

FOREWORD

To open a book, any book, by Christina Stead and read a few pages is to be at once aware that one is in the presence of greatness. Yet this revelation is apt to precipitate a sense of confusion, of strangeness, of anxiety, not only because Stead has a rare capacity to flay the reader's sensibilities, but also because we have grown accustomed to the idea that we live in pygmy times. To read Stead, now, is to be reminded of how little, recently, we have come to expect from fiction. Stead is of that category of fiction writer who restores to us the entire world, in its infinite complexity and inexorable bitterness, and never asks if the reader wishes to be so furiously enlightened and instructed, but takes it for granted that this is the function of fiction. She is a kind of witness and a kind of judge, merciless, cruel, and unforgiving.

Born in Australia, Stead lived in Britain, Europe and America and wrote novels set in cities in various countries as if she were native to them all. This phenomenon of ubiquity helps to explain her relative obscurity: she appears to acknowledge no homeland and has therefore been acknowledged by none until her return to her native country in 1969 after almost a half-century of absence. Lawrence, in exile, remained British to the core; Joyce took Dublin in his back pocket wherever he went. Stead becomes absorbed into the rhythms of life wherever she finds herself. Furthermore, although she has always written from a profound consciousness of what it is to be a woman, she writes, as they say, 'like a man': that is, she betrays none of the collusive charm that is supposedly a mark of the feminine genius. As a result, because she writes *as* a woman, not *like* a woman, the critic Randall Jarrell could say of *The Man Who Loved Children*: 'a male reader worries: "Ought I to be a man?"'

Jarrell thought that *The Man Who Loved Children* was by far Stead's best novel, and believed its commercial and critical failure blighted her subsequent development. However, it wasn't surprising that *The Man Who Loved Children* should acquire the reputation of a unique

masterpiece. The single-minded intensity of its evocation of domestic terror gives it a greater artistic cohesion than Stead's subsequent work, which tends toward the random picaresque. And Stead permits herself a genuinely tragic resolution. The ravaged harridan Henny, the focus of the novel, dies in a grand, fated gesture, an act of self-immolation that, so outrageous has been her previous suffering, is almost a conventional catharsis. One feels that all Henny's previous life has been a preparation for her sudden, violent departure from it and, although the novel appals, it also, artistically, satisfies, in a way familiar in art. Later, Stead would not let her readers off the hook of life so easily. She won't allow us the dubious consolations of pity and terror again.

Stead is one of the great articulators of family life. There is no contradiction here. Stead's families – the Pollits in *The Man Who Loved Children*, the Foxes in *Letty Fox: Her Luck*, the Hawkinses in *For Love Alone*, the Cotters of *Cotter's England* – are social units that have outlived the original functions of protection and mutual aid, and grown to be seed beds of pathology. These are families in a terminal state of malfunction, families you must flee from in order to preserve your sanity, families it is criminal folly to perpetuate – and, on the whole, Stead's women eschew motherhood like the plague. (Stead's loathing of the rank futility of home and hearth is equalled, in literature, only by the Marquis de Sade.) These are degenerated, cannibal families, in which the very sacrament of the family, the communal meal when all are gathered together, is a Barmecide feast at which some family member, wife or child, is on the emotional menu.

These rancid, cancerous homes may provide a useful apprenticeship in the nature of tyranny (several times in *The Man Who Loved Children* Stead stresses that children have 'no rights' within the family): that is all. The only escape is a plunge into an exponential whirl of furnished rooms, cheap hotels, constant travelling, chance liaisons, the blessed indifference of strangers. Stead's families, in fact, produce those rootless, sceptical, displaced persons she also describes, who have no country but a state of mind, yet who might, due to their very displacement and disaffection, be able to make new beginnings.

Stead's greatest moral quality as a novelist is her lack of pity. For Stead, pity is otiose, a self-indulgent luxury that obscures the real nature of our relations with our kind. To disclose that real nature has always been her business. Essentially, she is engaged in the exposition of certain perceptions as to the nature of human society. She does this through the interplay of individuals both with one another and with the institutions that we created, but which now seem to dominate us: marriage; the family; money.

She has, obviously, from the very beginning – her first publication was a collection of short stories modelled on the *The Decameron* – been a writer of almost megalomaniac ambition. The literary project of Louie, the unnatural daughter of *The Man Who Loved Children*, is to compose for an adored teacher 'the Aiden cycle . . . a poem of every conceivable metre in the English language', all in Miss Aiden's praise. This seems the sort of project that would attract Stead herself. Hers may even be the kind of ambition that is nourished by neglect, of which she has received sufficient. To read some of Stead's more possessed and driven novels – *Cotter's England* and *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*, in particular – is to be reminded of what Blake said about his Bible of Hell: 'which the world shall have whether they will or no'. If, as seems the case, we are now ready to accept Stead as one of the great writers of our time, this does not mean the times are going well.

It is possible to be a great novelist – that is, to render a veracious account of your times – and a bad writer – that is, an incompetent practitioner of applied linguistics. Conversely, good writers – for example, Borges – often prefer to construct alternative metaphysical universes based on the Word. Stead patently does not subscribe to any metaphysics of the Word. The work of her maturity is a constant, agitated reflection upon our experience in *this* world. For her, language is not an end in itself in the current, post-modernist or 'mannerist' mode, but a mere tool, and a tool she increasingly uses to hew her material more and more roughly. Her narrative is almost *tachiste*: she composes it like a blind man throwing paint against a wall. Her narratives shape themselves, as our lives seem to do.

At the time of *The Man Who Loved Children*, she relinquished all the capacity of the language of her narrative to bewitch and seduce. But Sam Pollit, the father almighty or Nobodaddy of that novel, uses a babbling, improvised pseudo-language, a sort of Pollit Creole, full of cant words – ‘cawf’ for coffee, ‘munchtime’, ‘orfus’ – with which to bemuse, delight and snare his brood. This is the soft, slippery, charming language of seduction itself. Louie invents an utterly opaque but grammatically impeccable language of her own, and confronts him with a one-act play in it, acted by her siblings. ‘Mat, rom garrots im.’ (In translation: ‘Mother, father is strangling me.’) Sam is very angry. Louie’s ugly language is vengeance.

Since Stead is technically an expressionist writer, in whose books madmen scream in deserted landscapes, a blue light turns a woman into the image of a vampire and a lesbian party takes on the insanely heightened melodrama of a drawing by George Grosz, the *effect* is the thing, not the language that achieves it. But there is more to it than that. The way she finally writes is almost as if she were showing you by demonstration that style itself is a lie in action, that language is an elaborate confidence trick designed to lull us into acceptance of the intolerable, just as Sam Pollit uses it on his family, that words are systems of deceit. And that truth is not a quality inherent in any kind of discourse, but a way of looking at things; that truth is not an aspect of reality but a test of reality. So, more and more, Stead concentrates on dialogue, on language in use as camouflage or subterfuge – dialogue, or rather serial monologue, for Stead’s characters rarely listen to one another sufficiently to enable them to conduct dialogues together, although they frequently enjoy rows of a polyphonic nature, in which it is not possible for anybody to hear anybody else.

Stead’s fictional method presupposes a confidence in the importance of fiction as the exposition of the real structures on which our lives are based. It follows that she has gained a reputation as a writer of naturalism, so much so that, in her introduction to the Virago edition of *The Beauties and Furies*, Hilary Bailey seems disconcerted that ‘this great writer of naturalism’ should have produced a novel so resistant to

a naturalist reading. (Any novel in which a prostitute advertises her wares by reciting the poetry of Baudelaire is scarcely in the tradition of George Gissing.) Stead is certainly not a writer of naturalism nor of social realism, and if her novels are read as novels about our lives, rather than the circumstances that shape our lives, they are bound to disappoint, because the naturalist or high-bourgeois mode works within the convention that there exists such a thing as ‘private life’. In these private lives, actions are informed by certain innate inner freedoms and, however stringent the pressures upon the individual, there is always a little margin of autonomy that could be called ‘the self.’ For Stead, however, ‘private life’ is itself a socially determined fiction, the ‘self’ is a mere foetus of economy may or may not prove viable, and ‘inner freedom’, far from being an innate quality, is a precariously held intellectual position that may be achieved only at the cost of enormous struggle, often against the very grain of what we take to be human feeling.

Teresa Hawkins in *For Love Alone* achieves selfhood only through a fanatical, half-crazed ordeal of self-imposed poverty and an act of willed alienation that takes her across half the world, from Australia to England. But this ordeal does not prepare Teresa for any reconciliation with the world: it only toughens her up for what is going to happen next. Louie, in *The Man Who Loved Children*, plots her parents’ murder and succeeds in abetting her stepmother’s death to a point beyond complicity. Then she runs away, leaving a houseful of small children to the tender mercies of Sam Pollit. That is what Louie must do, in order to enter the fragile state of freedom-in-potential that is all Stead will offer in the way of hope. But many, in fact most, of Stead’s characters remain trapped in the circumstances that have produced them.

The hard edges and sharp spikes of Stead’s works are rarely, if ever, softened by the notion that things might be, generally, other than they are. It is tempting to conclude that she does not think much of the human race, but it is rather that she is appalled by the human condition. It is illuminating that Teresa, in *For Love Alone*, says to herself: ‘I only have to do what is supposed to be wrong and I have a

happiness that is barely credible.' Teresa has freely chosen to be unfaithful to her beloved lover, to follow her own desire. To become free, she has exercised her will; to remain free, she follows her desires. Stead rarely states her subversive intent as explicitly as this, nor often suggests that the mind-forged manacles of the human condition are to be so easily confounded. But when Teresa meditates 'It was easy to see how upsetting it would be if women began to love freely', she is raising the question of female desire, of women's sexuality as action and as choice, of the assertion of sexuality as a right, and this question, to which she returns again and again in various ways, is at the core of Stead's work.

A Little Tea, A Little Chat, her New York novel of 1948, presents us with another kind of woman: the thoroughly venal Barbara Kent, who is depicted almost exclusively from the outside. She and the shark-like war profiteer Robert Grant form a union of true minds. They are both true entrepreneurs, although Barbara Kent's only capital is her erotic allure. The novel makes a seamless equation between sexual exploitation and economic exploitation. It etches in acid an impressive picture of New York as the city of the damned. It is also, as is all Stead, rich in humour of the blackest kind.

An internal logic of dialectical sequels connects all Stead's work in a single massive argument on the themes of sexual relations, economic relations and politics. If I were to choose an introductory motto for the collected works of Christina Stead, it would be from Blake, from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. It would be: 'Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.' One might take this as a point to begin the exploration of this most undervalued of our contemporaries.

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1982