1966). All subsequent page numbers in the chapter refer to this edition. This key phrase is also quoted by Geering in 'Christina Stead in the 1960s', p.31; also by Jennifer Gribble, who entitles her discussion, 'England with the lid off'.

[17] As subsequently discussed (section two of this chapter), in pursuing this argument I explore and adapt the reading strategy developed by Kate Lilley in her reading of *Miss Herbert* - 'The New Curiosity Shop'. Lilley's reading resists the text's positioning and questions the authenticity of its project.

But this strategy has the potential to redouble on the 'knowingness' of the authorial narrative. As shown by Eve Sedgwick, in *Epistemology of the Closet*, the figure of the closet is the (contestable) site of control over signification. The closeting of sexual secrets functions to displace or to deflect attention from other closetings, but works also to proliferate secret knowledges and networks of power in the guise of ignorance and powerlessness, perhaps generating despite authorial intention, 'a multiplicity of competing truths'.[18] The figure of the closet, which contains and constructs deviant identities in order to recuperate revolution, is paradoxically also the means by which the ultimate truth claims of Western discourses can be deconstructed.

1. Strange familiars, or the familiar estranged

> There is something (it's purely physical, I think a sense of smell is very strong in our make-up, especially some of us), there's something about women's skirts, I mean there's too much smell of material, I don't know what it is, something like that - I don't like it.[19]

> She was very untidy, but her chalk-blue angora sweater blazed round her beautiful arms and neck; her greasy black hair framed a fine white forehead. She was an attractive slut, uneasy when she washed. She had a good nose and missed the numerous familiar scents from her own body. (282)

At first glance, the description of 'Flo', a minor personage in *Cotters' England*, manifests consistency between the current of misogyny within the fictional text and the overt misogyny to which its author seemed prone. Yet, in both instances, the narrator/speaker's relation towards its object, the female body, suggests ambiguity. In the

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[18] This is Sheridan's phrase, in *Christina Stead*, p.121.

[19] 'Christina Stead: An Interview', Whitehead interview, p.247.

first quotation, from Stead's interview, the collective pronoun 'us', inclusive of the speaker, contrasts with the singular pronoun, 'I', which inscribes a demarcation, a hygienic separation from the sinister category of women. The speaker's uncertainty in the act of specifying her object is foreclosed by the dismissive certainty of the concluding declaration, 'I don't like it.' In the second quotation, from the novel, Flo's ambiguous beauty is revealed under narrative scrutiny, but dominant (phallocentric) lines of sight are interrogated by the plenitude of smell. Flo's beauty is both situated with reference to normative, 'proper' notions of femininity, supporting and returning the male gaze, and slips problematically outside this gaze into auto-eroticism. Both quotations suggest that the female body is a site of tension between horror and fascination, homophobia and homoerotic desire.

Through the medium of their very familiarity, women in *Cotters' England* trope the strange and the estranging. In 'A Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry', Luce Irigaray footnotes Freud's essay on 'The "Uncanny"' in her deconstruction of the oedipal male's overcathected, specular gaze upon the woman who 'exhibits the possibility of a nothing to see'. The word 'unheimlich' (uncanny) plays upon 'heim' (home) and 'heimisch' (familiar). For Freud, explains Irigaray, the female genital organs, in their reminder of the (un)familiar origin of all human beings, are disquieting:

> The woman-mother would be *unheimlich* not only by reason of a repression of a primitive relation to the maternal but also because her sex/organs are strange, yet close; while 'heimisch' as a mother, woman would remain 'un' as a woman. Since woman's sexuality is no doubt the most basic form of the *unheimlich*.[20]

Problematically for feminist readers, a similar disquiet about female sexuality permeates *Cotters' England*, and located under its aegis are the most recalcitrant, anti-social and counter-revolutionary structures. Strange families, insolent familiarites from both strange

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[20] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 47, 48n [emphases in original].

and familiar women, and the familiar re-perceived as strange or estranging - these are the disorienting and disturbing structures of *Cotters' England*. Their repetitions prevent the formation of wholesome community and circumvent historical progress.

The 'uncanny' works also through the text's verisimilitude, its estranging representation of a particular, real-life family. In search of working-class subjects on whom she could draw for her fiction, Stead stayed for a time in 1949 in Newcastle-on-Tyne with the Kellys, the family of her left-wing London acquaintance, Anne Dooley. Her letter to Kate Stead, detailing her observation of the Kellys, contains Stead's reading of the stunting material environment, its determining power in the lives of the inhabitants:

> ... but their ways, past, future as they think it, and their helplessness, mild hopelessness, their dependence is quite alien and perhaps all this comes from their many many years of underfeeding. All freely admit they are underfed, 'our stomachs are shrunken' 'we don't eat enough' - they leave it there, they don't run out in the streets with banner 'bread bread' you know ... .[21]

Permanent physical hunger becomes the novel's motif of insatiable desire, brought to its most macabre realisation in the bleakly comic scene in which Tom's gift of freshly-killed fowl occasions the family's rite of cannibalism, the fowl being a transposed epithet for Tom's recently deceased 'lover', Marion Ilger.[22] The boiled chicken is served practically raw, but the old people, having no experience of good food, are temporarily satisfied. Literal hunger, however, operates as a signifier for other desires, including desire for/loathing of the body of woman. Again, Irigaray re-reads Freud's understanding of 'insatiable hunger' as originating with the moment of weaning. Irigaray suggests that this 'resistance to weaning'

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[21] To Kate Stead (29 June 1949), in *Selected Letters Vol.1*, p. 116.

[22] Anderson notes that 'the dead fowl is Marion', commenting that this scene is Stead's 'most demonic, most powerful, and most imaginatively terrifying dinner party ... ', in 'Christina Stead's Unforgettable Dinner-Parties', p. 41.

can be seen also as 'a symptom of the trauma occasioned by the *final break in material contact with the inside of the mother's body*':

> Could [the child's] 'insatiable hunger' perhaps be the need to reabsorb its material cause? This would imply the inadmissible urge to devour the mother, to destroy this original nature-body from which one must eternally separate and be separated but to which one must eternally return and refer back. But if she is eaten, she will no longer be there to serve your needs-desires or to guarantee a certain representation of the place of origin and the original bond. So this 'hunger' is indeed insatiable, and no food will ever satisfy it.[23]

The corpse of the mother, symbolically devoured in the *Cotters' England* scene, eliciting/quelling an abject fear of incomplete separation and maternal incorporation, invokes also the nightmare return of the 'place of origin and the original bond', a return which will destroy subjectivity itself. The foundational power of the disavowed feminine/maternal body thus conditions the strange, 'familial' environment in *Cotters' England*, threatening engulfment. In the enveloping, womblike obscurity of Bridgehead, the air is thick with smoke and soot; origins are obscured, unrepresentable, and thereby all the more inescapable. Nellie and Tom are enmeshed within family, performing and performed by its suppressed history. Although Nellie's and Tom's quasi-independent lives (mostly in and around London) form the shifting, dual focus of most of the remainder of the narrative, the constitutive power of the Bridgehead environment, established in early scenes, is perpetuated in their speech.

The narrative traces through individual consciousness and sexuality the constitutive power of an enclosed familial world which, while appearing to privilege and maintain the role of the patriarch, in fact invites the proliferation of a transgressive female power, thriving under the cover of the socially-legitimated power structure. The male figures in the

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[23] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum*, pp. 40-41 [emphases in original].

family voice their entitlements but, under evident challenge, are ultimately displaced. Nellie's soothing placation of her father's irrational viewpoint at the dinner table, her refusal to contest his view and her support for his rights as head of the family, suggest above all her self-interested identification with hierarchical power which outlasts his physical presence in the novel. Uncle Simon, too, represents the waning of masculine authority. In a gesture which complicates and inverts inter-generational sexual guilt and power, Nellie taunts Uncle Simon, flaunting her naked breasts at him; whereas Peggy's abuse of the old man is physical, Nellie's is psychological.

Pop Cotter's ironically narrated death, early in the narrative, demonstrates how patriarchy simultaneously interpellates and subjugates its 'beneficiaries':

> There never was the funeral of a private person in Bridgehead or surrounding districts, like that of Thomas Cotter. All his friends were there. There were those from the assurance company, colleagues and clients, a group from two of his pubs, the Tuesday and Saturday, and a big wreath from his fellow drinkers of the Thursday for whom he had given his life .... (56)

Parodying the solemn discourse of the obituary, the narrative diminishes the father's credibility as a bearer of 'real' social power, representing him instead as a deludedly contented member of the working-class, an everyday bearer of the ideological discourses of capitalism. His individual death, far from marking the end of patriarchy, inaugurates its generational renewal through his daughters' - Peggy's as well as Nellie's - appropriation of male power. There is a narrative alignment between the pathetic Uncle Simon and the younger Tom Cotter: their interchangeable dislocations and alienation underscores male impotence in relation to female potency. Tom, the only family member to extend sympathy to Uncle Simon, and the butt of the women's lewd jokes, finds himself in a parallel situation when returning from the pub to Nellie's Lamb Street party:

> When he re-entered the house, the women all looked as if he had broken in on a board meeting.
>
> 'Have a good time,' he said as he passed on his way to the kitchen.
>
> They stared at him without appreciation. Even Nellie said nothing and stared. He felt like Uncle Simon. (277)

The patriarchal family unit is thus portrayed as endemic, repeating itself like a diseased blueprint throughout other social groupings. It is thoroughly entrenched in society because it benefits not so much its apparent male figureheads, as those women whose covert power is dependent upon and strengthened through complicity with the phallic power of the 'father'. Its hostile structures are ironically mirrored in Nellie's community of strange women, or 'familiars', who distortingly reproduce 'family' as strange and horrifying.

In representing these women in this way, is the narrative ascribing blame for the immoveability of the status quo, the perpetuation of oppressive structures, to women as a whole? This of course fails to account for the positively represented women in the text such as Eliza Cook, Camilla Yates and Caroline Wooller. Rather, the narrative carries out a classification of women into two groups: the heterosexual and the deviant. Caroline, an intrinsically proper and honourable woman, is a victim of Nellie, an intrinsically improper woman. Whereas proper women are men's lovers, supporters and companions, improper women seek power over men, inverting and perpetuating oppressive, patriarchal structures. Improper women can wreck not only heterosexual coupledom, but the revolutionary movement from within.

The proper revolutionary subject, in Marxist terms, is the proletarian or working-class man. And indeed Stead was somewhat dissatisfied with the Kellys, wondering how truly 'representative' they were. Stead tried to formulate, in her letter to Kate Stead, her elusive but desired subject:

> The trouble is I do not wish to meet middle class people, very 'articulate' people or very old people, but those who are working in some way, as in engineering, cotton goods, fish-shops, anything at all of the sort that

> puts them in relations with their own people: *not* retired people, or people who float about in the intellectual or literary world: I can meet those anyway and they are not strictly 'people'.[24]

Ultimately her novel covered precisely the terrain Stead initially wanted to avoid: the 'real' working-class is both present and symptomatically absent from the familial world represented. The narrative foregrounds the domestic world as unproductive and inauthentic, a dilatory space-time, lacking in progress. Additionally, in her role as a Fleet Street journalist, Nellie is an improper counterpart of and parasite upon the working-class; co-opted from the working-class, Nellie is interpellated by the populist, commodifying discourses of capitalism. She is a 'low-cultural' intellectual worker, a product of and traitor to her own class, and one from whom an authentic literary producer and true socialist is to be distinguished.

The description of Flo, quoted at the beginning of this section, is one of a number of mildly nauseated descriptions of 'strange' women who converge upon Nellie's London flat, as the narrative builds towards the climactic scenes of the novel. Among the many word webs in the novel, the chain of significations alluding to the 'strange' or the 'queer' is one of the most persistent. This linguistic web works to render the familiar, including the familial, strange. The list of the novel's characters - cryptically titled, 'Some Persons' - includes 'Johnny Sterker, a strange woman', as well as the infinite (but gender specific) category at the end, 'Other women'; indeed, many named and unnamed women drift in and out of the story. This Strindbergian list begins with a semblance of patriarchal ordering of the Cotter family, but soon degenerates into a seemingly random list of persons of varying importance, prominence and occupation whose roles and interrelationships are left in obscurity.[25] Two

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[24] To Kate Stead (29 June 1949), in *Selected Letters Vol.1*, pp. 116-7.

[25] Camilla Yates finds Frida Strindberg's book about her life with the dramatist on Nellie's shelf. It is ostentatiously inscribed with Nellie's sentimental ode to her own husband, George. (21-2). Anita Segerberg notes an allusion to Strindberg's 'The Ghost Sonata' in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. See 'Getting Started: The Emergence of Christina Stead's Early Fiction', p. 135.

persons, as the list itself mentions, do not appear at all. Other characters who do appear, such as Marion Ilger, are omitted. The incomplete list introduces both the bland taciturnity of the third person narrative and the narrative's habitual play upon names, whether these are legal names, nicknames, pseudonyms or aliases. In Nellie's case, the play upon names suggests the shiftiness of identity; listed as one of the Cotter children rather than as Mrs Cook, Nellie's name suggests the retroactive power of the family, and a consequent lack of individuation through heterosexual coupledom. Nellie's pet, familial name, 'Cushie', occasions Pop Cotter's complaint that her journalistic signature, 'C. Cotter', has caused embarrassment enough to lead him to deceive curious locals about her identity. Furthermore, the list of 'Some Persons' is the only place in the text where Nellie's birth name, Ellen, is given. With what metanarrative effect does the fictional 'Nellie Cotter' therefore play upon 'Ellen Butters', the maiden name of the birth mother who died in Stead's infancy? Reversing the syllabic sequence of 'Ellen', 'Nellie' is only the first of a number of coded, teasing rearrangements, recastings and reversals within the novel, including gender inversion.

In a further twist, relevant to representations of the individual in relation to the social, 'Nello' was a favourite marionette puppet of Stead's who, she explained to Ettore Rella, 'writes in *my* sleep, wooden head as he is'.[26] In correspondence, Stead drew explicitly on the image of the puppet to describe Nellie:

> Even Cushie, looked at in one way is a 'flyaway puppet' - she is eccentric and ridiculous as a puppet. She would be a Fate, control the lives of others. That is very puppet-like. (Though she too is very real.)[27]

As 'puppet', Nellie is both controlling and controlled; as 'would be' Fate, moreover, her controlling desire is fanned by her constitutive disavowal of her puppet status. Replicating the structure of the fetish, the 'Nellie' puppet is contained - her mischievous power being

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[26] To Ettore Rella (30 June 1953), in *Selected Letters Vol.1*, p. 143 [Stead's italics].
[27] To Jessie and Ettore Rella (17 April 1967), in *Selected Letters Vol.1*, p. 281.

theatrical - but is nonetheless seen as efficaciously powerful. A corresponding ambiguity structures narrative representation of Nellie: narrative framing exposes Nellie's rhetoric as delusory and yet profits from her evocative verbal powers. The two-way dynamic of the puppet, representing a bleakly deterministic relation between individual and external forces, is repeated in the other predominant image of Nellie - appropriately for a female predator - of a spider spinning her webs. Her description of Marion's hold over Tom - '"She's woven him into her web. She's taken the poor helpless fly and made him her parcel"' (18) - enacts her own jealous projection. Nellie, not Marion, is the spider, tempting stray women into her web of intrigue.

It is often noted that Nellie and Tom, the 'fatal brother and sister', are metaphorically depicted as each other's inverts, or mirror images.[28] While this relationship of inversion suggests a certain moral equivalence between them (that is, they are as bad as each other), what has been less well acknowledged is how their portrayal, despite this 'symbiosis', entails a subtle and important structural privileging, on the basis of gender, of Tom's viewpoint over Nellie's. Ultimately, the narrative evokes greater sympathy for men, or for male-identified women, than for its fascinating but emasculating female figures. While strategic presences and absences of brother and sister throughout the novel emphasise their collusion, Nellie is assigned the role of evil protagonist, whereas Tom is the seduced and hapless victim. As well as being physically absent from opening and closing scenes which centre on Nellie, Tom is also absent during the narrative's two climactic moments of horror - Peggy's heartless eviction of Uncle Simon and Nellie's symbolic rape of Caroline. The brother's absence licenses the enactment of horrors by the two sisters. His irresponsibility, his negligence and avoidance, his failure to rescue either Caroline or Uncle Simon, despite

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[28] See Brydon, who describes them as mirroring each other, in *Christina Stead*, p. 131; Sheridan, who defines the relationship as 'symbiotic', *Christina Stead*, p. 117; and Terry Sturm who discusses them as alter egos, in 'Christina Stead's New Realism', p. 31 ff.

his promises, shows that Tom is an empty figure, or a doppelgänger, as Nellie's version of him continually asserts. He remains peripheral in relation to Nellie's centrality, impotent in relation to her potency. As doppelgänger, however, Tom represents an undecidable doubleness not accounted for by critics, between malign and benign purposes. On the one hand, he is Nellie's horrid, puppet-like creature and, on the other, he is a potential healer, a locus of resistance to Nellie's seductions. Tom's loyalty to Marion, his sympathy for the plight of Uncle Simon, his desire to understand and forgive Nellie, and his counter-diagnosis of what troubles Nellie's women, offer strong resistance to Nellie's fictions. His healing power is represented as more than a figment, from the viewpoint of Caroline:

> He got up from his chair, stood near her, leaning slightly forward, spread out his arms a little from his body and began to look straight at her, smiling a deep smile. To her surprise, he seemed to grow upwards and outwards and she felt herself smiling, drawn towards him. His hands and face seemed larger and a feeling of happiness spread through her. (172)

Nellie counters such perceptions, arguing that Tom is 'a ghost eating with a ghoul', that he 'has no heart' (139-40). But Nellie's claim that he was the prey of some 'vulture' of an older woman suggests projection, if not guilt. Competing versions of Tom's identity and history thus generate narrative tension and undecidability.

Tom's resistance to Nellie is also inscribed in his mobility, his depthlessness, and his refusal to be co-opted into family dramas. In a scene of contest between brother and sister which culminates in their visit to the sideshow, Tom's 'placid, mild' face and his repeatedly minimal, negative responses to Nellie's interrogation suggest his chosen mode of opposition (184). An implicit alignment with Tom's perspective contrasts with the narrative's objectifying survey of Nellie's energetic and virtuoso performances. Tom's observational capacity is analogous to that of the artist: his openness and sympathy mirror the authorial project, providing the ground for his specific narratives of 'strange and

horrifying experiences'. His magnetic, healing power with women, in particular, seems to derive from his open and receptive being. Such metanarrative elements figured through Tom, however, suggest the strangely ambiguous stance of the authorial narrative, its studied self-effacement. For both character and narrative positioning, extreme withdrawal and relinquishment of control invites the dislocation and fragmentation of the subject (in both senses of individual and discursive subjects). Tom's determined evasion of entrapment becomes an inability to locate or to construct a stable sense of self. His 'art of seeing' is a counterpart of his inability to connect, interpret, and (consequently) to intervene or act. Presented as literal accounts, Tom's stories detail characters, events and settings naively in disconnected, alienated fragments. What his stories share is the character of the uncanny, their oddly familiar repetitions evading coherent signification. In his reading of the 'uncanny' in E. A. Hoffman's tale, 'The Sand-Man', Freud connects fear of blindness to the Oedipal fear of castration.[29] In Stead's novel, what Tom 'sees' is similarly emasculating, as is the wound symbolically inflicted on him by Nellie, who thus asserts controlling power over him:

> Her face bright as metal, triumphant, gleamed and cut into him; very bright, her small eyes peered into his large bursting ones. (190)[30]

Tom's ambivalence and masculine lack cannot be reduced simply to vampirism, as Nellie's version of Tom insists. While Nellie's perspective is insistently interpretive, always editorialising the world and rendering the strange familiar through her 'rosy veil' of poetry, it is from Tom's viewpoint that the familiar becomes strange again. He sees ghosts on the landing in the Bridgehead house, but offers no interpretation of them. He twice glimpses but fails to recognise his sister, Peggy, on her covert forays into the streets:

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[29] Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' in *Collected Papers*, Volume 4. trans. Joan Riviere (New York: Basic Books, 1959), p. 383.

[30] This moment of 'castration' has been noted by Sheridan, in *Christina Stead*, p. 117.

> ... a pale middle-aged woman with spectacles, a strained face, akerchief on her head, hurrying forward with a shopping basket. 'What a typical Bridgehead woman she is,' he thought, his heart drawn to her by her look of indoor privations, all of which he understood. Then he saw that again it was his sister Peggy ... . (116)

It is from a position akin to Tom's, which resists interpretive structures, and which aims at defamiliarisation, that much of the Bridgehead and Northern English environment is presented. Surreal images, situating bodies in relation to their environment, suggest the uncanny horror of psychological and communal fragmentation:

> 'They say that in Wisbech ... You can hear sounds, things moving round your feet, in the fog. It might be a bush. You might stumble over something, the remains of masonry. You can't see your feet: you feel as if all the parts of your body are going along separately. If you take someone's hand, it's just your hand holding a hand. You lift your hand up over the fog and there are two hands holding together.' (251)

Tom's fragmentation is accompanied by an apparent mobility of view. His frequent excursions by car, during which he charms a succession of women with his stories, represent through mobility a rootless modernity, in which progress and speed belie stasis and stagnation. Tom is a questing figure without an object. Like the moving landscapes seen from a car window, or a sequence of cinematic images, his stories statically repeat what he sees, but offer no interpretation. While this strategy mirrors the self-effacement of the authorial narrative, it also establishes an important distinction. By implication, Tom's fractured, replicating view must be seen as a 'distorting mirror', because it repeats without understanding, without theory and without history. His apparent 'freedom' is circular and repetitive whereas, for the reader, moral judgement is invited through narrative cues like sequencing, framing and repetition. Tom's estranging view is thus both a narrative resource and evidence of his ideological entrapment. It is an inverted version of Nellie's mythmaking rhetoric.

Whereas Tom's stories emphasise life's strangeness and impenetrability, Nellie's ostensible aim is to penetrate life's mysteries and to deny its strangeness through her fictions and her dramatisations. The theatricality of Nellie's performance is established in the opening chapter, which thematises her calculating, charismatic voice in combination with the spectacle of her strangely fascinating and repulsively familiar female body. Nellie's monologic presence is deliberately dialogised with the aid of a muted interpretive frame, cueing judgement. The receptive yet interrogative seated figure of the dressmaker, Camilla Yates, simultaneously images and structures the reader's stance. Complaining, to Camilla, of the continental influence of modernist architectural projects in the redevelopment of British towns, Nellie nationalistically affirms the British 'cot' which institutes an habitual, somnolent insularity.[31] This indigenous, domestic subject of Nellie's panegyric is what therefore effects the cultural incorporation and placation of the British working-class. Nellie's sentimental journalese approves the domestic consolations which both aid survival in a meagre environment and which constitute and perpetuate social entrapment:

> '... The British, Camilla, will never give up their fireplaces and their cosy little back rooms. You sit in front of the fire and look into it and you begin to relax after the day's work ... Ah, Camilla love, there's nothing better than to come home when you can't go on anymore and brew your pot of tea and sit before the blaze and dream ... .' (15)

The theatrical force of this address exceeds mere description of the British national character: Nellie is an agent in its perpetuation. The speaker/listener (performer/audience) posture of Nellie and Camilla intriguingly re-casts the scene from the first chapter of *For Love Alone*, in which the semi-naked patriarch, Andrew Hawkins, fills the doorway as he lectures on love to his seated, silent, sewing daughters. The strange, female body of the half-dressed Nellie encodes and travesties the earlier figure of the patriarch; she is his uncanny

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[31] Gribble points out Nellie's nostalgic and ironic evocation of the communal model of the British 'cot': see *Christina Stead*, p. 95.

repetition/double. Nellie's patriarchal subjectivity is both a rebellion against the father and an identification with and appropriation of male power, deflecting her from her heterosexual destiny. Tom reflects that Nellie '... had to wait until Pop Cotter was half dead before the great light shining on her face and blinding her to other men waned ...' (270).

Implicitly (and thereby compellingly), the reader's position is aligned with that of the seated, silent figure of Camilla Yates, or whomever Nellie addresses. Like Sam Pollit in *The Man Who Loved Children*, Nellie is presented primarily through her direct performance of spoken language, or by description of her person. In contrast to Tom, whose indirect discourse and observational perspective provides sympathetic access to his viewpoint, Nellie's interiority is rarely accessed. Nellie's subjectivity is thus habitually established as elusive, a site of speculation. What are her real motives and thoughts? By remaining external to her viewpoint, the narrative circumscribes sympathetic identification with Nellie, while promoting her mystery. With a voice at once compelling, theatrical and calculated, Nellie is seen in a performance to which the reader is both subjected and of which s/he is invited to be critical:

> She took a few puffs, inhaling deeply, and continued, like a chant, 'They brought us into the world in sorrow and ignorance and haste, young people then, with their lives before them, taking us like packs on their backs, along the pike; and from then on destiny had only one voice, it came out of the crying mouths of little children. Taking a strange dangerous chance with us, fighting against poverty and death with us in their arms. That's the thought, isn't it, pet? It's pitiful. We must take up the burden of repayment. We've not fulfilled their hope, I'm afraid, darling. That's beyond our poor human powers.' (17)

Nellie's mesmeric mixture of poetry and cliché, rhetoric and blandishment, makes palatable her colonising exhortation to recognise and submit to a generalised, generational guilt. Camilla, like the reader, is momentarily seduced, 'won by the inner melody of the northern

voice', but the succeeding image, inserted like a countering stage direction, firmly frames Nellie's speech as calculated performance:

> She had paused and settled herself in a businesslike way. She cocked her head, like a journalist envisaging his paragraph.

Accused by George of being a 'Fleet Street sobsister' (214), Nellie's language both demonstrates and exceeds this diminishing label. As strikingly written/rehearsed speech-performance, Nellie's discourse employs the sensationalist narrative genres of the tabloid or popular press, editorialising and dramatising the world as horrific, scandalous and guilty, focusing on the plight of individuals, rather than on political, economic or structural determinants of social conditions. Nellie's demagogy about destiny is both powerful and crippling: invoking 'truth' of human misery, but spurning explanatory theory, it sabotages revolutionary forces, whether these forces are located at individual or communal levels.

Nellie's strange body is ambiguously gendered, functioning in the narrative as a framing device for her discourse:

> Nellie, with a lively, hard smile, was sitting opposite, knees wide apart, her eyes fixed on her guest. She was wearing a blue shirt, as in the picture, and a pair of riding breeches, horribly bloodstained. Her hair was tied up with a coloured handkerchief, her feet were in Spanish rope slippers, and, leaning on one elbow, she held a cigarette in the air. (50)

Nellie's assumption of a masculine identity is grotesquely combined with aggressive menstrual display, indicating the horror of her (un)familiarity. Her dress code, which ostentatiously parades her identification with the workers and contempt for things 'bourgeois' and 'feminine', assumes a more sinister role in deranging 'proper' meanings when, for example, she cross-dresses in her brother's clothes, passing as an airman before the vulnerable Caroline.

Nellie's bodily strangeness is also emphasised in images which link her with stagnant, watery environments such as the swamp and the marsh:

> Nellie was a strange thing, her shabby black hair gathered into a sprout on the top of her small head, her beak and backbone bent forward, her thin long legs stepping prudently, gingerly, like a marsh bird's, as she came over the hogback ground floor, stairs up, stairs down, to the front room with her tea tray. (13)

Numerous terms pertaining to water, especially to creatures inhabiting enclosed, watery environments in the depths of the sea, the marsh or the swamp, evoke the amniotic fluid of pre-oedipal life, and the encompassing body of the mother which subverts (and sustains) phallic order. These images postpone and disrupt clear judgements of approval or disapproval, inducing an effect of perpetual dislocation, or oscillation between fascination and horror. The feminine, especially as represented by Nellie, is 'unheimlich', being both intimate and strange, charismatic and alien, the 'other' of an orderly, meaningful and connected world, the constitutive other of the revolutionary subject. The watery feminine element represents the sticky, sickly and disintegrating fabric of an ailing community.

Nellie's marriage to George Cook who, in opportunistic pursuit of a career in the international left, continually abandons Nellie and starving England for the Continent, is represented in the narrative as her one real chance for reform. Continually publicised by Nellie as a 'perfect union', the marriage is a battleground in which combat supplants sexual rapproachment. It is a travesty of the true heterosexual coupledom implicitly posited in the text as the only viable means of departure from the circularity of familial dependence and political stagnation. In her theatrical address to George, Nellie unwittingly reveals both paranoia and desire, moving from a clichéd complaint about being trampled on by the 'bourgeois and the Philistines', to its unconscious inversion in the idea of treading inescapably on the watchful face of life:

> '... a great, seamy, crusted face looking up at you from underneath, you can't get away from it because you're treading on it, you need it to live on and you're treading on it, and *whenever* you look you see the great face with the lips; you hurry away to another spot and you see the great eyes neither animal nor human unwinking and you are afraid just the same to walk everywhere on the face of life. You wonder where there's a place for you on the face that's so watchful and whose thoughts you don't know. You strain to find out one of its thoughts, but it has nothing but an awful thinking about the good and the evil and it judges you. In a way the Philistines are closer to it than me, because they are glad to judge you too, and if they understand you it's with a hard knife to your brain.' (223) [my emphasis]

Calculated to move George to pity, Nellie's plea is nonetheless unconsciously revealing. The choice of 'whenever' rather than the contextually more probable 'wherever' marks this as an image of repression, a process to be repeated and reinforced over time. This face, 'looking up at you from underneath', appears as a projection, a mirroring of that which Nellie has repressed, an image from which she must escape but from which escape is impossible. The action of treading on the face figures Nellie's own dominance over others, 'the great eyes neither animal nor human unwinking' recalling depictions of Nellie herself as alien, birdlike and sleepless.[32] Further, an uncanny horror is produced by 'the lips', which represent that which eludes/blinds the eye, the castrated female organ.[33] The image suggests the invasive gaze of sexual predator, ascribed to Nellie in a variety of sinister developments throughout the text. Beyond this, as well as encoding the Cold War climate of surveillance, the description ironically mirrors the furtive powers of the authorial narrative, the force that constructs and constrains Nellie, that determines her destiny and views her mercilessly under the microscope, applying 'a hard knife' to her brain.

Stymied by disgust with her 'villainess', Stead confessed to Stanley Burnshaw that she only got herself out of the 'wood of hate' by thinking of Nellie as a violin, '... and who

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[32] According to Freud, an individual's dread of the evil eye is caused by fear of the envy of others, and fear that others' envy will inspire their secret revenge: 'The "Uncanny"', p.393.

[33] See Irigaray's critique of the Freudian privileging of the gaze which posits the castrated position of the woman and thus determines sexual difference: 'The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry' in *Speculum*, pp. 47-8.

wants morals from a violin?'[34] The violin image tames Nellie's disorder, situating her as a performer who is ultimately subject to novelistic control. In a move which diminishes her agency, Nellie is the instrument of a performance not really her own. Enabled only by musician-composer, Nellie's performance is subject to authorial control and this reinscribes her, momentarily, as properly 'feminine'. Anxiety evoked by the disorderly feminine in the narrative is contained by the deployment of such kinaesthetic images of Nellie,[35] and through a reassertion of proper heterosexual boundaries. Through heterosexual coupledom, through George's 'original' vision of her, Nellie's personal attractions are momentarily redeemed from their usually negatively depicted strangeness:

> Once, too, he had thought her very beautiful in a unique way, strange, shaking with mysterious bells and corollas like an oriental tree, shivering with sunstreaks, racing with windrips from within. He still saw these almost invisible movements in her. His eyes were closing and her darings and trillings, her ingenuous and disingenuous ways, lovely voice and queer oaths, all the practiced art came to him, blew round him, lulled him and made him laugh: and then she would wake him up with a buffet, with sting and roaring in his eyes and ears .... (218-19)

Evoking Ariel rather than a Caliban in this instance, Nellie is still subject to the author/magician's will. But images of Nellie's feminine allure subside in comparison with her theatrical antics in the marital bedroom. Dressed in faded men's pyjamas, Nellie travesties the scene of conjugal love, winding the trophy of the now dead Caroline's ribbon three times around her scrawny waist, eating onions, smoking, drinking brandy and spitting blood (304). As in similar scenes in the novel, her foreplay with George is an invitation to combat. The suggested role reversal here, of active female seducer and passive male object of desire, can be paralleled with other episodes in Stead's fiction, such as the relation between Teresa and Jonathan in *For Love Alone*. Gender reversal stops well short of

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[34] To Stanley Burnshaw (23 February 1965), in *Selected Letters Vol.1*, p. 227.

[35] Sheridan notes the presence of kinaesthetic images in Stead's fiction, and aligns them with Kristeva's theory of the semiotic: *Christina Stead*, pp. 52-3.

'perversity' in *For Love Alone*, however, as Teresa's interests are confined to the realm of heterosexual logic.[36] In *Cotters' England*, the heterosexual act between Nellie and George does not express love, but is Nellie's opportunity to retrieve lost terrain, to re-establish recognition as legitimate wife, to assert power over the male. With what amounts to a battle cry, Nellie initiates her nightlong torment of the philandering George: '"I intend to run you ragged, you bugger"' (218). Nellie assumes the feminine mask to please George. The truth of Nellie's identity is, however, continually masked and displaced. As a seeker of power, and an inveterate role-player, Nellie is rarely unmasked. The novel's climactic scene of unmasking does not reveal truth, but merely evokes a greater estrangement, a deeper (un)familiarity. A detailed discussion of this scene of 'Walpurgis-nacht' will conclude this section's argument about the novel's representation of the female uncanny as that which can wreck revolution.

It is clear that the reader is expected to respond with horror to the estranging climax of the narrative, the staged revelation of a moonlit female orgy, orchestrated for her victim Caroline's benefit by a Mephistophilean Nellie. The scene obtains its wider power through a curious intertextuality with the 'Walpurgis-nacht' scene in Goethe's *Faust*, in which Mephistopheles reveals to a sexually awakened Faust the forgetful pleasures of orgiastic abandonment.[37] This interlude in *Faust*, in Marshall Berman's reading, functions as Faust's diversion from a growing tension between himself and Gretchen, the saintly woman he has seduced. Both characters, according to Berman in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, endure a personal transformation or 'development' which exceeds and ultimately shatters the confining logic of the small town idyll of the pre-industrial world. Identifying as crucial the experience of modernity shared by Marx as well as by Goethe, Berman sees *Faust* as an

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[36] For an exploration of the 'radical depth' of conservative gender roles in *For Love Alone*, see D. R. Burns, 'The Active Passive Inversion: Sex Roles in Garner, Stead and Harrower', in *Meanjin*, 3 (1986), pp. 346-353.

[37] Goethe, *Faust: Part One*, trans: Philip Wayne (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1949), pp. 167-186.

exemplary formulation of the experience of 'modernisation'. It is this simultaneously positive and negative reaction to modernity which, in Berman's view, grounds the Marxist dictum that history must proceed by its bad side. In Goethe's text, the doubleness of history is also represented: whereas, for Faust, development beyond traditional horizons has positive results, for Gretchen, an unprotected woman, development leads to ostracism and death:

> [Gretchen's] self-destruction is a form of self-development as authentic as Faust's own. She, as much as he, is trying to move beyond the rigid enclosures of family, church and town, a world where blind devotion and self-abasement are the only roads to virtue ... Faust fights the old world ... by transforming himself into a new type of person ... Gretchen clashes just as radically with that world by asserting its noblest human qualities: pure concentration and commitment of the self in the name of love.[38]

But notably, here, the direction of development for each character hinges upon gender. In mapping the experience of modernity through a network of texts, Berman does not explicitly account for the gendered operations of Marxist and modernist discourses, which reinscribe modernity as a realm privileging the male subject. The modern world and its freedoms are literally unavailable to the woman, who has little choice other than nobly to write herself out of progressive history. Berman's reading, however, provides a context for what happens, in *Cotters' England*, to Caroline, who functions as the Gretchen figure, the pure woman seduced, and whose nightmare ambiguously supplants Faust's positive experience of modernity. The spectacle of 'witches sabbath', in *Cotters' England*, is displayed before a vulnerable female spectator and operates to dismantle her subjectivity. Female bodies are metamorphosed into the strange otherness of sea creatures, in a description which both defamiliarises them and intensifies horror at their casual, awkward familiarity:

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[38] Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, pp. 58-9. The small town idyll is also relevant to the discussion of the Bakhtinian chronotope of the provincial town, discussed in section two of this chapter.

> A number of naked women were rounding, breaking, wrestling, weaving together in the back yard between the brick walls, the high fence and the tree. The moonlight showed that some were rosy in the daytime, others were the colors of night-lighted fish and they were like queer fish, a seahorse, an old man snapper, a gar, a toadfish, a puffball and one rather awkward and hesitant was as yet, only a woman: and what was more ludicrous, partly dressed. (291)

Having dressed in Tom's airman suit and thereby become a threateningly liminal figure, Nellie forces Caroline to witness a surreal drama of female disorder. Caroline's loss of honour, as a result of this contaminating spectacle, is equivalent to a loss of faith in human community, propelling her towards suicide. Nellie's achievement is thus the dismembering of any vision for the future. Jennifer Gribble's reading of this climactic scene of 'disorderly women' proposes that Nellie's cross-dressing expresses, through its ironic impersonation, her possessive love for Tom. She reasons that 'animal imagery, as always in Stead's writing, defuses moral judgement ... ' and that the lesbian women, transformed by night in their bacchanal:

> ... are no more queer than Robbie Grant or Henny Pollit; the orgy ... is no more or less a travesty of the creative mysteries of love than the sex parties of Grant and his cronies. The shocking effect of the scene comes rather from Nellie's rape of Caroline's sensibility and her trust ....[39]

Nellie's psychological 'rape' of Caroline is indeed significant, but it is equally important to recognise the narrative's specific representation of Nellie's power as linked to her 'queerness', her disorienting gender instability and secret inversion. The animal imagery, throughout the narrative, has not so much defused moral judgement as deferred it, so that the strange sea creatures comprising the bacchanalian circle are the culminating revelation of sexual, moral and political cynicism. Nellie is the corrupting female temptress, masquerading as male cut free from the earth (airman), preying upon and subverting

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[39] Gribble, *Christina Stead*, p. 99.

revolutionary aspiration. Through this illegitimate, reactionary project, Nellie parodies and thwarts the wholesome development of what the authorial narrative clearly privileges: heterosexual companionship and emancipatory goals. Nellie's appearance in the airman's suit is not merely a symptom of possessive love for her brother, but a consumption of his identity, an appropriation of male power, in pursuit of illicit political and sexual purposes. Tom, after all, has been on the verge of 'rescuing' Caroline, and Nellie's triumph over Caroline represents also a triumph over Tom, and heterosexual order.

What Nellie makes Caroline see is not 'named' in the text - the scene of lesbian debauchery, its diseased disorder metaphorising the chaos of the social and political scene. The way the narrative 'frame' is constructed directs the reader, through Caroline, to view this scene as a nightmare of humanity (partially) transformed into alien creatures in an alien element. The 'partial' nature of these metamorphoses only adds to their horror: bodies are not complete, but half-animal, half-human. The moonlit environment, depicting the scene as a murky aquarium, suggests an abject horror of the female body and a fearful denial of the authenticity of homoerotic desire. Having unveiled the spectacle, Nellie turns to find Caroline has disappeared:

> She went out and looked about among the women who were not excited enough to keep that slow rhythm up long. (292)

The women's lack of excitement insinuates that the bacchanal is not only an elaborately staged spectacle, but a pleasureless ritual. What Caroline, along with the reader, beholds is not a evidence of genuine female desire but a sideshow charade. Underlying this drama, this staged revelation, is the narrative's outmanoeuvering act of containment of Nellie, and of lesbianism, within the category of fakery and cultism. The authorial narrative addresses lesbian desire in order to reduce it to an impossible 'figment', to put it under erasure again.

Sheridan observes the 'moralistic queasiness throughout the text about lesbians and Bohemia'. In view of Stead's other novels and interviews, Sheridan does not see Stead's focus as primarily dictated by the specificity of these terms, but as compelled by a 'horrified fascination' with the amoral, anarchic power of the unconscious:

> The attribution in this text of 'disorder' and 'anarchy' to women living without the love of men... evokes, through the imagery of witchcraft, *all* sexual and egotistic energies as demonic and disruptive.[40]

While this helps to make *Cotters' England* more palatable for feminist readers, Sheridan's conclusion does not pursue the ways in which this particular novel genders sexual disorder. Similarly, the motif of witchcraft to which Sheridan refers, which is implicated in Nellie's 'necromancy', brings with it an historical specificity which insistently feminises sexual disorder.[41] In addition, the 'feminine' gendering of witchcraft in history inflects, in Stead's text, 'history' itself as doubly scripted, as possessing an unconscious, corrupting counter-narrative which erupts through its known, rational version. The cult of witchcraft, evoking not only 'Walpurgis-nacht' but also change-resistant traces of pre-literate, ancient Europe, is counterposed to the daylight logic of readable history which belongs, the text implies by default, to the masculine realm of the Marxist narrative. Commenting on Tom's ambiguous 'sexlessness', Stead alluded in one of her letters to the layers of folklore invested in this figure:

> ... all this and its connection with ancient sun-worship (crossed swords in a circle, sword-dance, crown of thorns, rushes laid in a circle, rays of the sun as seen in old caves in the north Scandinavia) is in that scene with the women who are sitting in a circle, and in which Tom, with the rose in his ear, crosses the sacred circle, a glass is smashed, blood falls, etc ... .[42]

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[40] Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, p. 119.

[41] See Stead's letter to Jessie and Ettore Rella (17 April 1967), in *Selected Letters Vol.1*, pp. 280-281. In this letter Stead also refers to her witchcraft imagery.

[42] To Jessie and Ettore Rella (17 April 1967), in *Selected Letters Vol.1*, pp. 280-1.

Stead's gloss on this cryptic scene of the bacchanal's preliminaries illustrates not only the text's careful coding, but also an authorial desire that it should be correctly decoded and understood. Tom's passage is tolerated, his already emasculated (feminised) presence - a status symbolically reiterated in the cut he sustains from the glass Nellie throws at him as he crosses the magic circle - rendering him both puppet and observer, relaying detached but mesmerised observation. The scene draws together the narrative's complex of symbolic interactions and motifs about both Tom and Nellie, depicting the inverted and parasitical relation between them and, in the process, significantly demonising Nellie rather than Tom, who remains puppet-like. The scene is staged in this way both to demonise female homoerotic desire and to contain it within the label, 'cult'. By associating Nellie with necromancy, the lid is firmly closed on the 'authentic' expression of lesbian desire. Such a move, paradoxically and in a Foucauldian sense, proliferates narrative obsession with sex and sexual identity.

Nellie occupies a liminal sexual position, making her less nauseating than the women at her party, but ultimately more threatening as a transgressor of boundaries. Evading easy categorisation, but thereby more monstrous, Nellie is both enlarged and diminished by the narrative. Although it would seem that her primacy is re-established when, after a temporary interruption misleadingly suggestive of change, she returns to the unaltered routines of her world, the reader now perceives that world as thoroughly isolated and isolating:

> Not long after Nellie returned, Walter the window washer came to the door to ask about the Mister. Nellie told him all about it at length and he was charmed by her with all her bells swinging at him .... (352)

Nellie's return to the narrow circle of her life at the end of the novel, with charms unabated, asserts her primacy and inevitability at the same time as it makes of her environment

(England itself) a kind of goldfish bowl. She escapes punishment and retribution, enjoying instead the parochial role of the hero's widow. In *Cotters' England*, because its darkest secrets are kept closeted, the prevailing culture is not ruptured. There is a certain staged revelation, but there is no revolution.

2. True lies, secret circles: the power of (un)knowing

> 'You don't know - Nell, it's just as if some evil spirit, some demon were speaking out of your mouth. Those aren't your words; and you don't know what work you're at.' (175)
>
> ... to renounce false judgements would be to renounce life, would be to deny life. To recognize untruth as a condition of life: that, to be sure, means to resist customary value-sentiments in a dangerous fashion; and a philosophy which ventures to do so places itself, by that act alone, beyond good and evil.[43]

If 'revolutionary consciousness' is lacking in the world of *Cotters' England*, how permanent or intractable is this lack? Does it extend only to the Cotters, or is 'revolutionary consciousness' itself a fiction? Does the narrative construct a privileged position of truth/knowledge, transcending the 'distorting mirrors' of ideological consciousness? At least two possible responses to these questions are indicated in the epigraphs above. Firstly, the characters may be seen as objectified by the text, turned into puppets who do not know what they speak. In this reading, the authorial narrative itself becomes the locus of privileged, revolutionary consciousness. Secondly, the operations of the narrative itself can be seen as so deceptive and evasive that all claims to a knowable truth exterior to ideology are abolished. These two positions are significant in assessing the role of Marxism in

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[43] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Prejudices of Philosophers' (Section 4), in *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 35-6.

constructing the novel's value system. Diana Brydon, for example, reads the 'Palace of Mirrors' scene, in which Nellie and Tom catch sight of their distorted reflections - as 'playing-card King', 'spindling hatchet witch' and 'black raven' - as a sign of irretrievable entrapment within false consciousness. For Brydon, the text thus invites its reader to shatter the mirror and to break free from delusion.[44] Sheridan counters this reading with the observation that:

> The very fact that the image of the distorting mirror is Nellie's favourite one for invalidating other people's realities is perhaps warning against employing such a notion of ideology in analysis.[45]

Sheridan believes that Brydon's implicitly pre-psychoanalytic notion of a false consciousness veiling an accessible, stable truth does not account for the multiple textual ironies of *Cotters' England*. These ironies, says Sheridan, reveal deceptions that work to 'construct a multiplicity of competing truths ... as well as pointing to the compulsive springs of action in the unconscious.'[46] Accordingly, the text radically undermines the confident truth claims of the knowing subject - including the reading subject. This post-Althusserian strategy which complicates 'ideology' and refuses a linear or 'explanatory model of reading' is one that I find compelling. It need not preclude, however, critical awareness of the ambiguous, fractured and ideological markings of the authorial narrative. Indeed, the force of a poststructuralist reading strategy can be invoked to collapse the critical binary that might otherwise inhibit attention to textual signs of intentionality, unity and desire for coherent signification. The novelistic deceptions in *Cotters' England* indirectly, but all the more insistently for that matter, assign political values to the characters and

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[44] Brydon, *Christina Stead*, p. 131, 137.
[45] Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, p. 120.
[46] Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, p. 121.

their actions: through devices such as framing and 'closeting', a symbolic dominance over the characters is asserted.

An instance of such a reading strategy can be found in Kate Lilley's discussion of Stead's *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)*. Lilley detects traces of a narrative intentionality (an insincerity) in the excessive female figure of Eleanor Brent neé Herbert who functions as a catachrestically counterfeit and improper body against which the truly authentic and proper female figure of the 'author' is realised and legitimated. Lilley's reading infers disingenuity here, 'since the contest which the novel implicitly stages is faked and the outcome known in advance'. Deconstructing the narrative's implicit binaries, Lilley observes that:

> Homosexuality as an abuse of sexual propriety is the open secret of *Miss Herbert*, aligned with negative curiosity, decadence, closeting or screening, effeminate men and manly women; it is also aligned with political untrustworthiness, paranoia, naiveté, and the slur of conspiracy.[47]

The potent nexus between sexual and political identifications suggests a curious relation between author and protagonist. Following this reasoning, in *Cotters' England*, too, the narrative staging of the improper figure of the lesbian who preys upon the left might also be seen as an unstable sign of an authorial investment, a site both of disavowal and of desire for legitimation. The figure of the closet in *Cotters' England* ostensibly promises that there is a truth to be unveiled. With the opening of the door, with the lifting of the 'lid', with the revelation of hidden truth, true consciousness and revolution must surely follow. But as Judith Butler has suggested, far from opening onto some 'new unbounded spatiality' the closet may open instead on the prospect of endless deferral.[48] For Eve Sedgwick, the figure of the closet is the site of powerful and proliferating ignorance/knowledge networks,

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[47] Lilley, 'The New Curiosity Shop', p. 6.

[48] See Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), p.16.

particularly in relation to sexuality in Western discourses.[49] In *Cotters' England*, the undisclosed secrets of past and present foster its characters' reactionary suppressions of identity and history; these same undisclosed secrets, however, constitute a site of projected authorial judgement and a powerful recuperation of the 'proper' revolutionary subject.

In exploring the workings of the 'closet' in this novel, however, I want also to register the informing significance of its historical and discursive contexts, and more specifically, the play of its novelistic genres. Historical and discursive contexts suggest other ways of understanding authorial desires, anxieties and disavowals. At the time of writing this particular novel, Stead was radically displaced within both economic and cultural fields, an expatriate struggling for survival, out of favour with the market, out of step with the climate of the Cold War. The historical failure of Western revolutionary movements, the erosion of the authority of Marxism amongst intellectuals, the increasing defection of intellectuals from the Communist Party - all these must have weighed heavily with loyal Stalinists such as Stead and Blake, and contributed to a sense of political and cultural displacement. Indeed, to be marked as a communist sympathiser was surely to be thrust into a veritable closet of deviant, unspeakable political and personal identity.

Close textual study, however, can complicate this reading, by foregrounding novelistic genres within which the individual text is produced and perhaps determined. Representation of the time and space of history is conditioned, in *Cotters' England*, by genre: intersecting novelistic chronotopes (space-time axes) of provincial town and threshold relay modernist anxieties about an historical impasse of crisis and stagnation. These generic chronotopes, identified by Bakhtin, reproduce the narrative's yearning for and despair of revolution. Cumulatively, these discursive contexts indicate the deeply overdetermined

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[49] Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), pp. 3-5.

nature of the 'closet' in *Cotters' England*, as generic categories work in tandem with the spectacle of sexual deviancy to suggest the diversion of revolutionary energies towards repetitive and theatrical parody.

Critical studies have already shown that in *Cotters' England* subjectivity is ideologically saturated, if not constituted. Terry Sturm's influential, materialist reading of Stead's fiction began the process of recuperation of Stead's work for Marxist and feminist criticism, highlighting Stead's unobtrusive dramatisation of characters as they move, speak and act within specific historic, economic and political circumstances:

> ...[their history] is simply *assumed* in the lives of her characters, referred to in casual and allusive ways; for this reason, it often comes to us, at the beginning of the novel, in fragmentary or cryptic ways - a name casually dropped, an incident alluded to. At other times it is filtered through mood and feeling ...eventually it emerges ... as an aspect of their more conscious struggles to understand the significance of their lives ... .[50]

What Sturm identifies as a 'sense of an impinging past' gestures to Stead's Marxist understanding of the relationship of past and present.[51] The text's representation of this past/present relation has been thematised, from different political viewpoints, by subsequent critics. The Cotters' lack of insight into history effectively curtails their power, blocking 'real' revolutionary change. Their ignorance of history, however, is also productive and powerful: characters participate in constructing history, in making myths and in perpetuating them, even as they are constructed by history. It is in (the possibly vain) search for a 'true' account of this history that the reader is thrust by Stead's narrative style into the role of historian.[52] In his study of the stalling of revolution under the dictatorship of

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[50] Sturm, 'Christina Stead's New Realism', pp. 22-3.

[51] Sturm, 'Christina Stead's New Realism', p. 22.

[52] See Geering, who points out that the 'full portrait [of Nellie] has to be assembled in a roundabout way': 'Christina Stead in the 1960s', p. 31.

Louis Bonaparte, with its threatened recuperation of bourgeois hegemony, Marx argues that the struggle with the past is fundamental to the revolutionary project:

> The awakening of the dead in these revolutions therefore served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given tasks in imagination, not of taking flight from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its ghost walk again.[53]

While asserting the necessity of co-opting the past in the service of the revolution, Marx warns against a solipsistic, self-destructive use of the past, which leads to the ghostly caricature of revolution. Terry Eagleton elaborates:

> Only by dreaming the past can revolutionaries awaken from its nightmare, since the past is what they are made of. Only by turning back, with the horror-stricken face of Walter Benjamin's *angelus novus*, can the revolution be blown by the winds of history into the realm of the future.[54]

The failure to 'dream the past' in a manner which aids historic progress accounts for the malaise in *Cotters' England*, in which Nellie's sentimental theory and promotion of guilt about the past makes a mockery of the spirit of revolution by recirculating oppressive and unproductive myths. Many restless 'ghosts' circulate through *Cotters' England*, signifying entrapment within an ahistorical discourse. For example, during his work-related stay at a century-old hotel, the River-Ouse, Tom first hears ghostly voices and then discovers that the hearthstones in the hotel room are from an old graveyard over which the hotel has been built:

> In his diary he wrote a letter to a woman, no name, telling her about the voices and the gravestones. He wrote, 'I should like to have a hotel like this, a poor hotel, and run it well and call it The Weary Traveler.' (319)

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[53] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 438. This passage is also quoted in Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 213.

[54] Eagleton, *Ideology*, p. 213.

Tom, himself 'The Weary Traveler', is waylaid in the past. His desire has no firm object - he privately addresses an unnamed woman - and he is subject to the morbid attractions of the grave. This horrifying experience, like his others, is evacuated of coherence, indicating the oppressively constitutive power of the past and defeating progressive historical understanding. Unable to interpret his experiences, Tom is condemned to repeat them.

Rather than allowing herself to 'dream the past', Nellie actively evades and suppresses the history of her own complicities and misdeeds and directs immense energy into recruiting all her intimates to her narrative. Her torrent of words swamps other, less palatable, versions of history. Her persuasive repudiation of theoretical socialism - 'Not one word of their theory can put a roof over that family's heads' (236) - is firmly 'placed' by her refusal of any 'objective' accounting of her own past history. Though her references to this past remain cryptic, Nellie is occasionally confronted with unwanted evidence. In one such instance, Tom insists on prodding her memory:

> '... Do you remember the Indian boy? In Bridgehead? One of Jago's circle. He was attracted by Jago's scraps of philosophy.'
> 'Yes,' she said sulkily, mumbling her cigarette.
> 'He talked about death all the time and do you remember what happened?'
> 'No, pet, I don't.'
> 'You do remember, Nell ....' (177)

Tom becomes most coherent when combatting Nellie's mythmaking. His account of the 'horrifying experience' of the Indian boy's death is unusually insistent and interpretive, bringing to Nellie's attention a counter version of the cult group which corrupted them. The role of a connective memory intimated here suggests possible access to a truth about the horrors of the past. Tom attempts to turn Nellie's attention to her destructive eloquence, which resulted in the boy's alienation and death, and to alert her to the similar dangers of her involvement with Caroline:

> Tom put his hand over his eyes, took them away, looked at her with his large globular china blue eyes, shining and staring, 'You used to talk death with him, Nellie; isn't that where you got this black stuff? You should never have brought her here.' (178)

The Jago group's cultish bohemianism recalls - in ghostly form, perhaps - the involvement of intellectuals in the vitalist Nietzschean cult, in Sydney in the early 1920s, as disseminated through the Lindsays' *Vision* magazine which, according to Ian Reid, is the referent of the magazine read by Teresa Hawkins in *For Love Alone*.[55] Diana Brydon, following Reid, draws a pointed biographical inference from the fiction that:

> Like Jack Lindsay, ... Stead moved from this apolitical celebration of positive instincts to a political engagement formed by Marxism when she moved, as he did, from Sydney to London.[56]

Does *Cotters' England* then constitute an even more critical targeting - or a decided disavowal - of these earlier, pre-Marxist, Nietzschean enthusiasms? Nellie is without doubt a caricature of the Nietzschean great leader, perhaps a postwar female reincarnation of that modern travesty of working-class leaders, Adolf Hitler. If she represents any class position, it must surely be that of the 'lumpenproletariat' of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, the 'refuse of all classes', and in later Marxist analyses of fascism, 'the déclassés ... unable to find their way back into bourgeois life after the first world war, and the impoverished masses of the lower middle class and peasantry ... .'[57] Tom's allusions to Nellie's continuing deployment of the corrupt practices of the Jago group suggest the reproductive power of her guilty suppressions. Her avoidance of this past, her persistent self delusion, fosters her present manipulations. Portrayed as both determined consciousness and determining force, Nellie

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[55] Ian Reid, 'The Woman Problem', in *Fiction and the Great Depression: Australia and New Zealand 1930-1950*, by Ian Reid (Melbourne: Edward Arnold, 1979), pp. 110-111.

[56] Brydon, *Christina Stead*, pp. 80-1.

[57] See entry, 'lumpenproletariat', in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 327.

embodies the amnesic social malaise - she is a spider spinning an unwholesome ideological and psychological web:

> 'You're so transparent, Nell. You've got just a little twisted spittling spider thread of sympathy and you try to dangle a whole human being on it.' (175)

Tom accuses Nellie, in effect, of playing puppeteer. But the determining, hierarchical strings and webs with which puppeteer controls the puppet are also, not four pages later, envisaged non-hierarchically as the fragile, necessary threads of community, sustaining the individual's relation to the social. Tom accuses Nellie of severing Caroline's threads:

> 'However fast she makes connections with real things, and real people, you cut them away one by one, and soon the whole spider web will be adrift.' (179).

Nellie's manipulation of Caroline is a repetition of other, similarly guilty, destructive exploitations, such as the death of Johnny Sterker's young protegee and the childhood seduction of Tom and Peggy by Nellie herself. Crimes by the predatory against the vulnerable are multiplied as images refracted endlessly in mirrors. The origin of guilt is therefore permanently displaced and unknowable, making it impossible to combat. Even where one individual momentarily grasps the workings of exploitation and suppressed knowledge, this isolated insight is not enough to produce collective rupture or change. Caroline's final, clearsighted penetration of Nellie's game is insufficient to arrest her own spiralling destruction:

> Caroline had taken submission as a word that Nellie used for her own purposes as she used Introspection and Friendship. By introspection she meant a shameless curiosity and crafty use of her knowledge; by friendship what only a clique meant; and it was dishonest since she trapped people that way. But Nellie was ill, and by submission she might mean death, it might be a preconception of death which only the sick could have. And this chilling submission was what Caroline for the first time was feeling now. (294)

The bitter understanding that she is Nellie's victim, and that Nellie herself is trapped in ideology, does not offer Caroline access to an alternative truth; instead, she reads the bleak 'truth' as generated by Nellie's fiction. The narrative thus heavily frames and qualifies Nellie's triumph in Caroline's suicide, revealing its multiple rather than singular determinations. The farewell note inscribes Caroline's desire for personal honour as well as implying criticism of Nellie, who cannot interpret its allusion to her own ideological entrapment:

> I can say nothing to you, for you are inside your cell of glass ... . (304)

The illusion of freedom from entrapment is thematised in the image of the airman. As discussed earlier, Nellie assumes male power in the act of cross-dressing in Tom's airman outfit, but this also frames her participation in the illusion of free flight. Just prior to their symbolic encounter in the fairground's Palace of Mirrors, Nellie's and Tom's contemplation of the scenery ironically implicates them, but also refers to an inescapable fictionality:

> For a while they sat side by side, smoking and looking at the view. A man was in a glider, rising on geysers of wind through clefts, reaching an invisible billow and wallowing over it. And others; some of them going far up and away, banking and coming back in circles, using the air as birds do, soundless and easy, though not free. The sun was going down over the Vale of Aylesbury and shone sometimes on the faces, or even on a wrist watch of the gliders. It was such a strange sight, like a vision of the future, or of Mars by an old time engraver. (184)

The appearance of freedom is conditioned by the reality of a controlling environment which replaces the ideal of autonomous flight by entrapment within determining, circular tracks. Moreover, the combination of movement and stasis in the image - its intersecting axes of the vertical and horizontal, of the temporal and spatial - is characteristic of the novel's general rendering of space and time. These space-time motifs mark a specific site of intertextuality

with novelistic discourses, which employ what Bakhtin calls the literary chronotopes of the provincial town and the threshold and which contribute to the novel's representation of a theatrically arrested and 'closeted' history. The chronotope, in Bakhtin's work, conveys generically specific interrelationships of 'man' with time and space, or history.[58] The chronotope of provincial town appears not only in the discourse of Nellie and Tom, but also in the plot structure, in which endless cups of tea and chat predominate over conclusive event or character development. Normally 'an ancillary time' or a backdrop for more eventful sequences, this 'cyclical everyday time' - 'a viscous and sticky time that drags itself slowly through space' - is alien to historical progress.[59] This 'idyllic' chronotope renders the prevalent domestic focus of Stead's novel deathly, or womb-like, disrupting reader expectation and accounting perhaps for the unease and repugnance expressed in some reviews of the novel.[60] Temporal stagnation colludes with the narrative's persistent representations of the feminine, connoting a feared but magnetic pre-linguistic and pre-historic space.

Intersecting with the provincial town, in a way which only magnifies its ahistoric tendency, is the chronotope of the threshold. Bakhtin suggests that in Dostoyevsky's novels the threshold represents a crisis or break in history.[61] Signifying either the critical 'decision that changes a life' or 'the indecisiveness that fails to change a life, the fear to step over the threshold', this chronotope is constituted by places such as ' ... the staircase, the front hall and corridor, as well as the ... street and square that extend those spaces into the open air ...'.[62] Thus, ghosts haunt the stairwell in Bridgehead, Nellie-as-airman appears first in

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[58] Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 84-85

[59] Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time', p. 248.

[60] See for example reviews by Barbara Jefferis, 'New Stead novel is penetrating, bitter', in *Sydney Morning Herald* (23 September 1967), p.18; and G. R. Lansell, 'Disaster Area', in *Australian Book Review* 6 (1967), p. 185.

[61] Eliza Cook commentsthat Nellie 'was wanting life to be like Dostoyevsky and Gorki' (231).

[62] Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time', p. 248.

the shadowed doorway, Caroline climbs a flight of stairs to her death, and Nellie dreams of descending a flight of stairs. The window, furthermore, has conventionally been a prevalent metaphor for either an epiphanic vision, or for the symbolic bourgeois divide between the private world of the domestic space and the wider public world.[63] Reiterating the threshold in *Cotters' England*, the window often frames a dystopian or introspective view rather than entailing the promise of the future: in Bridgehead windows are grimy with soot; Nellie shows Caroline the lesbian spectacle from the Lamb Street skylight; Camilla and Tom witness, with horror, the charade in which Nellie appears to be menacing Caroline, whereas Nellie is actually forcing her to view (in a return glance) Tom's 'rendezvous' with Camilla. These labyrinthine and untrustworthy views reinforce Nellie's theatrical spectacle, so that the 'threshold' intersects with stagnant provincial time to precipitate not revolution but a crisis of vision, rigged to delude the beholder and to circumvent history.

Like the deceptive and sinister view from the window, the narrative's enigmatic framing of characters muddies distinction between sexual identity and political affiliation. In the opening pages of the novel, Camilla's query about the activities of Walter, the window cleaner, ambiguously suggests the possibility of a clandestine political surveillance. Nellie approves of Walter, who seems a follower and admirer of George, but Camilla's instinctive distrust, allied with narrative details such as his 'strange smile' and his sudden manner of a 'mincing ... Chelsea aesthete', insinuates a posturing sycophancy that conflates sexual with political deviancy. The circulation of Tom's leather jacket (Nellie loans it to Walter, who loans it to his brother, who subsequently sells it - and thence it reappears fantasmatically as Nellie's outfit on the night of the bacchanal) tropes the constant passage, circulation and substitution of identities in the narrative. Walter quickly disappears from

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[63] Dorothea's view from the window, towards the end of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (pp. 644-645), is a notable example (See World Classics edition; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) and in Stead's *For Love Alone*, Teresa Hawkins' similarly epiphanic moments often occur in relation to views from a window.

view, only to reappear, in the last paragraph, as the initiator of new cult interest for Nellie. Far from being a 'rare [blemish] in artistic control',[64] the window cleaner's reappearance is a recapitulation of what Gribble has described as the novel's circulating, suppressed narratives.[65] Gribble's analysis traces some of these numerous, teasing, half-told stories; cumulatively these suggest that shocking truths about history are being actively suppressed, most importantly by Nellie, in her effort of domination. There is also a crucial link, however, between these suppressed narratives and the circulating secrets of sexual identity, which feed into the narrative thematic of gender instability.

So how does the closeting of identity in *Cotters' England* mark the site of authorial recuperation of the revolutionary subject? The Cotters deal with each other by means of a secret currency: despite the promise of revelation, they turn aside from incriminating detail and keep their skeletons well closeted. Nellie offers to impart her 'secrets' about life and society and in doing so constructs a particular myth which allows her to sublimate her own guilt and to exercise power over others, while still concealing from both herself and others 'the truth'.[66] But does the narrative deal 'truthfully' with the Cotters? What interconnected discourses are circulated in the text and what empowering ignorance is privileged? And subsuming these questions is the recognition, entailed in the Nietzschean epigraph enlisted at the start of this section, that human truth is always, and necessarily, based on lies, and that ignorance (in Sedgwick's terms) is the lining of knowledge.[67] Elliptical, circular and ahistorical, Nellie's theories prove untrustworthy, at best a set of authentic sounding fictions. In Judith Barbour's words:

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[64] Pybus, '*Cotters' England*: In Appreciation', p. 47.
[65] See Gribble, *Christina Stead*, p. 101.
[66] As Sheridan remarks in *Christina Stead*: 'Nellie's myth of origin is a myth of power' (p. 114).
[67] See Segwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 8.

> In ... Nelly's theories, I could find no recognisable model of a social theorist of any complexion whatever ... Nelly's references are bounded by personal experience and literary meanings.[68]

Produced out of populist fragments of socialist and liberal/capitalist discourses, Nellie's knowledge is founded on wilful ignorance, a strategically powerful (un)knowing - the 'un' betokening repression.[69] Her theoretical errors betray the founding error of Nellie's secret identity: as 'lesbian', Nellie is one of those 'impossible identities, errors of classification, unnatural disasters within medico-juridical discourse ... [and] ... the very paradigm of what calls to be classified, regulated, and controlled ... .'[70] It is significant, moreover, that Nellie's identity remains unnamed within the narrative. Like Nellie (whose designs seem impenetrable), the narrative itself both promises and conceals the real truth: sexual deviancy is the 'open secret' of the narrative. For D. A. Miller, the 'open secret' - the secret which is known, known to be known and simultaneously guarded or disavowed - is structural to the experience of novel-reading and informs wider social operations. The maintenance of the 'open secret' is 'the subjective practice' which both introduces a friction or resistance into the social order, and fantasmatically recovers the set of binary terms instrumental in maintaining the smooth functioning of the social.[71] In *Cotters' England*, the continual lack of revelation of these personal and familial secrets is the reason posited for the failure of revolution. The staged revelation of the bacchanal is for the victim's and the reader's eyes only; in accord with the genre of melodrama, threatened revelation of private secrets to a wider 'public', entailing a potential cultural and political rupture, is here anticipated but ultimately averted.

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[68] Judith Barbour, 'Suicidal Vortex - Christina Stead's *Cotter's England*', [sic] *Nation* (4 November 1967), p. 22.
[69] See Irigaray, 'The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry', in *Speculum*, p.48n.
[70] Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Subordination', p. 16.
[71] D. A. Miller, 'Secret Subjects, Open Secrets', in *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p.206-7.

Nellie exhorts Caroline, the unknown writer, to participate in the perpetuation of secrecy, to '... cover ... [the lives of the workers] ... with a rosy veil, a mystery ...' (38). This exhortation, however, doubles back upon the coded workings of the narrative which produces the 'open secret' of Nellie's sexual identity. Writing in 1968 to Ron Geering, Stead expressed relief on his critical 'outing' of Nellie as 'Lesbian', expressing surprise that despite the current attention to the 'goings-on of - homosexuals, almost no-one had recognised a full-length picture of one':

> I am afraid most of us need the Black-hat, White-hat convention - 'here is a nice woman in frills and here is a naughty woman in a shirt and stetson.' Anyhow, I think it is all settled now and for good: people may be cross, who didn't see it for themselves, but they must believe what you say. I am very glad. In fact, what is the book about? It *is* about the sort that preys on the left movement: and the plot roughly is: 'Someone died for Johnny Sterker and now someone has died for me: I've matched her.' The total heartlessness of such a vanity is quite clear. (But sexual vanity is completely heartless.)[72]

Stead's use of the categories of 'lesbian' and 'homosexual' implicitly replicates dominant medico-sexual discourses, such as the hierarchical categories of inversion elaborated by Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, sexologists of the early twentieth century. According to Esther Newton, Krafft-Ebing delineates four ascending stages of gender inversion, culminating in the true, active invert who is most degenerate: masculine in all but genitalia, she is a member of 'the third sex', and lesbianism is her biological destiny.[73] In her ground-breaking lesbian novel of 1928, *The Well of Loneliness*, Radclyffe Hall problematically appears to accept this confining medical discourse of the true invert in the representation of her protagonist, Stephen Gordon.[74] Havelock Ellis, who 'simplified Krafft-Ebing's four part

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[72] To Ron Geering (21 September 1968), in *Selected Letters Vol.1*, pp. 319-320.

[73] Esther Newton, 'The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman', in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Baum[l] Duberman et al. (New York: NAL/Penguin, 1989), pp. 287-8.

[74] Newton, in 'The Mythic Mannish Lesbian', asks whether the discourse of sexology circumscribed the terms of representation in Hall's novel or whether the novel manages to represent the 'real' experience of a 'gender dysphoria' (p.292).

typology', intervened in the discourse by spotlighting all intimate woman to woman relations as evidence of sexual degeneracy, thus pathologising passionate female friendships and tainting as potentially predatory the woman-centered identification of the 'New Woman's' feminism.[75] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg traces the damaging impact of Ellis's work on the discourse of the New Woman, stemming from his suggestion that even 'genteel, educated women, thoroughly feminine in appearance, thought, and behavior might well be active lesbians':

> By dichotomizing lesbians into 'true inverts' and potential heterosexuals, Ellis depicted the female invert not as a genetic anomaly and a helpless victim but as a woman on the make, sexually and racially dangerous.[76]

Stead's dislike of both lesbianism and feminism, as well as her unease about women in general, is undoubtedly constituted by a specific, historic, discursive formation which complicates sexual, moral and political domains. In the letter to Geering, it appears that the 'outing' of Nellie ensures a distinct security for the author, interposing a distance between author and the ambiguities of a deviant protagonist, thus shoring up her own heterosexual and political identity. Stead's focus on the significance of this now-opened closet produces the possibility that another closet is more tightly secured as a result. By locating all evil within the category of 'lesbian who preys on the left movement', the left movement is at a stroke valorised as a decent body under attack from a definable source of corruption. A similar effect was achieved through the discursive constitution of the new sexual subject of sexology. As Smith-Rosenberg puts it:

> This new sexual subject assumed a critical role in the grand Edwardian social drama, which used physical disease to enact social disorder.[77]

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[75] Newton, 'The Mythic Mannish Lesbian', pp. 288-9.

[76] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Woman, 1870-1936', in *Hidden From History*, ed. Duberman et al., pp. 270-1.

[77] Smith-Rosenberg, 'Discourses of Sexuality', p. 270.

The spectacle of sexual perversion, in representing social disorder, focuses fears and anxieties about sexuality to deflect attention from politically threatening issues such as the emancipation of women and the exploitation of the workers under capitalism. Somewhat perversely (given its historic appropriations), this same spectacle in *Cotters' England* explains, but also displaces and disavows, both the failure of the left to orient itself to the contours of the postwar environment and McCarthyist vilification of communists and communist sympathisers.

Stead's post-publication authorial commentary, which so decisively affixes the lesbian label to Nellie, contrasts with the tone of pre-publication comments, as well as with the narrative itself, in which labels are eschewed in the interest of dramatisation. The open secret of the narrative, Nellie's sexual history and identity, is a secret known to Nellie, and to her siblings, Peggy and Tom. It is known to people from her past, such as Jago and his circle, to Johnny Sterker, perhaps to others. But while the reader is early made aware that Nellie 'lies', precise details of her history and sexual identity are kept at bay. Revelation, as previously discussed, is orchestrated by Nellie herself, performed before a select audience (Caroline), in order to subdue her victim and to consolidate her own power. The narrative 'reveals' Nellie, in this context, to the reader, but also facilitates her escape. The obliquity of the presentation of Nellie's sexuality, her evasion of precise definition, enlarges her corruptive power. There is no 'public' naming of her perversions, no labelling terms are allowed to circulate within the narrative.

Whereas Nellie herself is never 'exposed' or 'pinned down, the opposite is true of the women who attend the party, about whom the narrative's descriptions convey the tone of the curious and detached enumeration of so many zoological specimens:[78] '... they were like

[78] Compare with Allen, 'Lives of Obscure Women', p. 404. Allen observes that the women are aligned with lower forms of animal life whereas Nellie is seen as having a higher animal cunning.

queer fish, a seahorse, an old man snapper, a gar, a toadfish, a puffball ...' (291). Although Nellie is repeatedly described as a strange marsh bird (13), these descriptions do not objectify her to the extent that they do the 'queer' women at the party. The relation of authorial narrative to such objects is explained by Stead, in her previously quoted analogy of the little girl looking into the fishtank at snails.[79] Stead's claim of complete 'scientific' or non-judgemental detachment from the object is marked, however, by epistemological contradiction, suggesting reliance on the self-evident truth of the visual sense, the ability of scientific observation to be neutral and value-free, and prior to narrative or linguistic construct. Such neutrality is contradicted by the obvious revulsion conveyed by the narrative, dictated by Caroline's perspective, in surveying the fishy world of Nellie's women. The scene of the innocent little girl looking into the aquarium, suppressing her queasy feelings in the interest of truth, is structurally distorted in the lurid scene of the bacchanal. Even if moral judgement is suppressed in the process of observing and recording Nellie's deviancy, a strong judgemental reaction is invited in regard to these peripheral women, who are identifiably lesbian. Nellie's lesbianism, by contrast, remains coded, liminal and uncertain, like other aspects of her sexual history. This liminality, recalling Havelock Ellis's 'predatory feminine invert', increases Nellie's threatening power, facilitating her free circulation.

There is no direct exposure of secrets in *Cotters' England* - nothing intervenes to disrupt the continuous patterning and maintenance of culture - and glimpses of 'truth' afforded to the reader point to the desirability of revolution, even as they confirm its remoteness. The continual 'closeting' of the Cotters' secrets, the inarticulation of the exposing word, guarantees cultural survival and the maintenance of the status quo.

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[79] See interview 'Christina Stead Talks to Rodney Wetherell', p. 24.

Paradoxically, however, the false revelations - the entrapment in subjective illusion - may also suggest the unknowable, inexorable progression of history 'by its bad side',[80] by its blind side, indicating both the disjunctions and interplay between ideologically-driven individual action and forces of historical determination. With its false turnings, destructive energies and crises, capitalism produces the impossible seeds of its own destruction and supersession. Eagleton comments that, for both Nietzsche and Marx, the 'transition from traditional society to capitalism' is a 'felicitous' fall:

> In necessarily fashioning the organized collective worker, and in evolving a plurality of historical powers, capitalism for Marx plants the seeds of its own dissolution as surely as the epoch of the subject in Nietzsche's eyes prepares the ground for that which will overturn it.[81]

Despite his finding that both Marx and Nietzsche are fundamentally 'sceptical of the category of the subject', Eagleton remarks that if 'Nietzsche's thought can be paralleled to Marxism, it can also be deciphered by it.'[82] For Eagleton, Nietzsche's *Ubermensch* - in reconstituting the bourgeois subject as fearless and ethically unfettered entrepreneur - is politically problematic, a vision of 'disdainful isolation' entailing a reckless privileging of individual power over a collective vision of freedom.[83] If revolutionaries fade from the drama, in *Cotters' England*, and are substituted by Nietzschean fakes, does this wreck the revolutionary project or further it? Paradoxically, the more negative the picture of the society and the greater the contradictions exposed, the more Marxist such a representation seems. If Stead's intimate exploration of bleak corruptions and misguided energies in *Cotters' England* mirrors Marx's strategy in *Capital*, then it is a truly Marxist text to a degree belied by its apparent pessimism, and by the retreat of more 'wholesome' characters from

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[80] Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 240.
[81] Eagleton, *Ideology*, p. 239.
[82] Eagleton, *Ideology*, p. 241.
[83] Eagleton, *Ideology*, pp. 241-5.

the foreground of the text. Stead's novel practises what Fredric Jameson calls a 'negative hermeneutic' in its analysis of culture, demonstrating how narrative itself, like any cultural artefact, '... fulfills a specific ideological mission, in legitimating a given power structure, in perpetuating and reproducing the latter, and in generating specific forms of false consciousness ... .'[84]

Towards the end of the novel, Nellie invokes the true vision from the window in order to suggest the limited explanatory power of 'theory':

> What can Marxism say to a lover, or to a mother? Or what can Einstein? Aye, he can say more, for there's something wonderful and beautiful in the idea that we have an attic window only, open on the swamp of stars. (344)

Nellie's image momentarily synthesises two chronotopes ('swamp' and 'stars'), achieving a perspective with that which is heterogeneous to herself. But she is immediately framed in the act by the narrative, which records her private self interest, in -

> ... looking out of the black window to see if she could get another idea like that about the stars which had so pleased Eliza. (344)[85]

Nellie's words convey and perform the doubleness implied in the narrative's sense of 'fiction', as meaning-making process which renders the world comprehensible and, simultaneously, as a blinding and deceiving force. Beyond this duality, however, the narrative project itself is caught up, necessarily, in this contradiction, echoing what Nietzsche says about the role of knowledge and ignorance in human behaviour:

> ... how we have from the very beginning understood how to retain our ignorance so as to enjoy an almost inconceivable freedom, frivolity, impetuosity, bravery, cheerfulness of life, so as to enjoy life. And only on this now firm and granite basis of ignorance has knowledge hitherto been able to rise up, the will to knowledge on the basis of a far more powerful

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[84] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 291.

[85] The narrative 'placement' or framing of Nellie is noted by Sturm, in 'Christina Stead's New Realism', p. 34.

> will, the will to non-knowledge, to the uncertain, to the untrue! Not as its antithesis but - as its refinement![86]

Both Nellie and the narrative exercise power on the basis of a firmly maintained ignorance, a set of false judgements and self-deceptions which allow the resolution of issues of guilt and blame and which empower survival in and through depressing social and historical circumstances. The energy with which Nellie engages in this project and the commitment with which she adheres to it are akin to revolutionary. The narrative frames her as a negative counterpart to the Marxist revolutionary and, through its representation of her labyrinthine subjectivity, conjures up the Nietzschean *ubermensch*, an impossibly recalcitrant figure in post-holocaust Europe.

The narrative performance of *Cotters' England* finally suggests that, in more than one sense, human society is built on energising lies - lies which are both impossible to oust and which paradoxically indicate, since they are lies, that society is capable of change and rupture. If the world of the Cotters seems Nietzschean in its thematics of power, Stead's project is certainly Marxist in its determined exposure of the deepest structures of social psychology and its unveiling of the seeds of destruction. The novel leads one to ask about the generative power of secrets contained, in contrast with the utopian power promised by the revelation of these secrets. Nellie knows that she who controls knowledge wields power, that whoever projects the strongest narrative wins the game. Along with the variously competing narratives of other characters in the novel, a struggle is staged between Nellie's narrative and that of the author - which, in the case of the latter, has the powerful advantage of being concealed behind a 'naturalistic' mask. Through this masking of authorial judgement, the narrative disavows and reproduces its project of control.

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[86] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 55.

Although *Cotters' England* can be read as intensely homophobic and misogynistic, such labels can also prove reductive, leading out of one 'closet' and into another. The label itself, as efficacious and all encompassing signifier, is thematised in the text, at once circulated and suppressed, or circulated via suppression. The exploration of this terrain leads directly into the deepest political contradictions exposed and experienced in Stead's work. As discussed in my next chapter, political contradiction, embodied in the female revolutionary subject, is also pursued in Stead's posthumous novel, *I'm Dying Laughing*, but with less assurance, detachment and closure.

In *Cotters' England*, the narrative projects the nightmare of the terminal failure of socialist discourse and revolution in England, of the anarchy of bohemian morals thriving parasitically in a postwar climate of degeneracy and disorder between the sexes. Fear of social instability and corrupt community is crystallised in the personal, private terms of a pervasive gender instability. Furthermore, in tension with the Marxist value system projected by the text, Nellie Cotter's 'lies' and illusions unleash the efficacious powers of fiction, situating the narrative and its readers within, rather than outside of, ideology. Despite and because of authorial disavowals, Stead's text celebrates the productive powers of fiction, the revolutionary power of the lie:

> The lie, the perfect lie, about people we know, about the relations we have had with them, about our motive for some action, formulated in totally different terms, the lie as to what we are, whom we love, what we feel with regard to people who love us ... - that lie is one of the few things in the world that can open windows for us on to what is new and unknown, that can awaken in us sleeping senses for the contemplation of universes that otherwise we should never have known.[87]

[87] From Marcel Proust, *The Captive*: quoted by Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 67.

Chapter 7.

Crossing the Rubicon:

Abjection and Revolution in *I'm Dying Laughing*

> - here,
> but here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
> We'd jump the life to come.[1]

> He foresaw their slow separation from the Party, the beliefs of the Roosevelt era. He had a suspicion that Emily, who had jibbed at all marking time or trimming, would throw herself bodily over the Rubicon, would jump, laughing and hurrahing, the narrow deep river while he might forever hesitate on the banks.[2]

> ... Often, moreover, he includes himself among [his abjections], thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations.[3]

Preamble

If the spectacle of the lesbian wrecker of the workers' movement in *Cotters' England* functions ultimately to recuperate revolution, then a far more ambiguous and reflexive exploration of revolutionaries and of the Marxist revolutionary project is promised in the conjunction of political betrayal with the failure of heterosexual coupledom in *I'm Dying Laughing*. Where *Cotters' England* is structured by closetings, *I'm Dying Laughing* thematises crossings. As the narrative progresses, geographic, temporal, cultural, political and subjective boundaries are initially traversed, and then painfully internalised. In the opening

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[1] Shakespeare, *Macbeth*: Act I Scene VII: lines 5-7.

[2] Christina Stead, *I'm Dying Laughing*, ed. R. G. Geering (London: Virago, 1986), p. 275. Subsequent page numbers in the chapter refer to this edition.

[3] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 8.

chapter, set in 1935, in which Emily Wilkes embarks on her transatlantic voyage from America to France, she, like others of her generation, traverses also, via her re-reading of Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*, the scene of a revolutionary fervour seminally linking the histories of France and America, a scene which also founds Hannah Arendt's evaluation of the modern history of revolution.[4] Beyond its opening three chapters, Stead's story leaps in time across the divide of World War Two, where the Howards - Emily and Stephen - are found fully-fledged in America, negotiating marriage and careers as cultural producers, involved in Roosevelt-era, Communist Party politics and struggling for recognition and money. Having criss-crossed the USA in Part One (from West back to East Coast, ambiguously seeking political sanctuary and economic opportunity), Emily and Stephen repeat their transatlantic crossing in Part Two - although this time the shipboard voyage is reduced to a bare line or two (190). Already effectively exiled (because of their pro-Soviet radicalism) from the American Communist Party, they progress into deeper, more contradictory forms of exile and displacement, in hungry and traumatised postwar France. Here, haunted by the sound of the tumbrils, Emily and Stephen spiral relentlessly downwards, from their status as political radicals in self-imposed exile, to their tortured and performative self-identification as counter-revolutionary emissaries of American imperialism.

The moral decline of the couple, in the teeth of their avowed Marxist politics, is effected through compulsive repetition of reckless hedonism, culminating in their McCarthyist renunciations, their alienation from each other and the disintegration of their very subjectivities in apocalyptic scenes of death and madness. Emily defiantly celebrates the American presence in Europe, likening it to the triumphal, colonial rule of Ancient Rome

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[4] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1963). See also my discussion of the opening chapters of *I'm Dying Laughing*, in chapter two.

over primitive provinces and outposts of empire. The specific political sense, therefore, of Julius Caesar's action in crossing the Rubicon - an action which precipitated the downfall of the Republic and ushered in the Empire - is invoked in the novel's ironic play between the revolutionary ideals of American democracy and the reality of American imperialism. Emily's identification with pivotal, historic figures of betrayal of liberty and political idealism - such as Danton, Cicero and Marie Antoinette - performs her crossing or overleaping of the Rubicon of political commitment in her encounter with the pain of lived contradiction. In another sense like the Macbeths - the reckless husband and wife who murder the good father/king - both Emily and Stephen want to jump 'the life to come', the post-revolutionary future with all its terrors. As I argue, with reference to Julia Kristeva's work on abjection, the holy drive towards a revolutionary subjectivity is rapidly converted into a fall into the negative energy or abyss of counter-revolution, so that Emily becomes, with a creative vengeance, a 'female who can wreck the revolution'. In *I'm Dying Laughing*, however, the constitutive abyss of the subject, of culture and indeed of the text itself - their mutual 'abjections' - are corporeally configured, with contradictory effects, in Emily's body and laughter. Far from overleaping the river/abyss, Emily is thrust within manifold contradiction: Emily inhabits the abyss and the abyss inhabits Emily, becoming 'the scalpel' within. In and through these 'abjections', moreover, the text - like the scalpel - performs a displaced anatomy of that which it does not wish to know, its own 'jettisoned object', which draws it 'to the place where meaning collapses'[5] - the crimes of Stalinism and the corruption of the revolutionary ideal itself.

The question of textual coherence shadowed this novel from its inception. From what is known of the long drafting process undertaken by Stead in producing her

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[5] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.

posthumously published novel, it would seem that despite her efforts for two or more decades it cruelly failed to cohere. As her various accounts of the struggle suggest, the more Stead tried to amend it in accordance with editorial advice, the more that she felt it was destroyed: 'there is barely anything of the original left,' she wrote, 'it is torn to pieces.'[6] Geering's editorial reconstruction, according to his own recounting of the process, deliberately leaves exposed some of the work's ragged edges.[7] Its 'long, sprawling, prodigal, passionate, loose (as an elephant's hide is loose), argumentative, appetitive, unnaturally naturalistic' character,[8] however, testifies to the scope of its projected ambition as well as to its incompletion, and to the immense terrain of debate - historic, social, aesthetic, psychological, ideological - which traverse its boundaries and to which it is oriented.

Two of Stead's commonly-cited pronouncements about this novel, which so resisted her efforts of completion, encapsulate its contradictory pulses:

> It was all about the passion of - I use passion in almost the religious sense - of two people, two Americans, New Yorkers, in the thirties. They are doing well, but they suffered all the troubles of the thirties. They were politically minded. They went to Hollywood. They came to Europe to avoid the McCarthy trouble. Of course they were deeply involved. And then, they lived around Europe, oh, in a wild and exciting extravagant Hollywood style. But there was nothing to support it. At the same time they wanted to be on the side of the angels, good Communists, good people, and also to be very rich. Well, of course ... they came to a bad end.[9]

> ... I meant it to go on from fire to more fiery to fierier still; it has a very terrible dramatic end, I wanted it to be a build-up all the way through ... .[10]

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[6] To Stanley Burnshaw (16 May 1973), in *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, p. 495.

[7] See R. G. Geering, '*I'm Dying Laughing* : Behind the Scenes', in *Southerly* 47 (1987), pp. 309-17; and R. G. Geering, 'Preface', in *I'm Dying Laughing*: 'What I inherited, in fact, was a huge mass of typescript ranging in finish from rough to polished and in length from page bits to different versions of whole chapters, along with piles of basic and supplementary material' (vii).

[8] This is Don Anderson's description, in 'Tragedy and dinner parties ... ' in *Real/Opinions: Polemical and Popular Writings*, by Don Anderson (Ringwood, Victoria: McPhee Gribble/Pengin, 1992), p. 106.

[9] From 'An Interview with Christina Stead', in Lidoff's *Christina Stead*, p. 181. Also quoted in Geering's 'Preface' to *I'm Dying Laughing*, pp. vi-vii.

[10] Geering, 'Preface', *I'm Dying Laughing*: viii.

Stead herself highlights the biblical dimension of her narrative; it is the traditional morality-play setting of the fall of the angels to which she alludes in the first of these passages. Emily's and Stephen's Marxist political views are thus transposed into a frame both theological and primal, of rebellion against the Father, of the loss of paradise, and of the endurance of eternal exile. It is a frame which also parodically emphasises an intensity of belief capable of puncturing reason. As idealists and aspirants to revolutionary heroism, the fall of these angels into betrayal and cynicism is all the more devastating.

The two authorial statements, however, highlight different expectations about the availability of positions of coherent judgement in the text. Stead's somewhat misleading reference to the McCarthy era, in the first statement, promotes a relatively straightforward reading of the text as primarily critical of the anti-communist witch-hunt of the postwar era.[11] The second statement, evoking the temporal experience of reading/writing the text, promises an epochal and apocalyptic drama, where endings are catastrophic beyond the level of the individual, constituting retroactively the individual's meaning. Here narrative offers eschatology as a substitute for ideology in a long tradition of Western narratives, where 'the paradigms of apocalypse continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world'.[12] In Stead's first statement, moreover, a position of critical if sympathetic detachment is assumed, which would enable a clear judgement. In contrast, however, the second statement affirms the elusive intensity of the reading/writing process, evoking the fascination and ferocity of the scriptor's regard of the protagonists and of the apocalyptic world into which they are plunged. This is a point of view which indeed complicates ease

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[11] Rowley observes that prior to publication it was anticipated that the novel primarily undertook an exposé of McCarthyism: its critique of the radical left in America was therefore something of a surprise. See Hazel Rowley, 'Satire on the hollow radicals of Hollywood' in *The Age* (4 April 1987), p. 12.

[12] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of An Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 28.

of signification and forestalls narrative closure by blurring the boundaries between author/fictional text/reader.

Critical discussion has also crystallised around issues of coherence and closure. Diana Brydon asks whether *I'm Dying Laughing* enacts 'an endless play of difference, providing the reader with no fixed point of reference', or whether it provides 'a coherent moral and political vision'.[13] Contrasting the critical approaches of Michael Wilding and Susan Sheridan, Brydon suggests that Wilding detects a strong moral focus and a political partisanship structuring Stead's aesthetic and guiding the reader towards a knowledge of 'how to be true',[14] whilst Sheridan, on the other hand, privileges the deceptive ironies of Stead's work, which resist a final 'Truth' or closure and which supply instead 'a multiplicity of competing truths'.[15] Although Brydon's contrast perhaps oversimplifies these critics' readings, it does usefully highlight the divide between Marxist-humanism and feminist-poststructuralism. Wilding's reading endows Stead-as-author with a political purpose and agency. Sheridan's reading, on the other hand, informed by poststructuralism's interrogation of authorial agency, emphasises the text's difference, the ways in which divergences and ironies are produced within Stead's texts through the multiplicity of genres invoked and, in Bakhtinian terms, the heteroglossia of the novel form. This critical polarity raises the issue, central to my own negotiation of these positions, of the pivotal role of the 'author function' in Stead's narratives and the degree to which this constructs, or manifests an attempt to construct, the reader's role and viewpoint. Brydon argues that:

> A novel that refuses to make expected distinctions between major and minor characters and their pronouncements may still signal in other ways how it may be interpreted and where value is to be located.[16]

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[13] Diana Brydon, '"Other Tongues Than Ours": Christina Stead's *I'm Dying Laughing*', in *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 2 (Fall 1989), p. 17.

[14] Brydon derives Wilding's position from his discussion of the novellas in Stead's *The Puzzleheaded Girl*.

[15] Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, p. 121; cited in Diana Brydon, '"Other Tongues Than Ours"', p. 17.

[16] Brydon, '"Other Tongues"', p. 17.

Acknowledging the reductiveness of a determining authorial intention, Brydon proposes instead to chart her reading using the map of signals provided within the narrative. The ensuing discussion of the novel's intertextuality in terms of Rabelais and Goethe is illuminating, but Brydon's argument that the text draws closer to 'the spirit of Rabelaisian satire' than to 'a modernist, Eliotian irony' assumes a critical/political choice which privileges one set of signals over another, demonstrating the subjective nature of any reading position. Brydon contends that, in the last analysis, the text retains a critical distance from the central characters, remaining 'committed to the utopian overthrow of a system based on plunder, and to the puncturing of its pretensions.'[17]

While I agree with Brydon's assumption that the 'author function' - as detected within the narrative organisation and frame - does indeed generate such signals, my own reading will show how the temporal reading process insistently undermines the confidence and efficacy of projected authorial values. My reading of this novel, therefore, tests the limits of my own overall proposition that Stead's texts project a unified, coherent set of values, informed by Marxism, which orient them to worldly meanings and which (attempt to) impose closure on the heterogeneity otherwise produced. Brydon's clarity about the coherence of Stead's overt political agenda remains both true and problematic: the text's ideal of political commitment is not so certainly either attained or contained. Although the narrative does morally and politically 'frame' the actions of Emily and Stephen (through signals such as its intertextualities, sequencing, minimal cues in descriptors in the third person narration and so on), conflicting cues are present, fracturing this unity. For example, the image of Emily at the narrative's end, which from one point of view functions as closure, from another strongly suggests circularity and incompletion, through the mechanism of

[17] Brydon, '"Other Tongues"', p. 21.

repetition and return.[18] Like the energy of Emily's counter-revolutionary performance, such repetition subverts 'the promise and hope' of revolution and the efficacy of a cleanly enacted political commitment, represented by such positive models as Vittorio and Suzanne.[19] So although, as Brydon argues, judgement is signposted through the novel's intertextual relations, in equal measure - as in Sheridan's argument - closure of this text's significations requires that we ignore much in the construction, for example, of Emily's encompassing, fluid character. The way the text repeatedly inscribes and returns to Emily's corporeality makes it function to interrogate subject-object boundaries. Emily's bodily performance, then, marks a site in excess of the regulating logic of the narrative frame.

This debate over unity versus heterogeneity produced within Stead's novel prompts a return to Bakhtin, upon whose theories both Sheridan and Brydon seem somewhat differentially to draw in their respective readings. Although Bakhtin's theorisation of the novel, in contrast to the work of structural linguistics and the traditional formalist study of literature, emphasises heterogeneity through the generation of terms such as heteroglossia, polysemy and polyphony,[20] what is not always acknowledged is the implied structural necessity of both centripetal and centrifugal forces in Bakhtin's understanding of novelistic discourse. Michael Holquist reasons, in his introduction to *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, that Bakhtin's notebooks '... are a useful corrective ... to the carnivalistic image of Bakhtin now abroad, for they come back again and again to the power of frames ...':

> ... when Bakhtin says 'we are suffocating in the captivity of narrow and homogenous interpretations,' he is not suggesting there is some freedom *beyond* interpretation. All understanding is constrained by borders ...

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[18] For a discussion of circularity and linearity as underlying, conflicting structures in Stead's fiction, see John Colmer, 'Conflicting Structures in Christina Stead's *For Love Alone*' in *Breaking Circles*, ed. Britta Olinder (Sydney: Dangeroo Press for CommonwealthStudies, 1991), pp. 160-174.

[19] I have appropriated this phrase from a chapter entitled 'The Promise and Hope of Romance', in Gribble, *Christina Stead*, p. 11.

[20] See Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, esp. p. 272; and Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson, intro. Wayne Booth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), esp. pp. 6-10.

> There is no pure spontaneity, for breaking frames depends on the existence of frames.[21]

Both Brydon's and Sheridan's readings of the novel can be productively reconnected at the point of their difference (as constructed by Brydon) over this issue: the ironies uncovered in Sheridan's mode of reading are, indeed, multiplied, precisely through and by reference to the text's implicit normative frame of value as posited by Brydon. But the dynamic between centrifugal and centripetal forces, between the text's political values and its multiplying ironies is not so much ultimately resolved as constitutive of the text's very plenitude. My reading of *I'm Dying Laughing* explores this dynamic, assuming some accessibility to a posited site from which the text's political value can be read, without assuming the inevitable self-presence or coherence of such a position.

As well as considering how the narrative prompts the reader's response to the plight of its protagonists, I consider 'revolution' and 'abjection' as fields not only fundamental to but mutually constitutive of the workings of subjectivity and culture, in ways which highlight their specificity to Western thought. In exploring also the text's own 'abjections', the inseparable abyss of its avowed politics, I suggest how revolutionary progress and the abyss of terror and counter-revolution - like other binary formations, such as high culture/mass culture, or male/female[22] - are symptomatic of a Western metaphysics which conditions the narratives of both Stead and Kristeva. In the first section, 'On the side of the angels', as well as viewing Emily and Stephen in their contradictory roles as revolutionaries and cultural producers, I consider how they function as 'other': Emily and Stephen are constituted in opposition both to European notions of revolutionary virtue and to notions of proper or high-cultural production. In the second section, 'The scalpel within', which

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[21] Michael Holquist, 'Introduction', in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. xix.

[22] Huyssen, in *After the Great Divide*, criticises the view, held by Kristeva amongst others, that male modernist and avant-garde writers speak the 'feminine', on the grounds that such usage is predicated on a misogynist erasure of woman and the masses (see pp. 48-49).

deploys Julia Kristeva's study of abjection, I discuss and explore the effects of the narrative's presentation and evocation of horror. In the concluding section, 'Fissures in the Marxist project - the text's abjections', I propose that the text's representation of the renegade couple is symptomatic of the potential loss of faith that it must repress, effectively revealing a constitutive connection between revolutionary hubris and its shadowy 'other' of fascist terror.

1. On the Side of the Angels

> And she told them much more about him. How brave he was, how, once convinced, he had dropped his fashionable practice, joined the Party and done their legal work, organized their cultural work, how good his memory was, infallible, freakish, how he sacrificed himself, how he was sought after by the police, what he had done in the Resistance, how he had been caught and put into a camp, where he was ill-treated. Much more. The Howards were entranced by their capture, their new friend. (232)

The Howards' excitement about Vittorio, their newly found link with the world of European communism, stems from their desire to bridge the gap between their romantic ideals and the reality of commitment to revolutionary activity. Vittorio's personal charms and urbanity, moreover, which also render him a potential dinner companion for Stephen's mother (269), are combined with his irreproachable history of altruistic action. In her book, *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt defines and evaluates the attributes she believes historically attached to the revolutionary man. In Arendt's reasoning, a decisive and corrupting shift occurred during the historic development of the French Revolution, from a 'good' philosophic base in Rousseauian compassion to an 'evil' political shape in Robespierrean sentiment, from the emancipatory quest for workable 'forms of government' (in the early

republic) to the opportunistic identification of virtue with the masses (in the ensuing dictatorship). Locating the revolutionary man's defining moral attribute of detachment, Arendt finds that this appearance of selflessness, Robespierre's discursive borrowing from Rousseau, is in tension with popular notions of 'idealism' and 'heroism'. Arendt argues that the revolutionary's virtue of disinterest:

> ...has put, as it were, its indelible stamp upon the revolutionary man and his innermost conviction that the value of a policy may be gauged by the extent to which it will contradict all particular interests, and that the value of a man may be judged by the extent to which he acts against his own interest and against his own will.[23]

Arendt's liberal valuation understands Robespierre's revision as productive of an historically dangerous contradiction, leading in and against itself to the 'evil' of the Jacobin Terror. To the extent that such a contradiction involving virtuous disinterest - which both expedites revolution and justifies terror - is pertinent to post-1789 European cultural representations of revolutionaries, then such contradiction is centrally evoked in *I'm Dying Laughing*, which pits American liberalism not only against the challenge of fascist terror, but also against the impossibly alien demands (from a liberal viewpoint) of a communist program of revolution. The narrative deploys a range of divergent notions of the revolutionary figure, while asserting a particular value through its implicit comparison of the couple Emily-Stephen with the pair Vittorio-Suzanne (although the latter are of course comrades rather than lovers). Without displaying the cold severity implied in Arendt's description, Vittorio and Suzanne represent a less excitably romantic model of the revolutionary activist. Emily and Stephen constitute the 'other' of this representation: they are demonstrably unable to live by the Robespierrean dictum that the revolutionist shall act 'against his own interest and against his own will'. In an interview in which she discusses

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[23] Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 74.

the influence on her own work of Christina Stead's fiction, Angela Carter - from another vantage point - identifies a split between European and Anglo-American socialist traditions. Her ad-hoc formulation, however, consistent with the ideological values functioning in Stead's book, identifies major differences between Western traditions of socialism:

> 'Why is it that in Britain socialism has always been romantic and soft-edged and visionary? It's always been the dreamers - Blake and William Morris - dreamers of impossible dreams of beauty and wholeness. [Long pause.] And in France, *it's Lenin* [Wild laughter - 'I'm only formulating this now,' she warned, and barreled on.] In Britain, and I expect also in America, socialism is soft, it's the soft option. It's to do with ... Christianity ... Although Britain had a tradition of socialism since the peasants' revolt, it's always like the blue mountains, something which will descend in a cloud. Whereas in Europe socialism is rationality - anticlerical. You don't have to be *good* to be a socialist there; you have to be rational. Socialism is obvious when you think about it.'[24]

I'm Dying Laughing similarly privileges a European rather than Anglo-American tradition of socialism, and both Carter's comments and Stead's novel stand in contrast to Arendt's liberal-humanist evaluation of the morality and meaning of the post-1789 history of revolutionary movements.[25] Carter's observation illuminates the tension produced by clashing notions of revolutionary behaviour in *I'm Dying Laughing*. Vittorio and Suzanne, representatives of European socialism, touched but not demoralised by Nazi horror and the privations of postwar France, still act with disinterest, setting aside concerns of appearance and of the self. Their positively human attributes - their learned views, enthusiasm for life, vitality and earthiness - are also registered, however, ensuring their privileged referential status in the narrative. After meeting Clapas, the corrupted Resistance worker, Emily

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[24] Angela Carter, 'Angela Carter, Wild Thing: Conversation With a Necromancer', interview with Ann Snitow, in *Village Voice Literary Supplement* 75 (June 1989), pp. 16-17.

[25] See Arendt's complaint, in *On Revolution*, that Eurocentric Western thought has undervalued the achievements of the American Revolution: 'The sad truth of the matter is that the French Revolution, which ended in disaster, has made world history, while the American Revolution, so triumphantly successful, has remained an event of little more than local importance' (p. 49).

marvels at Suzanne, who, despite similar experiences, can respond with humility and fortitude:

> 'I don't know what I'm like. I should like to be in another world where I would not have to ask myself, where society was interested in the future and not this post-mortem and this preparation.' (287)

Narrative approval of lack of self-indulgence and modest practicality is thus registered, and yet, like Vittorio and like Ruth and Axel Oates, who carry a similar sense of approval earlier in the novel, Suzanne remains a marginal character, a point of comparison rather than a source of narrative drive. She can do little to deflect the destructive path of the protagonists as they are propelled, and propel themselves, towards the abyss of their final betrayals.

In Part One of the novel, which bears the Rabelaisian epigraph, 'I'm thirsty!', the clash between the Howards' internationalist, pro-Soviet affiliations and the nationalist, revisionist communism of the Hollywood radical set results in the Howards' mock trial and exile from American Communist Party orthodoxy. This narrative move aims at critical exposure of the parochial ideology of the latter organisation as servile to postwar American imperialism. But the move of contradiction and exile is double: the Howards' practice is not equal to their theory and their idealism is criss-crossed with the markings of a culturally and corporeally inscribed self-interest. From the beginning their gravitation towards Stephen's family, their desire to attain the approval and financial support of matriarch Anna Howard, constructs the logic of their contradictory political position. And yet, in another irony consistent with Stead's 'complex seeing' of subjects' imbrication in the social,[26] self-interest is not regarded as merely a removable layer on top of a pure revolutionary core; rather the latter is generated through the self-same network of desire for distinction:

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[26] See chapter one of my thesis, which refers to Williams's 'complex seeing', a phrase used to identify Brecht's three dimensional apprehension of character in the world.

> '... and then I took up Marxism because I thought it gave me a key they didn't have; it raised me above them. I got out of the grovelling mass in the valley and felt the fresh air blowing on me; but it was all selfish - ' (68)

Stephen's naked admission to Emily of his desire for elevation to a pre-eminence above the mass of people is characteristic of the tangle of self-interestedness characterising the conduct of the couple's political lives. Stephen's harsh self-assessment abrogates the altruism of the revolutionary man. Where Stephen - as intellectual - articulates the ignoble, material impulses woven into the purer, finer fabric of motive, Emily - the artist and performer - plunges into the temptations of the world, demanding (as signalled in the Rabelaisian epigraph) to have it all. In terms that reveal an ironically pained awareness of his repudiation of revolutionary alignment with the interests of the working-class, Stephen defines his position in terms of social hierarchies, aspiring to an existence above 'the grovelling mass'.

The Howards are defined, however, precisely in relation to these formless and voiceless masses. From the beginning, Stephen derives his economic and social position (as writer, as member of the Howard family, and as intellectual trained in Marxist theory) from his very distinction from these masses. It is also the masses for whom Hollywood produces its wares and for whom Emily wants to write the great proletarian novel. Emily's relation to 'the masses' - a category of increasing threat in the narrative - is rather differently configured, expressing ambiguities constructive of the text's own strategic positioning as cultural artefact. As the daughter of a mid-western farmer, as writer of popular fiction which is potentially revolutionary (in its reach to the common man) and potentially counter-revolutionary (in its commodified subservience to the American marketplace), and as excessive woman who wants it all, Emily performs as an ambivalent exemplar of Andreas

Huyssen's argument about modernist, high-cultural identification of mass-culture as woman.[27]

Stead's own novel, which openly canvasses these issues, can be read as an intervention in the debate about the role of intellectuals in fostering and producing proletarian or progressive literature. With a strikingly modernist sensibility, which aligns Hollywood's production of mass culture with conservative and imperialist purposes,[28] the text critiques the convenient Party orthodoxy of the time. This orthodoxy favoured the prescriptive two-dimensional plot and characterisation of the party-line proletarian novel which, the critique suggests, thence became fodder for the Hollywood propaganda machine. Godfrey Bowles's glowingly detailed outline of Jim Holinshed's novel/script about a radical intellectual who, after Pearl Harbour, turns comrade-patriot-fireman, is a standard exemplar of such socialist realist plotting. It provokes the disgusted amusement of Emily who subsequently argues - in terms strongly reminiscent of Stead's own short story 'Did It Sell'[29] - that her own achievements in articulating the lives and experiences of workers have passed unrecognised by the party faithful (89-90). Thus the text mounts its criticism of the address to mass-culture as dictated by the mutually complicit cultural formations of conventional narrative aesthetics and conservative nationalist politics. Stead's novel constitutes through such a negation its own aesthetic, as that of an internationalist, progressive realism informed by a critical modernist sensibility, situating itself as the 'world literature' of *The Communist Manifesto*.[30]

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[27] See Huyssen, 'Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other' in *After the Great Divide*: 'Stuart Hall is perfectly right to point out that the hidden subject of the mass culture debate is precisely 'the masses' - their political and cultural aspirations, their struggles and their pacification via cultural institutions. But when the 19th and early 20th centuries conjured up the threat of the masses 'rattling at the gate,' to quote Hall, and lamented the concomitant decline of culture and civilization (which mass culture was invariably accused of causing), there was yet another hidden subject. In the age of nascent socialism *and* the first major women's movement in Europe, the masses knocking at the gate were also women, knocking at the gate of a male-dominated culture' (p 47).

[28] For an example of how this equation works, see Huyssen, 'Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner' in *After the Great Divide*, pp. 16-43, which critically analyses Adorno's critique of Wagner's prefiguring/inauguration of mass culture.

[29] As discussed in chapter five of my thesis.

[30] See Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 339.

By contrast with the conventional and manipulable social realist narratives privileged by the Party, the narrative aesthetic of *I'm Dying Laughing* is more closely aligned with the 'revolutionary novel' as theorised by Ralph Fox in *The Novel And The People,* unfolding its drama of 'the individual will in its conflict with other wills on the battleground of life'.[31] With its emphasis on strife produced within subjectively-sited categories of ideological commitment and desire, as well as its focus on theatrical conflict rather than plot resolution, *I'm Dying Laughing* can undoubtedly be read as an exemplar of Fox's call for characterisation based on a Shakepearean model of character:

> This view of character, entirely lost from the novel, is the one that the revolutionary novelist must restore. Not for him the fear of reality, the shrinking from showing the full man.[32]

Or woman as Emily herself proclaims, and as so pointedly demonstrated in this novel.

> '...and I believe in marriage and children for women and art, too. I think it's possible for a woman to be a wife and mother and woman and artist and success and social worker and anything else you please in 1945.' (81)

Stead presents Emily - whose desire to have it all is also, problematically, the source of her downfall - with no less stringency than would be accorded a strongly flawed male hero in Shakespeare, for example. There is no 'shrinking from showing the full' woman - no concession to rationalisation, sentiment or prudery. Moreover, in voicing the female writer's complaint against an exclusive male establishment which either ignores or patronises her, Emily interrogates the patriarchal establishment, implicating not only Hollywood but also the American Communist Party. Emily's Marxist attack on gendered expectations - carrying the rider, 'it's no more a problem than being a wage-earner in a factory with the kids at

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[31] Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 27. See Rowley, 'Christina Stead: Politics and Literature', p. 155.

[32] Fox, *Novel*, p. 84. See also Rowley, 'Christina Stead: Politics and Literature' which discusses the relation between Stead's novels and Fox's ideas about 'revolutionary literature'.

home ... ' (81) - is augmented by Stead's own cultural performance, as inscribed in the novel: both performances register the Party's silence about women.

If Emily and Stephen are neither simply mercenary nor altruistic, their performances - revealing their characters in full contradiction - are also compelled by these opposing motivations. Along with the acquisition of material comforts, their fight against consignment to obscurity and their desire for initiation to a privileged inner circle (of family, class and political party) are centrally important in Emily's and Stephen's lives. Extrapolating from Arendt's work, in his discussion of Thomas Paine's use of the phrase 'the liberty of appearing', Michael Ferber suggests that many British reformers and poets of the revolutionary era evinced a strong desire for 'appearance' in the public sphere, for the unveiling and elevation of previously obscure individuals and classes, and for the right of their voices to be heard in the free space of the 'polis'.[33] Ferber cites Arendt's speculation that:

> ...Marx's effort to rewrite history in terms of class struggle was partially at least inspired by the desire to rehabilitate posthumously those to whose injured lives history had added the insult of oblivion.[34]

Arendt's insight here may also be addressed to the issue of obscurity as interwoven through Stead's authorial production - in particular, to the narrative, alluded to in my second chapter, of the epic struggle of emergence from a cloistered, provincial setting into the wider world, into a space of free speech and fraternity.[35] Emily, too, reads the key passage from Thomas Paine's essay:

> The American Constitutions were to Liberty what a grammar is to language.

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[33] Michael Ferber, 'The Liberty of Appearing: Two Versions of the Romantic Enlightenment', in *Revolution and English Romanticism*, eds. Keith Hanley and Raman Selden, pp. 91-93.

[34] Cited in Ferber, 'The Liberty of Appearing', pp. 102-103. The citation can be found on page 64 of Arendt, *On Revolution*.

[35] Several critics have explored this theme, for example: Allen, 'Lives of Obscure Women'; Judith Barbour, 'Christina Stead: The Sublime Lives of Obscure Men' in *Southerly* XXXVIII (December 1978), pp. 406-16.

> Freedom has been hunted around the globe; reason was considered rebellion. But such is the irresistible nature of truth, that all it asks and all it wants is the liberty of appearing. The sun needs no inscription to distinguish him from darkness and no sooner did the American governments display themselves to the world than despotism felt a shock. (26)

With its inclusion of Paine's passage, the narrative signals a key historical context from which transatlantic notions of revolution flow. The narrative frames Emily, momentarily, as the young American (atypically female) revolutionary subject, fortuitously transporting high American revolutionary notions back to Europe, naively anticipating a fruitful return through her contact with a more sophisticated culture and history:

> She was glad now that she had discovered her ignorance. She wanted to be by herself until she could learn a few of the things that were ABC to the people she had just met and that were known to all artists in rebellion, all people who had been stirred up, in search of a better fate for mankind. (26-7)

The epic moment of Emily's youthful idealisation of Europe as centre of the dissemination of cultural power is tinged with not a little irony. Her provincial American self will not be so easy to shed, nor will Europe prove to be the model of utopian civilisation that it promises.

In some respects, as discussed in chapters two and five, the 'insult of oblivion' significantly marked Stead's own life and career, particularly in the postwar period, when her earlier achievements seemed forgotten by the literary establishment and when her efforts to publish met with frustration. Stead's early plans to write about the lives of the obscure were realised most obviously in novels such as *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, but her interest in the obscure subject remains a constant, if not always identically treated theme. In *I'm Dying Laughing*, Emily and Stephen, despite their fears of oblivion and from the viewpoint of nationality and class positioning, are worlds away from the obscurity of Joseph Baguenault and his society. As members of an intellectual class they are, in

Bourdieu's terms, the dominated fraction of a dominant class.[36] The Howards not only rebel against but are also radically dependent upon American cultural dominance: Emily as successful Hollywood writer and Stephen as educated intellectual and family member. Having much but wanting more, they fiercely, passionately, even spiritually struggle to fulfill seemingly inexhaustible material, social and political desires. Like Robbie Grant in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat,* Emily's and Stephen's privilege does not breed contentment, rather an endless, all-consuming desire feeding on itself. The Howards' political commitment appears to stem as much from emotional and identity needs as from objectively considered information:

> '...The only road I won't take is to be an enemy of the Soviet Union and an enemy of the Party. My belief in them is my life. And if I didn't believe in that, what would I believe in?' (164)

Far from the passive self-evidence of Thomas Paine's image of 'truth' as the sun simply waiting to be unveiled, the need actively to hold onto a passionate imperative or formulated system of belief with which to order the world and to construct coherent meaning is what drives the protagonists. To lose such a system, as Stephen fears it and Emily performs it, is to plunge into positionless chaos. In a wider sense, the text's project, worked out through its protagonists, becomes the question of how theory as truth is to be lived, the latter being necessarily predicated on the former's coherence.

Desire for belonging, and for significance, motivates both Emily and Stephen - as well as their detractors - in the Hollywood dinner-party at the home of Vera and Jim Holinshed. The distance from orthodoxy of the Howards' political position is most fully revealed through their having to defend it. It emerges as a far more radical, revolutionary

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[36] See Bourdieu's discussion of the historic developmentof the 'literary field' in the nineteenth century, occupied by 'bohemians' and by 'proletaroid intellectuals', the latter being aspiring writers who had 'adapted to the [contradictory] position of being the dominated fraction of the dominant class.' Bourdieu, 'Flaubert's Point of View', in *The Field of Cultural Production*, pp. 194-6.

position than that of their American comrades. Suburban conformity, parodically represented in the graded regimentation of housing according to wealth and status over the Santa Monica hills, prefaces the narrative's critique of the 'Hollywood radicals' who inhabit them (48-9), contextualising the theatrically staged scene of the dinner where Emily and Stephen are arraigned as deviationists and counter-revolutionaries (92-107). Operating at a number of levels, the dinner-party arraignment satirises the morally corrupted, self-serving politics of left-wing factions and the struggle for supremacy within the American Communist party, ironically invoking the very climate, methods and intent of McCarthyism, with its crude invasions of privacy. Stephen explicitly alludes to the arraignment as 'the little play in *Hamlet*'(99), and similarly the text's articulation of its own interrogative processes reflexively draws it back into the fictive world which is its target, thus deferring closure of signification. The text may also be charged with becoming prosecutor, in its arraignment of Stephen and Emily, as Stephen's self defence implies:

> 'Don't say you wrote this dreadful and partly true story to the lawyers! Is this your idea of truth and the role the friend and the writer plays in human life? You're asked for an opinion and you get up like Life the Prosecutor itself, like a prosecutor in a reign of terror ....' (103)

Couched in terms reminiscent of the fate of the virtuous revolutionist arraigned by counter-revolutionists, Stephen's accusation resoundingly challenges values legitimated and imposed via the narrational frame. In showing how the written report on a life can distort its complexity, the narrative suggests the ultimate complicity of the prosecutor with the accused criminal, of the judgement maker with the judged, of the orthodox party member with the deviationist. It should also be recognised that the play-within-the-play is not simply or only a self-consciously proto-deconstructive technique, it also functions to enhance readerly pleasure, by inhibiting and delaying (even while circulating) the possibility of firm judgemental stance.

A further disorientation of the text's political critique, its dislocation of the coherence of postwar Marxism, seems effected through its targeting of McCarthyist procedures, which seem just as redolent of the Moscow show trials as of the USA witch-hunt. This move threatens to constitute a curious reversal of object, given the text's apparent privileging of anti-Browderism, as well as Stead's well known loyalty to Stalinist Russia and her refusal to credit the rumours of its crimes.[37] Godfrey Bowles's amateurish indictment of Emily's sexual, maternal and social behaviour parodies debased, popular Freudian psychology and thus the entire gathering's claim to 'truth' is undermined. Surprisingly, Godfrey's discourse, which occasions the narrative's criticism of psychoanalysis as a culturally skewed patriarchal narrative, also proleptically articulates the descriptive power of the psychoanalytic narrative; this constitutes a contradictory prefiguring of late twentieth century feminist re-readings of Lacanian psychoanalysis - for all its phallocentrism - as descriptive of the cultural mechanism which denies 'woman' a coherent speaking position:

> To become a mother, surely for a woman is the solution of many conflicts. But it had not sufficed. Her conflicts were deeper still; the subconscious itself seemed to us to be rising to the surface through a profound cleavage. (102)

A pitch of absurdity is reached when Godfrey's Freudian pseudo-science is revealed as premised on a Shakespearean or Dickensian discourse of 'humours':

> '... Surely before, she had had a lively good humour, a natural comic spirit, a broad general wit, an almost gargantuan perception, an unrepressed genial flow of animal spirits distilled upwards into true wit ...observation, reflection, something unique, the word is not too much. And what is there now? She stammered, stuttered, emitted long parade speeches turned on instantly as if prepared long before; and yet, how could they have been, unless prepared in the unconscious, and rising to

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[37] Interviewed by Dessaix, Rowley discusses Stead's 'life-long Stalinism and her anti-feminist stance', but claims that 'Stead doesn't allow her dogmatismto alter her fiction very obviously'. See Dessaix, 'Christina: The Great?', p. 95.

> the surface, the necessary and healthy inhibitions having melted in the fire and disappeared, as is seen only in the unstable.' (102)[38]

This parodic Freudianism is strangely fitted to the narrative's recurring representation of Emily as a kind of landscape, ravaged by seismic energies and forces. Her strong, sensual, physical existence attracts, as seen in the dinner-party scene, voyeuristic fascination in a culture which prizes a domesticated female subject and fears one associated with political thinking and revolutionary aspirations. Emily is perhaps aligned, in another contradiction, with the mythic and dangerous figure of Ethel Rosenberg. The report of Stephen's death by fire appears to invoke the scene of execution of the Rosenbergs: it is a very public death, inspiring horror and fascination, as well as a release of communal 'demons', not least because of the cultural associations of witch burning. The wider public fascination with the Rosenbergs' death is evident, for example, in the eyewitness press report on the scene of execution, a report that resonates with Stead's novel:

> They died differently - gave off different sounds, different grotesque manners. Uh - he died quickly. ... She died a lot harder. When it appeared that she had received enough electricity to kill an ordinary person and had received the exact amount that killed her husband, the doctors went over and placed the stethoscope to her and looked around at each other rather dumbfounded and seemed surprised that she was not dead. And she was given more electricity which started again the kind of ghastly plume of smoke that rose from her head. After two more jolts, Ethel Rosenberg was dead.[39]

The public display of Emily's and Stephen's lives and deaths (physical and spiritual) invites a similarly ghastly, collective fascination. In an otherwise apparently outlandish observation, which surely finds full textual justification in Godfrey Bowles's discourse, Kate Lilley notes how the 'fully apocalyptic ending' of the novel connects apocalyptic fire with

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[38] See also Sheridan's comment that in Godfrey's analysis, '... the language modulates into pop psychology and a kind of seventeenth century disquisition on her "humours"'. See Sheridan's *Christina Stead*, pp. 126-7.

[39] See Ilene Philipson, *Ethel Rosenberg: Beyond the Myths* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1988), pp. 351-2. See also Stead's letter to Ettore Rella (30 June 1953), in *Selected Letters, Vol 1*, in which she referred to the execution of the Rosenbergs as 'the knockout blow of America's prestige' (p. 141).

the mysterious, powerful, female body that dominates the text, asserting that Emily 'will "die laughing", as we know she must, in a kind of spontaneous combustion'.[40]

Godfrey's charges against Emily, at least partially borne out by her own 'speech and behaviour',[41] actually prefigure the apocalyptic ending of the Howard marriage and the fragmentation of Emily's subjectivity. Through its suffering-laughter, which evokes the 'abject' abyss of revolutionary failure and tropes the mutually constitutive boundary between revolution and terror, Emily's body becomes the site of apocalypse, of an irrevocably divided female subjectivity, the locus of witch-hunt, holocaust and terror. In contrast to what Brydon says, even if the text does not purvey ' ... simplistic notions of retribution', neither may 'Stephen's suicide and Emily's madness' be understood as merely 'the judgements they cast on themselves'.[42] Rather, Emily and Stephen theatrically assume the role, on the textual stage, of sacrificial victims required for postwar cultural atonement.

2. The Scalpel Within

> 'And think of the terrors you must pass through - the misery, starvation, torture, the countless awful deaths, perhaps our whole generation will have passed before we even catch sight of the new world!' (252)

Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, which elaborates through a vividly post-holocaust sensibility the elusive concept of abjection, is a text which produces many resonances in conjunction with Stead's *I'm Dying Laughing*, in which Emily's descent into madness produces a rich psychological and political seam of study. Although Stead was always scathing about Freudian psychoanalysis, *I'm Dying Laughing*, with its post-holocaust

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[40] Kate Lilley, 'Christina Stead: Writing Expatriation', in *Diverse Voices: Essays on Twentieth-Century Women Writers in English*, ed. Harriet Devine Jump (New York: St Martin's Press, 1991), p. 176.

[41] A point made by Sheridan, in *Christina Stead*, p. 127.

[42] See Brydon, '"Other Tongues"', p. 21.

awareness of Western history, is constructed out of cultural resources, discourses and modes of thought which bear a strong similarity to those employed within Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*. In the tradition of both Marx and Freud, both texts reveal (and assume that) human subjectivity - the individual's relation to the social - is a site of struggle. Both texts identify the transgressive female body as the negative of culture, an unspeakable thing that threatens to undermine it, but also a vital principle and a rich source of challenge to the existing order. Both narratives arise from a Western heritage, with its traces of a colonial past (and present), its affluence, its dominations, its nightmares and its individualism. Neither narrative can speak for other kinds of human cultural experiences, although there are also traces of such things within them.

'Abjection' pertains to a dimension of experience that, Kristeva asserts, is both repelled by and fundamental to the functioning of human subjectivity. In my argument, which explores the specifically gendered revolutionary subject in *I'm Dying Laughing*, revolution as an event which may destine its participants for both cultural transformation and catastrophe is constituted in and through 'abjection'. Although both remain potent categories in Western thought, 'abjection' and 'revolution' are ultimately locked together within a phallogocentric paradigm of the social subject. This paradigm, which supports the privileged unity of *I'm Dying Laughing*, is also contested through the narrative's qualities of difference and heterogeneity.

In advancing an explanation of what can be an elusive concept, I want to situate 'abjection' in relation to the formation of subjectivity, and to explore its functioning in the representation of revolutionaries in *I'm Dying Laughing*. Lacan's theory of the formation of subjectivity is the requisite foundation for Kristeva's concept of the abject, which both profits from and revises the former, emphasising the pre-oedipal bond with the body of the mother and thereby reinscribing maternal corporeality within psychoanalytic discourse. In

Lacanian terms, the process of the individual's attainment of an apparently stable condition of selfhood is inaugurated in the pre-oedipal child through the mirror stage, through the 'jubilant assumption of his specular image' even while 'still sunk in his motor incapacity and nurseling dependence', a drama which 'decisively projects the formation of the individual into history'.[43] As Elizabeth Grosz explains, the infant's experience of ubiquity and 'syncretic unity' with the (m)other, and its immersion in the '"pure plenitude" of the Real', is lost as the child, recognising absence, is 'propelled into identificatory relations': the child's sense of a unified, autonomous self is acquired through its (mis)recognition of its own gestalted image in the mirror.[44] The division between the child's fragmented body and the *imago* of the ideal, unified self is internalised, and the (m)other is thrust out from what is now constituted as the subject, in the instant of primal repression. But the stable, unified status of the subject, with secure psychic and corporeal boundaries and well-defined subject-object relations, is only ever an incompletely achieved state, at best illusory. Subject-object/self-other are the binary terms with which the conscious mind of the self maps it/self and its intersubjective relations. The potent experience of abjection, in Kristeva's theory, is crucially linked to this structure, recurring throughout the life of consciousness as a threat to the notion of stability of the constructed self by perennially reminding it of its own repressions.

According to Kristeva, the threat of the abject derives from its impossible status as neither subject nor object. Rather, it is -

> ...ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated ... [the abject] has only one quality of the object - that of being opposed to *I*.[45]

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[43] See Jacques Lacan, 'The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience', in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), pp. 2 and 4.
[44] See Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A feminist introduction* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990), pp. 34-35.
[45] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 1.

Experiences, images or encounters which, on a daily basis, call up the repressed from the unconscious, serving to remind the self of its own transiently constructed nature, without which it would fall into the abyss of non-being, are termed 'abject'. Grosz points out that the abject is both 'a condition of symbolic subjectivity; and is also its unpredictable, sporadic *accompaniment*.'[46] It is thus both structural to the subject, and symptomatic: it is the principle of cohesion and the threat of fragmentation.

Kristeva's theory posits that culture and the law (the symbolic order itself) depend upon but do not acknowledge their dependence upon the abject - the excluded, the taboo - in order to exist:

> 'On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.'[47]

In other words, Kristeva centrally positions the struggle for unified subjectivity as a privileged narrative from which all other narratives flow. The danger of such a totalising narrative is that it can engulf other narrative possibilities and cancel out its own potential for meaningful specification. In appropriating her terminology for this discussion of *I'm Dying Laughing*, I am suggesting that the Kristevan paradigm is not universal, but culturally specific, and intertwined with a European history which, in privileging the salvational narrative of the revolutionary subject, also threatens to collapse into the conflagration of the holocaust. Likewise, *I'm Dying Laughing's* treatment of revolution refigures the post-1789 tradition, employing a complex and allusive web of responses to revolution as millennial apocalypse. The abject, constitutive of and accompanying the political guilt of the protagonists and of their milieu within the text, simultaneously opens up and closes over the abyss of human failure, particularly with respect to the revolutionary project.

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[46] Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (North Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), p. 72.
[47] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.

What, in Stead's novel, evokes or refers to the domain of abjection? Why should this argument privilege the term 'abjection' where another term such as 'guilt' or 'horror' might have sufficed? Horror and guilt undoubtedly play a prominent role both in the unfolding of the experience of the protagonists and in delineating the culture in which they move. Revelations of the world's horrors attend (and perhaps provoke) the deterioration of the Howards' moral choices. Echoes of the tumbrils, induced by fearful guilt and eliciting a horrified fascination, grow louder in Emily's mind the more contradictory and compromised her life becomes. Embodying contradiction, both Stephen and Emily are also strays - 'dejects' in Kristevan terminology - firstly from conventional society and secondly from the category to which they aspire: that of the virtuous and disinterested radical. Yet they command our total involvement, their outrageous and wilful lives not only permitting but activating voyeuristic, readerly pleasures.[48] Furthermore, the Howards' revolutionary hubris is coupled with their irrational loathing of others' material hardship and of anything offensive to their standards of cultivated, cosmopolitan order.[49] There is much which the characters actively avoid and deny, much which, when confronted, horrifies them. These repressions point towards abjection as that which both accompanies and constitutes their subjectivities, signifying the gap between their revolutionary aspirations and their primal fears.

An 'abjection' also accompanies the structuring of the narrative viewpoint. Emily, in particular, provokes a relation of 'abjection' for the reader, with the narrative shuttling between sympathy and repugnance in a manner disruptive of conventional readerly expectations.[50] Emily represents what Kristeva calls the maternal abject, her body eliciting a

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[48] See Blain's discussion of this effect within Stead's narratives, '*A Little Tea, A Little Chat*: Decadent Pleasures and the Pleasure of Decadence', esp. pp. 26-8

[49] See for example, the Howards' disgust when entertained in a less than lavish manner (p. 267), or Emily's loathing of the starved cat and of non-human life forms (pp. 112-113 and 122).

[50] See Lidoff, *Christina Stead*, p. 56. Sheridan problematises Lidoff's discussion of the combination of sympathetic identification and ironic distance in Stead's narratives, finding the division between realism/romance and irony

striking combination of attraction and repulsion. Its otherness to the hygienically bordered, 'clean and proper' body signals its 'femininity' - its shifting size, its vulnerability to the penetration of feeling, its irrational creativity. Moreover there are moments where the text, through Emily, opens up horrors that both constitute its moral and political bounds and which it must overleap. These moments function to fissure the coherence of the Marxist world view which establishes the text's normative frame; rupturing this frame, they produce the narrative's heterogeneity, its multiplicities of meaning. Returning to the Brydon and Sheridan debate, this focus on the narrative's abjections thus affirms that although the normative frame of the text might signify the call for revolutionary commitment, the temporal experience of reading *I'm Dying Laughing* problematically remains, as Sheridan asserts, one of certainties ruptured and ironies multiplied.

Emily and Stephen occupy a territory with unstable boundaries. Increasingly severed from original familial, cultural and political ties, they hover on the brink of an impossible crossing into ideal community. The Howards' hardline, revolutionary, Stalinist political stance - which can strike present-day readers as already deeply flawed - registers their bold defiance of the world of safe, liberal-humanist values. Emily declares passionately, in the company of sympathetic friends, their fidelity to the Soviet cause (which is still mythically equated with revolution) in its triumphant, inexorable progress through history:

> '... We're still on that all-stations train. That omnibus. How many stops has that train got, that started at the Finland station in March 1917? At every whistle-stop people got off. Not us.'
>
> Stephen said, 'Romantics and mystics and people like ourselves looking for a new energy, a new aim from the revolution. All there with a personal aim. Well, we're still on the train that started from the Finland station.' (183)

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dichotomous; Sheridan prefers Jennifer Strauss's suggestion that Stead's focus is on the real confusions produced by overlapping and intertwining identities. See Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, pp. 79-80.

Employing the hackneyed but comforting refrain of Lenin's train ride, a narrative which tends to deny the turnings of Soviet history, Emily and Stephen valorise the loyal company of supporters, including themselves, who stayed on 'the train'. Their discourse, however, already contains the markings of contradiction, in the multiplicities of 'personal aim'. This devout and communal train ride to utopia is overtaken in the text by a dark counterpart - a journey into nightmare[51] - and the commitment and camaraderie of staying aboard is subsumed by the fear of passing a signpost on the lonely road and of not being able to turn back:

> '... all the stages on the road to socialism, all the turnoffs, all the milestones, until you get to the one that says, *No Turning Back*. Oh, what a shudder! I'd like to stand on that road and look up at that signpost. *From here no way back*. What would be my real feelings? I mean, without romance, without hazy illusions, without the idea that one day if it didn't suit I could go back to the USA? It's a fearful idea. For us all, socialism, even Russian Marxist socialism is a somewhat Utopian dream; but there - at the dread signpost -'
> She laughed. (252)

With a shudder elicited by the presence of abjection, Emily voices the instability produced by the existence of the borderline. Emily's unorthodoxy, initially a site of political value in contrast to conformist Hollywood communism, also allows her to stray from 'good' European communist circles into an area that threatens to undermine revolutionary certainties. Furthermore, still caught in a culturally constructed subjectivity, Emily can neither progress past the signpost into the utopian future nor advance from the safety of the known past.

Transgressing social bounds, the Howards, and Emily in particular, do not observe expected distinctions between public and private worlds:

> They always talked with the greatest freedom before intimates. (51)

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[51] This journey is literally staged in the latter half of the novel, when Emily and Stephen accompany the reckless Trefougars on a smuggling trip (see pp. 317-324).

> Emily spoke in public as she spoke in private. (74)

In this transgression the couple are both engaging and threatening - such a lack of observation of trivial social niceties is compellingly original, enhancing their rebellious non-conformity. In their freedom from decorum, however, Emily and Stephen also take liberties that infringe on the privacy of their dependants - servants and children - who become unwilling spectators of a drama within which they are powerless. Like Sam Pollit in *The Man Who Loved Children*, Emily and Stephen speak with 'the greatest freedom' before intimates, their performances dramatically heightened and invigorated through the presence of a silent 'stage' audience. As argued in chapter six, in relation to Nellie Cotter's performance, the muted presence of intimate witnesses within the narrative mimics and dramatically produces its framing interrogations, dialogising what otherwise threatens as the monological ravings of the protagonists.

In her failure to observe social niceties, however, Emily still eludes the simplistic label of vulgarity or ostentation. Like Frankenstein's monster or the Rabelaisian Gargantua, Emily represents a joyful excess, an uncivilised, untameable way of being, disruptive of symbolic order.[52] But this is an unlivable, dangerous excess: Emily's subjectivity is shaped by the experience of permanent exile. She continually crosses and recrosses conventional and moral boundaries. Her anguish is not concerned primarily with identity but with relationship and belonging. In this state of self-conscious separation, she (as well as Stephen) resemble, in their subjectivities, Kristeva's 'deject':

> Situationist, in a sense, and not without laughter - since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection. Necessarily dichotomous, somewhat Manichaean, he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections is not at all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself

[52] Brydon discusses narrative tensions between Faustian and Rabelaisian paradigms in '"Other Tongues"', esp. pp. 18-20.

> the scalpel that carries out his separations. ...A tireless builder, the deject is in short *astray*. He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding ....[53]

Thus Emily's laughter, erupting at moments of recognition of discord or horror, may be seen as a strategy for 'placing or displacing abjection'. In Jennifer Gribble's words, Emily's laughter is her 'strategy of forgetting'.[54] Both Emily and Stephen are 'without, properly speaking, wishing to know' their abjections, 'not at all unaware of them'. It is this semi-conscious, borderline state, in which doubts and horrors are half-glimpsed and then laughed away, which accompanies their behaviour and discourse and which suggests the approach of abjection. They are multiply exiled from family, country, political party and finally from the 'revolutionary journey' itself. The more Emily agitates to belong and the more tirelessly she builds, the more she is cast out - and casts herself out; her compulsive and indiscreet campaign of letter writing to Stephen's family, for example, is later enlisted as damning proof of her instability when the letters find their inevitable way - rather like Poe's purloined letter[55] - into Anna's possession. There can be no reconciliation between the potent desire for belonging to the bourgeois American family and the Marxist aspirations which undermine such a concept of family, despite Emily's contradictory self-justifications:

> '...Quit worrying, Stephen. We're going to live high, wide and handsome and to hell with the consequences. When the revolution comes we'll have helped to hurry it on.' (219)

In the last half of the novel, the more Emily indulges in the distractions of sumptuous, sensual living, in the proliferation of bizarre schemes for books, parties and unlikely projects for turning Christy into a scholar, the more her abject fear of

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[53] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 8.

[54] Jennifer Gribble, 'Books of Laughter and Forgetting', in *Meridian* 6. 2 (October 1987), p. 159.

[55] See Jacques Lacan, '*Jacques Lacan*, Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988): 'Thus it is that what the "purloined letter," nay, the "letter in sufferance," means is that a letter always arrives at its destination' (p. 53).

revolution/apocalypse is heightened. The inclusion of gourmet menus and baldly itemised accounts of what was had for dinner functions to horrify and tantalise the reader, inviting voyeuristic participation in what Don Anderson would call its 'drama of the appetites'.[56] Contesting Anderson's emphasis on the metaphoric functioning of the feast, Tina Muncaster prefers to consider this novel's production of the 'textuality of appetite',[57] a focus which usefully suggests the metonymic rather than metaphoric functioning of narrative consumption, its hastening towards apocalypse. The correlation established between the Howards' overconsumption of food and the accounts of human bodies consumed in the Nazi holocaust, therefore, momentarily surfaces a metaphoric relationship which the 'shopping list' approach to food in the narrative (in Muncaster's words, its 'gourmand tallies') otherwise functions to repress or to overleap. Vittorio's analytical account of the concentration camp, which applies Marxist analysis to the economy of the holocaust, theorises and defines that which seems to work in defiance of rationality:

> It was a question of calories, kilograms and grams of human resistance, the kind of flesh and fat. The nutrition problem they calculated was how long a man of a certain type and weight, fat, bone-structure, would keep working on a diminished provision of calories and vitamins. (249)

Vittorio's explanation, diagnosing the Nazi system as driven by a desire to consume rather than to be consumed, indicates an extreme form of cultural repression, a collective abjection. In the contaminating conjunction of food and corpses (continued at the level of the dinner-party itself, since these stories of Nazi horror circulate with the food and drink), where human bodies are valued only as food or fuel, subjectivity is threatened and a cultural abyss opens.

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[56] See Anderson, 'Christina Stead's Unforgettable Dinner-Parties', p. 30. His subsequent piece on *I'm Dying Laughing* refers to it as a 'Rabelaisian tragedy ... of the appetites': see 'Tragedy and dinner parties ... ', p. 110.

[57] Tina Muncaster, 'The Pleasures of Text and Fable: Appetite and Consumption in *I'm Dying Laughing*'. *Southerly* 53. 4 (December 1993), p. 106-115.

Kristeva also discusses the ways in which food (as oral object/other/mother) can be abject, when it occupies a borderline 'between two distinct entities or territories' such as nature and culture.[58] In addition, food remainders are also abject, 'residues of something but especially of someone', polluting 'on account of incompleteness'.[59] Emily's obsessive intolerance of any imperfection in a menu, of the sight of plain food, or even of food scraps, therefore betokens abjection. The only episode in which she acts violently involves a stray cat, which has been allowed by a servant into the kitchen to lick an unwashed baking dish:

> Emily shouted, with an ugly expression, 'Who did that?'
> She took the cat by the scruff of the neck and hauled it to the door. It was a bluish, short-haired animal with a white hourglass on the belly. It had just had kittens. It was almost starved to death. She threw it on the hillside which rose behind the house. (113)

As in Nazism, Emily's reaction springs from a compulsive fear of the other, of what is residual or excluded from the world she wants to inhabit. The extreme need of the cat seems to intensify Emily's loathing, just as, later in the narrative, the concept of the poor student of Christy's tutor and the idea of the hungry masses invite her irrational fear and rejection. The starving cat represents an abject existence, an exiled suffering, which Emily wants to exclude from her self and her home. Of course, the ejection of the cat from the house to the cold hillside ironically prefigures Emily's own fate.

Things, creatures and people who represent that which is 'other' to Emily's preferred domain call forth her disgust and horror.[60] Her outrageous attack on Christy's friend, Frankie, appears reasonless, but is logically linked to her provocatively incestuous approaches to Christy. Her rhetorical performance recalls that of both Sam and Henny in

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[58] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 75.
[59] Kristeva, *Powers*, p. 76
[60] See also Brydon's comment, in '"Other Tongues"', that the 'text inscribes that respect for otherness that Emily neglects' (p. 22).

The Man Who Loved Children. Abject and vindictive like Henny's discourse, Emily's address to Frankie is also like Sam's - arrogant in its use of power over a vulnerable audience:

> 'This ignorant girl that I would kick to the bottom of the class, she wouldn't get ten per cent from me, she's going into business righting the wrongs of American society with her fat-jawed, fat-eyed, fat-breasted, fat-waisted, fat-legged, fat-footed intuition and Freudian jargon ... Sit up, Frankie. You sit opposite me and I can see all the revolting arrogance in your fat little eyes. You're a nobody.' (336)

Ironically, this speech projects self-loathing: it is Emily who is fat at this point. Moreover, the young American girl she reviles and despises, whom Christy 'met on the boat and who like him, had been a young communist' (332) is the counterpart of Emily herself at the beginning of the novel. Thus Frankie is a remainder/reminder to Emily of a lost, idealistic self. This reminder provokes Emily's theatrical, monological raving, her attempt to exclude that which challenges her self-definition. Emily's depiction of revolutionary scenes at Versailles conveys her horrified fascination with the abject image of the vulgar proletariat, the uncultured, unwashed masses:

> '... the terrifying memory of the furies, clawing at the cobblestones, their feet gaping with festering wounds, dirt ground in and scarred everywhere, filling the air with their rotten breath, spoiling the gilt with their fierce dirty paws; and think of the broken, yellow, torn nails, the knotted joints, overturning, tearing, breaking with hate, pocketing, shouting, jeering, lusting, and bad, bad, as conquerors are always bad, jealous, mean, and justified eventually by history. What a terrible picture! It makes me hang my head. I can't even cry. My eyes are empty. I am empty. If that can happen, why live?' (423)

As her rhetoric shows, Emily's fear and loathing is aroused primarily by the invasive impurity of these attackers, their vandalism of civilised order. Kristeva's discussion of the abjection of self extends on the notion of this kind of projection and misrecognition:

> ...abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory. I imagine a child who has swallowed up his parents too soon... What he has swallowed up instead of maternal love is an emptiness, or rather a maternal hatred without a word

> for the words of the father; that is what he tries to cleanse himself of, tirelessly.[61]

At first fending off the abject, Emily eventually relinquishes any attempted mastery over it, not only becoming the narrative's major site of collective, cultural abjection, but also constituting the narrative's own abject. Emily becomes the narrative's reminder/remainder, performing its displacements. A number of commentators have observed the non-judgemental, detached quality of the narrative's authorial voice -

> ... her persistent withholding of explicit moral judgement. Stead remains detached, leaving her characters to talk; her readers must always make up their own minds.[62]

The furious, frenetic voices of Emily (in particular) and of Stephen certainly seem to swamp the less noticeable third person narrative. Connecting the dialogues are passages of relatively unembellished, functional prose, blandly recounting scenes, events and plot developments, executed with a deceptive air of 'this is exactly what happened', from which all but the faintest hints of an ironic authorial presence are expunged. Where employing indirect discourse or focalisation to recount a scene from the perspective of a particular character, the narrative presents itself mildly, as a 'necessary' view, a plain view of how things are. But through repetition or closely detailed description of the 'object', a voyeuristic gaze can be utilised which belies the seeming objectivity or neutrality of the account:

> Emily had some things to do herself, she had no time to change, and for dinner and most of the evening she wore her afternoon costume, a pair of short blue linen trousers, tight and somewhat faded, over this a blue butcher's smock over a turtle neck sweater over a white silk blouse; and a blue ribbon off a chocolate box tying her hair into a top-knot. From time to time she adjusted in her water-fall of hair, little combs which did not hold it. There was her very red and yellow face smiling, her naturally light-red lips, her bright blue eyes, rounded and wide open. Stephen looking at her, smiled, as others did; her costume was comic, original and becoming. (240)

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[61] Kristeva, *Powers*, pp. 5-6.

[62] Ann Blake,' An Epic Exhumed', *Meanjin* 47. 1 (Autumn 1988), p. 138.

Using excessively detailed documentation, the third person narrative's supposed neutrality is a mask, as the 'gaze' travels over Emily's vivacious disorder, her incongruous, clown-like costume, both sensual and absurd, and her undomesticable hair. The final sentence, focalised through Stephen, offers the only direct opinion, its intervention working to mask authorial judgement.[63] But while the narrative so insistently details the eloquent language of Emily's body, its sexual receptiveness and vulnerability, a fascination extending beyond mere detached enumeration seems to fetishise the viewed object:

> Emily turned round, her bosom bursting the seams in the new tailored suit, raised her rosy cheek, rosier still in the black dress. (393)

The narrative presentation of Emily's voice, and the voyeuristic focus on her female body, combine to effect a powerful excess which destabilises the judgements invited by the text's Marxist values. The narrative constitutes her body (an object shifting towards the abject) as its fascinating and horrifying 'other', as seen in its voyeuristic approach. Kristeva indicates that -

> Voyeurism is a structural necessity in the constitution of object relation, showing up every time the object shifts towards the abject; it becomes true perversion only if there is a failure to symbolize the subject/object instability. Voyeurism accompanies the writing of abjection. When that writing stops, voyeurism becomes a perversion.[64]

The act of reading/writing the novel becomes analogous to an act of sublimation: only by writing can abjection be deferred. While Emily's sexuality seems vigorous and active, as textual object she is represented as passive to bodily forces. Her body expands like a pregnant body, functioning independently of subjectivity, challenging the boundaries of clothing and custom, a shifting borderline. Abjection is discovered in this violation of the

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[63] Stephen's focalisation is modified by the qualifying phrase 'as others did', which broadens the basis of sympathy for Emily.

[64] Kristeva, *Powers*, p. 46.

boundaries pertaining to the body. The narrative is preoccupied with these corporeal boundaries and, as in the scene of her incestuous advance towards Christy, can seem to function beyond horror, in complicity with forbidden desire:

> She pointed to her heart, under her rosy breast. The nipple stood up at him through the thin, silky material. She looked at it and smiled at him with capricious coquetry.
>
> 'I am a woman, Christy, my precious, you know; and this is what makes a woman, this heart, this breast, this skin, this mouth, this loving mouth that I am pressing to your dear cheek; to your dear -'
>
> She kissed him eagerly on cheek and mouth, holding her mouth to his and pressing his lips, drinking thirstily. He let her manage him and drew back when she released him, with moist, large eyes. He seized her hand and kissed it.
>
> 'I love you, mother, I do really love you,' said he.
>
> She jubilated. (328-9)

This scene evokes an abjectly borderline body - a body of crossings - which in Kristevan terms is foundational to the in/coherence of subjectivity. It is undecidably the body of the mother/madonna and the sexualised body of the desiring woman. There is a lingering over the mouth, a heady play upon orality - as well as over the sight of the erect nipple (the woman-as-phallus becomes a transgressive woman-with-phallus), the excessive kissing, the reference to drinking thirstily. What makes this piece particularly 'abject' for the reader, positioned as voyeur by the narrative, is the interaction between mother and stepson. In a scene which seems to affirm the efficacy of the psychoanalytic paradigm, the paternal prohibition lapses on both sides as Christy responds to his stepmother's advances, thus figuring the breakdown of both subjectivity and the social order. Discussing the social purposes of incest prohibition, Kristeva alludes fleetingly, however, to a different version of 'the confrontation with the feminine':

> ...one that, going beyond abjection and fright, is enunciated as ecstatic ... That kind of confrontation appears, where our civilisation is concerned,

> only in a few rare flashes of writing. Céline's laughter, beyond horror, also comes close to it, perhaps.[65]

While it is tempting to consider Christy's encounter with Emily as one such 'ecstatic' 'confrontation with the feminine', Kristeva's gesture to this mystical state - attained through incorporation of the feminine - is still predicated on a phallocentric version of female subjectivity and sexuality. Certainly, in relation to cultural expectation, Emily's behaviour represents a radical transgression of the sexual code, but it is also part of her evolution towards monstrosity. Her laughter, erupting more and more frequently in the latter half of the novel, is another bodily symptom of - or response to - her abject condition.

It is through laughter that Emily's body achieves a life of its own: laughter is a force that grips and overtakes her. Her body is penetrated, Rabelaisian style, by the twin forces of suffering and laughter. It is the site of an eruption of creative and destructive forces. The forces of appetite, laughter, desire and horror are comparable to the forces of labour pain which wrack the maternal body:

> 'And the body gets up like an immense giant and grabs me and balances me over the cliff, threatening to toss me over. Oh, heigh-ho, nothing in my life compares with my physical feelings. How often are we physical in life, Suzanne? A hot bath? Pouah! A childbirth, well, yes, it is. Sex? I mean compared with what I felt just then?' (305)

Gribble comments that Emily's laughter 'expresses above all her uniqueness and vitality, but also her anguish and bewilderment'. She aligns Emily's laughter with *jouissance*:

> Emily ... is a vivid embodiment of *jouissance* ... For Emily, laughter is orgasmic: making love is the closest physical experience she can find to describe what it is like to 'die laughing' ... .[66]

Subject to unpredictable, catastrophic forces, to whatever passes through its permeable and shifting boundaries, Emily's body is the site of an immense struggle with volcanic passions,

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[65] Kristeva, *Powers*, p. 59.
[66] Gribble, 'Books of Laughter and Forgetting', p. 159.

the arena where the narrative itself performs its political debate, its moral dilemmas and its passions:

> She sobbed, struggled, strangled, shouted, screamed with laughter, strong, immense laughter, it seemed, not hysterical, the great roaring of big lungs and a strong heart. (399)

Abjection also emerges from Emily's seemingly boundless linguistic energy, her sound and fury inexorably invoking its opposite condition of void, emptiness and hopelessness. Writing of the phobic's need to devour words and language, Kristeva connects the want, originating with separation from the mother, with the symptom of extreme, aggressive orality:

> The speech of the phobic adult is also characterized by extreme nimbleness. But that vertiginous skill is as if void of meaning, traveling at top speed over an untouched and untouchable abyss ... language has then become a counterphobic object ... In analyzing those structures one is led to thread one's way through the meshes of the non-spoken in order to get at the meaning of such a strongly barricaded discourse.[67]

In *I'm Dying Laughing*, in which the narrative is borne along on the torrent of speech, the sheer volume of talk obstructs coherent meaning-making processes. Emily's excessive talk and behaviour are both attractive and repulsive, exerting a kind of horrible fascination, tirelessly building meaning and tirelessly disrupting coherence. In her excess, perhaps, she embodies the laughable hubris of aspiration veiling the 'vertiginous' threat of mortality, the need to skim on the surface of life rather than look down.

Rumours, stories and signs of brutality, terror and fascism permeate the narrative, although violence is rarely enacted.[68] The reported nature of these events both keeps them at bay and increases their potency. Difficult to validate or to control, rumours circulate

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[67] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 41.

[68] Stephen's death by fire is reported rather than represented 'on stage'. The stray cat episode is a notable exception.

endlessly through the community, promoting fear and paralysing action. Unresolvable reports cluster about a suppressed narrative of violence in the text, which is articulated in and through the Howards' association with two corrupt and unstable Americans, Violet and Johnny Trefougar. Desperate for belonging and for money, the Howards are led by the Trefougars into a shadowy, dangerous world of criminal conspiracy and enticed into border-crossing escapades of gold smuggling and drug addiction. Violence is in the air, but not actually played out. Violet Trefougar's unsubstantiated 'story' of Johnny's desperate and murderous intentions towards her displaces Emily's attention from the less comprehensible narratives of Nazi horror circulating at the dinner-party. The proximity of this more bounded horror prompts Emily's and Stephen's ineffectual rescue attempt. But neither the Howards' attempt nor the subsequent narrative provides a tangible proof or resolution of Violet's claim. Later on, when the Howards witness the extremity of the Trefougars' criminal activity, they glimpse the possibility that Violet's story springs from and enacts a deeper guilt. From a Marxist viewpoint, such cryptic stories and reports are crippling on both individual and collective levels, disabling the synoptic vision required to perceive, address and act upon the social ills of postwar society.[69]

Similarly, the reportage of Stephen's death by fire mediates the representation of this violent scene. The displaced focus on Emily's frenetic, theatrical response produces unease and nausea - a production of the abject, mimicking Emily's own response. In death, Stephen enters the transforming, apocalyptic fire to which Stead referred in her previously quoted desire, that the narrative should 'go on from fire to more fiery to fierier still'. The apocalyptic manner of his death plays upon sublimity: according to Kristeva, the abject is

[69] Note also the Macbeth-like, disembodied cry of 'Murder' that Stephen and Emily hear when they drive to the Trefougars' house. (p. 292)

'edged with the sublime'.[70] Through fiery sublimation, Stephen crosses borders, moving into and beyond horror:

> Passers-by notified local people and also the local police that there was a car in a distant field, burning fiercely, so bright that although it was clear daylight, no details could be seen. (443)

Kristeva, discussing Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed,* identifies 'the aim and motive of an existence whose meaning is lost in absolute degradation' as abjection, through which the subject enters a territory of transition:

> Abjection then wavers between the fading away of all meaning and all humanity, burnt as by the flames of a conflagration, and the ecstasy of an ego that, having lost its Other and its objects, reaches, at the precise moment of this suicide, the height of harmony with the promised land.[71]

The territory of transition, in Stephen's case, is represented by apocalyptic fire. Not reducible to a cynical betrayal of Emily, Stephen's suicide both acknowledges and refuses his own degradation. Just prior to his 'departure', he takes part in the May Day march, revisiting his youth, and telling Christy (rather than Emily, with whom communication is now impossible) that 'this is the happiest moment of my life: the best; also the most foolish' (443). Stephen, the man without a country, is transformed by fire as he makes his suicidal crossing into another country.[72]

The violence of counter-revolutionary terror is recurrent in the narrative. There are the repeated references to the tumbrils of revolutionary France. Their echoes, heard solely by Emily, are induced by her guilt. In the midst of luxury and decadence, the tumbrils evoke a narrative of terror, threatening dire punishment for failure to live according to virtuous

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[70] Kristeva, *Powers,* p. 11.

[71] Kristeva, *Powers,* p. 18.

[72] Early in the novel, Stephen is identified with a 'tear-jerking fiction' by Edward Everett Hale, *The Man Without A Country* (14). This carries an extra burden of irony in view of Marx's assertion that 'The working men have no country': see *The Communist Manifesto* in *The Marx-Engels Reader,* p. 350.

revolutionary principles. At first threatening others (such as orthodox communists identified as theoretically impure) with impersonal, irresistible revolutionary terror, the tumbrils come to represent a direct threat to Emily herself, as she increasingly identifies with Marie Antoinette. This identification, the subject of her 'magnum dopus' (408), both represents and increases her estrangement from that world of revolutionary purity to which she would belong. Guiding Stephen's family through Versailles, Emily dwells on its reminders of a decadent past and details her sense of connection with Marie Antoinette:

> 'I have the memory of all these Marie-Antoinettes of all degrees, all doomed; and the sadness of their stately doom, behind the unspeakably rich and voluptuous and happy life a horrid sound, coming out of the gorgeousness pushing through into the forefront, the slow-paced tumbrils, the towering guillotines, the last moment, the awful axe. And it is this most awful of scenes, itself wickedly vulgar which saves this park from vulgarity.' (422)

Indeed, the awful scene of her suffering retrieves Emily, the crass American, from collapse into vulgarity. The vulgar, the common, the obscure, the culturally impotent - these are the terms from which Emily and Stephen flee and into which they always threaten to collapse.

Abjection is evoked not only in the spectre of Nazism that still leaves its traces in post-holocaust Europe, but in the threat of its ceaseless repetition (and permutation) by those who should be ideologically opposed to it. As Stephen's final narrative suggests, Nazism becomes identified with the smallest, most unavoidable acts of betrayal. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva's discourse is haunted by the violently transgressive images of holocaust:

> In the dark halls of the museum that is now what remains of Auschwitz, I see a heap of children's shoes, or something like that, something I have already seen elsewhere, under a Christmas tree, for instance, dolls I believe. The abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things.[73]

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[73] Kristeva, *Powers*, p. 4.

I'm Dying Laughing also contends with the residues of holocaust, yoking together extremes of innocence and horror, connecting holocaust with images of children. At the cocktail party she has organised for Vittorio, Emily recalls, without being able to identify, the refrain from William Blake's poem, 'The Echoing Green' (241). Signifying again the transatlantic revolutionary nexus, Blake's poetry assumes a certain prominence within the narrative, since Emily's earlier citation of the stanza from *Milton* is uncannily repeated by Vittorio:

> But Palambron [sic] called down a Great Solemn Assembly ...
> That he who will not defend Truth, may be compelled to
> Defend a Lie, that he may be snared and caught and taken. (75 and 242)

Blake's verse alludes to a heavenly tribunal at which Palamabron (representing Blake himself in the role of Pity, the writer on the side of the oppressed) justifies himself by putting the liar (Satan) on trial.[74] Among other aspects of the narrative, these lines resonate not only in relation to Emily's unfinished book, *Trial and Execution*, prefiguring the Howards' own act of denunciation, but refer us to the 'author', who puts the renegade couple on trial. Vittorio also recognises the refrain of 'The Echoing Green'. One of the *Songs of Innocence*, this poem celebrates childhood, play and innocent laughter. Its final lines, not articulated in the text, alter the poem's tenor:

> And sport no more seen,
> On the darkening Green.[75]

These unspoken lines foreshadow Stephen's last reported words in the novel. He recounts, to Emily, Vittorio's narrative of how some Nazi soldiers briefly played ball with children who were waiting in line for the gas chamber:

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[74] See S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), p. 321.

[75] William Blake, 'The Ecchoing Green' [sic], in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, intro. Sir Geoffrey Keynes (1967; London: Oxford University/Trianon Press, 1970), pp. 6-7.

> '...then the fault was fixed. They stopped playing and the children went to the gas chamber. And Vittorio, who told so much - for once his voice faltered.'
> 'Well, what about it?'
> 'I prefer not to be out there playing ball.' (442)

Vittorio's uncharacteristic loss of words at this juncture suggest abjection's emergence through and disruption of the symbolic order. In its retellings, this narrative risks an abjection for speaker and listener. Curiously blunt and obtuse, Emily's affectless response to the tale suggests her complete immersion in rather than detachment from horror.

Assuming grotesque, even carnivalesque, dimensions, Emily becomes even more monstrous in the last chapters of the narrative. Increasingly housebound, ostensibly working on her book during Stephen's absence, she becomes 'so portly that she [feels] uncomfortable in anything but loose gowns' (334). Retreating gothically from the house proper to the chilly basement where she types relentlessly or resorts to her pills, Emily performs the role of an imprisoned Marie Antoinette, her rhetoric having increasingly enlisted her on the side of counter-revolution. Her sympathies lie with the doomed aristocracy, with the thwarted ambitions of colonial powers, with the decadent, ruinous past. Identifying with Marie Antoinette, she relives a dark history, succumbing to the spectre of the terror, rather than leaping forward into a post-revolutionary future. Stephen returns from hospital to find Emily much altered, her body manifesting the monstrous moral and political transformations effected in both their lives:

> ... she looked leering and wild, her eyes swam and one half of her face, grey and fallen, seemed many years older than the other. (416)

Whereas the end of Stephen's complicity is his death, Emily refuses to end, her glancing repetition of Vittorio/Stephen's narrative at the end of the novel suggesting that it is now endlessly replayed in her shattered consciousness:

> 'Emily, come and have a meal with us.'

> 'Oh, no, I don't want to play ball with the little children; that's too funny.' (447)[76]

Her repetition is accompanied by a laughter which both displaces and entertains the abject knowledge, not only of Stephen's end, but of his betrayal and desertion of her and of the failure of their partnership:

> '... Everything is so funny!' She kept on laughing, until she cried 'If Stephen could see me now! But he's in jail. He's in jail for contempt. They took him from us in the end.' (447)

Ritual and repression, like art and narrative, are strategies with which the abject may be fended off when it threatens to erupt through the boundaries of the subject and the cultural field. Emily performs the ritual of repeating Vittorio's story, repressing and reproducing endlessly her encounter with Stephen's betrayal and death. At the end of *I'm Dying Laughing*, Emily's transparent, ineffectual performance of these strategies displays her to us as 'mad'. Simultaneously, she fiercely maintains a controlling energy and powerful will - energy to resist certain knowledges and will to continue. She poses an insoluble problem to the bounds of the social, seemingly beyond the scope of its sanctions, a challenge to certainty. The continuing effort, expended by monologism and culture (and narrative), in maintaining boundaries and imposing sanctions, is both called up and rendered inadequate in the last lines of the novel:

> They left her, in the end, and went to the American Embassy. They did not know what else to do. (447)

Emily's utter abjection is confirmed in the novel's conclusion. In a scene which resonates with both Shakespearean and modernist antecedents,[77] Emily resembles King Lear

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[76] Philipson recounts that on the day of the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in 1953, their son, Michael Rosenberg, about ten years old, was playing ball outside their friends' home:see *Ethel Rosenberg*, p. 352.

[77] See last lines of 'Preludes' by T. S. Eliot in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (1936; London: Faber and Faber, 1974): 'Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;/The worlds revolve like ancient women/Gathering fuel in vacant lots' (25).

on the heath,[78] a mad and lonely figure, a figure of prophecy, a circling stray. Her novel and her personal affairs incomplete, she has adopted as her home the symbolic scene (the Forum Romanum) of both the origins and the ruins of Western civilisation:

> This old woman, with the straggling half-grey hair, the droll, hanging-fat face, the untidy silk suit ... She had a handbag on her lap and beside her a worn valise, of snakeskin with gold fittings, which lay open. Some loose papers lay on the steps and in her lap were letters it seemed. (446)

Symptomatic of division and disorder, Emily's body - old, but only half-grey, displaying evidence of deprivation and traces of past wealth, of purposes and failures of purpose, of comedy and tragedy - performs ambiguity and contradiction. The 'scalpel' of 'separations' cast within is now manifested in the disorder of her belongings and in her torn, divided body.

3. Fissures in the Marxist project - the text's abjections.

> Abjection [...]is merely the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding abject things (and that act establishes the foundations of collective existence).[79]

What 'abject things' does *I'm Dying Laughing* seem unable to exclude from its operations? To read of Christina Stead's life-long support of the Stalinist regime is understandably to be persuaded that *I'm Dying Laughing* must ultimately affirm these sympathies. There is certainly plenty of evidence that the text itself constructs a privileged view of the Soviet State. However as argued here and by other commentators, even if

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[78] The similarity with both 'Lear on the heath', and with 'Cleopatra and Antony in their folly', is also noted by Don Anderson, in 'Tragedy and dinner parties...', p.108.

[79] George Bataille, *Essais de sociologie*, quoted in Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 56.

Stead's vision is finally affirmative of the revolutionary project, the narrative's complex ironies work to destabilise such putative coherence. Even though the narrative projects its final approval of the task of revolutionary communism, the temporal experience of reading the text and the text's construction of history render revolutionary certitudes problematic.

By tracing patterns of 'horror' and 'abjection' in *I'm Dying Laughing*, this reading has affirmed the text's projection of Marxist values, while countering assertions that it must finally be read as confident about the efficacy of revolutionary Marxism, or about the possibility of a utopian future. In at least two ways, the confident project of revolution favoured by the text's privileged position of value is radically undermined. One resides in the manner of Emily's representation. The text situates her as its defining 'other', and increasingly as 'abject', the latter being a move which corrodes the stability of the text's political boundaries. This possibility is realised in the voyeuristic way in which Emily's body and her voice are represented. The exercise of controlled voyeurism implies the text's double relation to Emily, its constitutive need to create her as the site of what can go wrong, to analyse, isolate and objectify the source of corruption. But the voyeurism produced by abjection, which breaks down subject-object boundaries, may equally manifest the text's illicit desire to enter and experience the alien viewpoint. The narrative at once parades its objectivity, its distance from Emily, and lingers over her in a way that suggests a powerful obsession, shading into an ambivalence between love and loathing. Such an approach can be at least partially attributed to Stead's rigorous intellectual honesty, her consistent avowals about allowing her characters a life of their own, about not treating them as her puppets. But as argued in earlier chapters, the transparency of such an aesthetic of neutrality and naturalist observation need not be taken as read, and may be understood, using Bourdieu's theory, as homologous with a specific position of suffering marginality carved out and

occupied by a left-wing, female, (post)colonial writer who addresses the elite end of the cultural field.

The second way in which revolutionary certainties are undermined in the text is related to the operation of dialogism. The impossibility of closure is demonstrated in at least two examples from the text: the first is from Emily's letter of renunciation to the Oates and the second can be found in the text's parodic articulation of the crimes of the revolution. In obedience to and appeasement of Anna, and for money, Emily writes letters of recantation and renunciation to all their radical friends and associates. Her letter to Ruth and Axel Oates (a couple who appear to be partly modelled on Stead and Blake) attempts to justify recantation by articulating the 'other' side of the debate about socialism and revolution. In conclusion, Emily asks that the Oates 'be good to us, try to understand us and know that we did not act from the base motives we are accused of" (403). Undercutting this appeal is the note to herself that Emily has absentmindedly scribbled at the bottom: $30,000. It is impossible to decide between these two competing pieces of evidence supplied by the text. Does this mercenary, biblically resonant $30,000 empty all integrity from the arguments advanced in the letter? Or does the compelling rhetoric of the letter demand an equal hearing?

> Are there no innocent martyrs whatever in the bloody dark unrevealed chronicle of Bolshevik history, no innocent people afraid to return to their loved country for fear of a rope or a shot in the dark? No people hauled out of bed and brought suddenly up on strange charges, ignorant of the denouncer, the accuser? ...
>
> Now in every country, communists strive to fit themselves into a mould ... But people should be *free*. A form, a mould is a stereotype, it banishes the person, bleaches personal thought and dyes over it. (401)

Following recognisable lines of debate about personal liberty versus collective welfare, the letter addresses the particular problem of intellectual freedom. Revisiting those central 1930s questions about the relation between artists and the revolution, the letter argues

persuasively for the freedom of the artist or novelist and for the valuing of individuality, a position with which orthodox communism appears to be at odds:

> Take Danton. Or Cicero. Their friends were overwhelmed by their characters, their own characters, rich, various, tortured, intricate and noble because human. They fill the soul with a great nostalgia because they are right, somehow entirely right. Reason, the fullness of humanity is so little considered in our doomsday world, that it is like a shock to discover man afresh. (403)

Post-holocaust knowledge, inscribed in Emily's letter, operates doubly in the text to articulate and repress the fear that the workers' revolution is drained of hope and credibility. At the level of its symbolic unity, the text is turned away from this nightmarish admission, fastening its steadfast gaze on the contradictory behaviours and tortured loyalties of Emily and Stephen. The narrative betrays its own effort of avoidance; it does not risk straying from the horrifying spectacle of the renegade couple's failure, lest other more disastrous failures come into view, failures which threaten to implicate stalwart Stalinist-Marxists, amongst others, who *did* stay on the train which departed the Finland station in 1917. The spectacle of Emily's and Stephen's failures stands in for, functions to obscure, an unpalatable version of history articulated by their ironic listing of the betrayals of the Soviet Union (183-5), the second example of textual undermining of revolutionary certitudes. For the Howards and their friends, at this early juncture, contemplation of the betrayals and crimes of the Soviet Union is contemplation of the unthinkable. They approach the exercise through parodic laughter and a ritualistic group attack, beginning 'to shout and crow and to throw dates and events at each other' (184). How is this scene to be read? Is it an instance of containment of a subversive idea by its parodic articulation? Is it not, therefore, the very trace of horror which ensures both the persistence and the voyeuristic detours of the narrative gaze? Towards the end of *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva compares various kinds of 'laughter', singling out Céline's dark comedy for its intimate

relation to abjection. In this comparison, Kristeva identifies Célinean laughter as a response to abjection, where its horror is not only confronted, but incorporated:

> With Céline we are elsewhere. As in apocalyptic or even prophetic utterances, he speaks out on horror. But while the former can be withstood because of a distance that allows for judging, lamenting, condemning, Céline - who speaks from within - has no threats to utter, no morality to defend. In the name of what would he do it? So his laughter bursts out, facing abjection, and always originating at the same source, of which Freud had caught a glimpse: the gushing forth of the unconscious, the repressed, suppressed pleasure, be it sex or death. And yet, if there is a gushing forth, it is neither jovial, nor trustful, nor sublime, nor enraptured by preexisting harmony. It is bare, anguished, and as fascinated as it is frightened.[80]

Stead's narrative - particularly its representation of Emily - hovers close to the psychological point located by Kristeva in her reading of Céline, and yet, finally in its reasserted attention to closure and unity, attempts to stave off the full implications of such a crossing into post-holocaust, and post-revolutionary terrain. The intolerable knowledge of the corruption of revolutionary ideals is dragged into the daylight - in the guise of a wild joke at first - but Emily, site of the text's otherness, is able momentarily to think the unthinkable, to allow intolerable insight to permeate her mind's defences. Having glimpsed horror, she can at first grasp it, articulate it and then cover it over dismissively:

> The men went on talking, Ruth listening; but Emily had sunk into reflection ...Emily said slowly, 'Well, honestly there have been moments when my heart failed. By golly, what a canticle you have made! ... It's quite a record, isn't it? ... Well - heigh-ho! History doesn't bear scrutiny. (185)

Using 'Emily' as a kind of morally-riven mask, as a narrative 'scalpel', Stead delves into complicity. Her fictional character, whose contradictory populism and female corporeality produce excess, also incorporates the laughing apocalypse, representing and displacing not only the despair and horror unleashed in the world in the postwar years, but also, perhaps,

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[80] Kristeva, *Powers*, pp. 205-6.

the difficulty for a generation of committed Marxists, in those years, of confronting and reconciling with their beliefs the notion of atrocities committed in Soviet Russia. Emily and Stephen, the renegade couple of *I'm Dying Laughing,* thus endure and abjectly figure the unendurable position of the fallen angels, whose theological system, while still structurally holding them in place is, for all practical purposes, permanently evacuated of god:

> A laughing apocalypse is an apocalypse without god.[81]

[81] Kristeva, *Powers*, p. 206.

Conclusion

> The refractory spirit is in them ... At a certain point in their life they suddenly go off leaving everything behind them: all that has happened up till then seems almost a dream, it is then that their own life begins. They regret nothing, not even children, not father, mother or brothers, not lover and certainly not safety. They disappear: they die or get a mean job somewhere; they are not happy and would like to be happy: but they have been satisfied in a singular way, they have achieved something, with their lean faces, hollow eyes and in their rags that the ... wellfed, jolly sisters, sitting like animals in their cages have not achieved ... .[1]

The wayward, deranged, homeless woman at the end of *I'm Dying Laughing* has been driven there in part by the unbearable tensions accompanying the 'refractory spirit': driven by her thirsts, Emily is also burdened by the world, by the weight of an unforgettable history which is both personal and collective. She is no lean-faced, hollow-eyed, romantic slip of a girl like Teresa Hawkins; but neither is she a 'wellfed, jolly sister' sitting complacently in a cage. The character in Stead's fiction who most approximates the latter is surely Eleanor Herbert, whose residue of authentic desire is finally snuffed out and replaced by the simulacrum of domestic contentment: 'She reached home and then something strange happened. It was as if someone lifted the top off her head for a moment and let air in so that part of her brain blew cold.'[2] Nellie Cotter, as we have seen, is another whose otherwise compellingly 'refractory spirit' is both perverted and perverting: her return to the narrow circle of her life with charms unabated signals a chilling submission to the past, a

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[1] From an undated, unpublished piece on women's destiny, in NLA MS 4967, Box 4, Folder 24. Hazel Rowley comments on a passage from the same piece, speculating that it was written in the 1930s or 1940s: see, Rowley, 'Christina Stead: The Voyage to Cythera', in *Span* 26 (April 1988), p. 36.

[2] Stead, *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)*, p. 308.

denial of the future. What these female protagonists share is the category of the revolutionary subject, a category which more or less negatively constructs all of Stead's protagonists: Eleanor's conformity, Nellie's deceptions and Emily's excessive consumption are all represented as socially and ideologically determined, but all these protagonists are nonetheless invited to construct something different out of their lives, to engage with destiny, to do 'some little thing'.

While the historic failure of 'revolution' and the intractability of ideological consciousness become the troubling focus of Stead's later fictions, desire for a post-revolutionary fullness still conditions their critical observation. Like Marx's major work, *Capital*, which dialectically unearths human labour as the invisible basis of the reifying system of value and exchange under capitalism, Stead's novels' dialectical representation of subjects in specific cultural and historical contexts is premised on the desirability of liberated being. For all its undoubted political power and efficacy, such a category of the subject - invoking the goal of a unified, transcendent being, along with the narrative of a 'salvation history' - can also prove limiting, not only for Marxism but for feminism too. As Donna Haraway puts it:

> Feminisms and Marxisms have run aground on Western epistemological imperatives to construct a revolutionary subject from the perspective of a hierarchy of oppressions and/or a latent position of moral superiority, innocence, and greater closeness to nature.[3]

Across three decades, Stead's narrative represention of individuals in struggle, performing in and through the socially and ideologically constituted web, as well as being informed by Marxist categories of the revolutionary subject, also participates in developing strands of Western European Marxism. Stead's knowledge and use of 'Marxism' are not separable

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[3] Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p.176.

from either historical or personal contexts, her intellectual and ideological formation being dynamic and contradictory rather than simple or linear. Her narratives explore the changing patterns and tensions of individuals' ideological formation, their conflicting political understandings and subversive passions.

To hold Stead's 'political passion' in tension with her naturalist heritage and her belief in evolution, as Harris recommends,[4] is to recognise the seemingly contradictory traditions of revolutionary socialism, scientific naturalism and vitalism at work in her narratives. The tension between revolution and evolution, an ongoing preoccupation in Stead's fiction, shapes narrative treatment of determinism versus free will, inviting the question of whether revolutionary change is inevitable, possible or desirable. But the apparent theoretical contradictions between these different traditions belie their practical intersections in Stead's fiction. Firstly, by drawing on both Nietzsche and Marx, Stead's narratives project the liberating possibilities of human agency and willpower. Secondly, the fictions, both intra- and intertextually, employ dialectical materialism as a mode of narrative inquiry in apprehending the depth of social constructedness. Lastly, unimpeded by a 'scientific Marxism' which shares its epistemological rationality, Stead's training in naturalism fosters the project of observing and classifying the human species in a variety of habitats, as well as informing an understanding of 'human nature' as shaped by biological drives, as well as by social and economic forces. The Marxist base/superstructure paradigm can therefore be made to serve and to enable the sex/gender distinction which conditions Stead's exploration of gendered social roles, while curtailing more radical implications by recourse to the prior biological narrative of 'natural' heterosexuality.

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[4] Margaret Harris, 'Christina Stead' (*The Age: Monthly Review*), pp. 7-8.

Stead's Marxism is complicated by gender identity and positioning. The development of Stead's authorial production during the course of these three decades, and across continents, bears witness to intensifying explorations of masculine and feminine domains, and to her focus on gendered roles in the depiction of male and female subjects. In earlier narratives, sympathetically rendered male revolutionary subjects provide important ethical guidelines, but not without subtle qualification and attention to gender. Additionally, while some of Stead's female protagonists of the 1930s and 1940s represent the most heroic of her revolutionary men and women, it is crucial that a fully awakened sensuality, an authentic subjectivity, is accomplished through a strategic process of male identification and the bold appropriation and performance of conventionally masculine scripts. Teresa Hawkins understands her own restlessness, significantly, as a thirsting 'after [the] track-making and wandering of the man in the world, not after the man'.[5] These appropriations mark a site of ambiguity in Stead's narratives, suggesting, in psychoanalytic terms, the ambivalence of feminine identity, its organisation around 'the phallus'.[6] But the psychoanalytic paradigm also founders here, as Stephen Heath's reading of Joan Riviere's 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' makes clear: the compulsion toward display and masquerade reveals nothing if not the social construction of both masculinity and femininity.[7] Heath shows how Riviere, who remains indebted to the Freudian paradigm, 'runs the masquerade back into "genuine womanliness"' which, in Oedipal terms, 'makes the latter an attainment, not an alienation but a fulfilment.'[8] Whereas the adolescent Louisa Pollit momentarily supersedes such gendering, in the case of Teresa Hawkins's reverse

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[5] Christina Stead, *For Love Alone*, p. 492.

[6] Joan Riviere refers to the 'phallus' as the father's 'talisman', in 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin et al. (New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 42.

[7] Stephen Heath, 'Joan Riviere and the Masquerade' in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Burgin et al. pp. 55-7.

[8] Heath's phrasing, in 'Joan Riviere and the Masquerade', p. 55.

Odyssey,[9] performance of the masculine script culminates, paradoxically, in the achievement of 'womanliness'. Beyond her experimentation with the wanderer, Harry Girton, Teresa returns pragmatically (if not absolutely contentedly) to the performance of a normalised gender role within heterosexual monogamy.

While the revolutionary potential of such appropriations of masculine scripts is tangible within Stead's narratives, they evade the problem of origins of gender-based oppression, stoically assuming a baseline of natural, inevitable gender identities and destinies. In the later narratives, as I have argued, ambiguity about gender is intensified, with an increasing focus upon the fascinating energies of the woman at odds with the forces of determination or destiny. These narratives locate within 'femininity' - in the excessive figure of the female performer or masquerader - the corrupting source of the transatlantic, postwar malaise, aligning the duplicitous woman with forces antithetical to revolutionary change.

Advancing an argument such as this entails the risk of reducing the heterogeneity of Stead's authorial production to a linear, falsely-unified critical narrative. It is Bakhtin who provides the salutary reminder to the critic that '[t]he observer has no position *outside* the observed world, and his observation enters as a constituent part into the observed object'.[10] By invoking the notion of 'performance', however, with its range of possibilites between scriptedness and agency, and by considering Stead's own practical activity as cultural producer, I have suggested that the project of 'objective', critical observation may be both theorised and moderated by recognition of what Bourdieu calls the logic of practice. Stead's own 'practical consciousness' is discursively and ideologically disposed or invested, but her authorial performance is not reducible to these investments, nor fully determined (in a

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[9] Various commentators have discussed how *For Love Alone* rewrites the Odyssey. In particular, see Susan Higgins [Sheridan], 'Christina Stead's *For Love Alone*: A Female Odyssey?' in *Southerly* 4 (1978), pp. 428-53.
[10] Bakhtin, 'The Problem of the Text', in *Speech Genres*, p. 126 [emphasis in original].

closed sense) by them, her own performance constituting a practical response to and decisive negotiation of the field of culture. As seen in her acknowledgement, almost exclusively, of male writers as her major influences, Stead's relation to male culture suggests the (no doubt) unavoidable gendering of these negotiations, a point of some ambivalence for feminists.[11] Jane Miller maintains that, as well as constituting sites of feminist resistance, male-dominated culture can be pleasurably seductive for women. According to Miller, feminists need to be more attentive to the double bind that operates for women in the (non) choice 'between accepting the place offered them in men's lives and men's ordering of existence, or resisting that seduction in favour of the terrors of negation, of criticism and abnegation and silence.'[12] Stead's disposition to value and to identify with male culture, to avow the influence on her work of canonical male texts, has often been observed, but in view of Miller's argument, this should not prevent recognition of how such a move constitutes ambiguity between tension and struggle, and identification and desire.

In addition, I have argued that the discrepancies in Stead's authorial performance - the contradictions produced through her authorial persona, as well as related problems in the reception of her work, stemming from the association (or disassociation) of the name of 'Christina Stead' with 'Marxism' - should be explored in terms which can recognise the logic of individual practice, as well as the 'rules of the game' in the field of culture. Even if the association of the name 'Christina Stead' with 'Marxism' partly explains the decline of publishers' interest in her work during the Cold War, conspiracy theories alone cannot illuminate the subtle and structural determinants of reception, nor can they deal with other dimensions of authorial positioning, such as gender, sexuality, class, race and nationality.

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[11] Susan Sheridan, in her study of neglected and marginalised Australian women's fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, claims that novels by women dealing with the 'romance of experience' can be considered as possible precursors to Stead's *For Love Alone*: see Sheridan, *Along the Faultlines: Sex, Race and Nation in Australian Women's Writing 1880s-1930s* (St Leonards, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1995), p.67.

[12] Jane Miller, *Seductions: Studies in Reading and Culture* (London: Virago, 1990), p.26.

As previously elaborated, Pierre Bourdieu's mapping of 'fields' of social endeavour and his conceptualisation of the way in which agents, equipped with *habitus*, mesh dynamically with their fields of endeavour, can help in rethinking the factors at work in Stead's career. Although ultimately determined in relation to other fields, the field of literary production, according to Bourdieu, enjoys a relative autonomy, being constituted by its own logic, according to which individuals struggle for their positions. In these terms, Stead's Marxist awareness of market-driven exploitation of writers, and of the commodification of their work, could (paradoxically) both screen and politically justify her 'thirst' to achieve literary distinction beyond the measure of immediate popularity. Indeed these seemingly contradictory impulses combine not only to effect Stead's negotiations of (and refusals to 'negotiate') the varying rules of the literary game, but also to shape the narratives themselves as critical, cultural productions which are nevertheless constituted as 'high art'. Reading Stead's authorial disavowals in this light alerts us to the logic of her positioning - a positioning of critical distance - which is homologous with her political views. In addition, these disavowals work strategically to effect a more marketable positioning for Stead as a writer in the literary field. Stead's authorial production, therefore, can be read as strategic performance, as a kind of counterpart to the performances of her fictional protagonists.

Likewise, seemingly objective acts of critical appropriation, including my own, need not be exempted from Bourdieu's reflexive model of 'practice', a 'practice' which must be at least partly blind to itself. 'Stead', in my own thesis, as in the academic field, is both more and less than the individual, historical person, her name constituting a field of work which is a subset of many fields of work within the field of literary-critical study. The 'Stead' who appears in such work may also function to mask the orientation of critic or theorist to her own audiences. If these other 'orientations' are too clearly articulated, or if the rules of this game are made too explicit, then theorising may be disabled and critical posturing

undermined. In whatever field agents find themselves, the imperative to observe its 'doxa' remains, at some level, impossible to resist. In the academic field, all participants subscribe to the 'illusio' of scholarly disinterest and autonomy, adhering to belief in the possibility of intellectual freedom. In its freedom from 'interest', the critic's objectivist stance, however, becomes another form of 'practice':

> And there is every reason to think that as soon as he reflects on his practice, adopting a quasi-theoretical posture, the agent loses any chance of expressing the truth of his practice, and especially the truth of the practical relation to the practice.[13]

Critical 'objectivity' may be no more truthful to experience (nor any less 'fictional') than the stance of the artist, whose work aims for immersion in and creative representation of 'untheorised' experience; but a reflexive criticism, prepared to recognise the skilled knowingness of temporally embodied agency, even in the midst of apparently encompassing determinations, may be both productive and politically effective.

In describing good novelistic technique, Stead recommends what amounts to a strategic, provisional deferral of what the scientist or cultural analyst might think of as objective judgement: in unpublished notes on characterisation, she wrote that '[sympathy] and antipathy are two instruments of observation which must be used cautiously but continuously ...'.[14] Licensed to perform, Stead's characters are viewed sympathetically and in close-up, but from the 'outside', from the viewpoint of observer or listener. Constituting, in this way, a space of critical judgement, Stead's fictional subjects perform in a symbolic frame which ultimately refers to a Marxist world view. This same strategy, however, unleashes a heterogeneity of voices and views which cannot be foreclosed; the contradictory world views of the protagonists, so generously represented and projecting their own

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[13] Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, p. 91.

[14] From a paper headed 'Notes on Character observation: on first sight and afterwards', in NLA MS 4967, Box 14, Folder 108.

plausibility, can contest and unsettle the making of judgement. The necessary respect and sympathy which Stead, the writer, must have for her characters contribute to her narratives' open-ended exploration of subjects in the social web.

Refuting a reductively mechanical understanding of the relations between 'field' and *habitus*, Bourdieu articulates a similar tension:

> People are not fools; they are much less bizarre or deluded than we would spontaneously believe precisely because they have internalized, through a protracted and multisided process of conditioning, the objective chances they face. They know how to 'read' the future that fits them ....[15]

Bourdieu's preference for a 'fuzzy logic', in negotiating both structuralism and voluntarism, is demonstrated in his refusal to erase the knowledgeable praxis of the individual, while retaining the theoretical and political power of structural analysis. This solution to the endemic problem of the subject-object split in Western epistemology may seem circular, but attests to Bourdieu's politically-oriented desire to pursue what Marx proposed in his *Theses on Feuerbach*: that 'reality' should be grasped 'as *concrete human activity*, as *practice*, in a subjective way'.[16] Likewise, it is possible to view Christina Stead's authorial production as both constituted by prior discourse and as practically oriented to the world, her narratives striving to represent characters 'in the process of becoming'.[17] Concluding her long narration, one such character, Letty Fox, assesses her life with typical frankness, disclosing the temporal logic of the actor in the field, while the symbolic act of narrative critically frames and displays her as representatively ordinary. Inviting both admiration and critical judgement, Stead therefore presents Letty Fox as a subject who, in a dialectical sense, is both performing and performed. Demonstrating the shrewd, self-reflexive understanding

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[15] Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.130.

[16] Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, as quoted in Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation*, p. 121, n.76.

[17] From Stead's 'Workshop in the Novel', NLA MS 4967, Box11, Folder 84.

that Bourdieu's work encourages us to recognise in the everyday practice of individual agents, Letty knows perfectly well, despite and because of her disclaimers, 'how to "read" the future that fits [her]'. Letty's clichéd but energetic discourse represents the necessary, discursive reproduction of the subject, while signalling her 'practical consciousness', as well as Stead's own exploration of the dynamic subject performing in the social and ideological web:

> ...I don't think for a moment that this is the end of everything, but I'm no tea-leaf reader. I can only tangle with situations as they come along. *On s'engage et puis on voit.* Perhaps I just love life. I certainly expose myself to it; and I'm accessible to it.[18]

[18] Christina Stead, *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (1946; North Ryde, Australia: Angus and Robertson, 1991), p. 517. The French phrase translates literally as: 'One engages, and then one sees.'

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