

Christina Stead's Poor Women of Sydney, Travelling into Our Times

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If the nation, the novel and psychoanalysis ... draw our gaze in two directions at once—inward to their imaginary psychic territories and outward to their global reaches or, on a different axis, backward to their hegemonic histories and forward to their postcolonial afterlives—what can we learn from such double vision? (Cooppan, *Worlds* xxiii)

This paper considers the imaginary psychic territories that Christina Stead (1902–1983) brought into the first novel she completed, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. These were constituted from a wide range of reading, and from familiarity and often affinity with Left intellectuals and political activists in Sydney from towards the end of the First World War (during which the Russian Revolution had also occurred) through the 1920s, and then from what she found in London and Paris from 1928 to 1934, when the book was substantially written and revised. Stead had arrived in London in May 1928 with a novel, 'Death in the Antipodes,' in mind; how much of it was on paper is unclear.¹ As is well known, she was pursuing on some level an unsatisfactory romance with the Sydney University tutor, Keith Duncan, who went in 1926 on a travelling scholarship to the London School of Economics to study political science, and who intended to go on to further work in the United States. This was apparently why Stead introduced Duncan to Wilhelm Blech, her American boss in the job she found—serendipitously, it would turn out—at the grain exchange business of Strauss and Company almost immediately upon her arrival, with little money to live on, in London. It was purportedly Duncan who told Blech that Stead 'thought herself a writer' (Rowley 85), after which Blech asked her to show him some of her work. After he had taken it home for the weekend, she recalled later, Blech 'looked at me with absolute astonishment . . . and he said: "It has mountain peaks"' (Wetherell 85); this undoubtedly increased the boss's already considerable interest in his secretary. Seven months after their meeting, he asked her to move to Paris to continue as his secretary (Rowley 91)—and perhaps he thought at the time, his 'back-street wife' (Rowley 24–25).

Many passages in *Seven Poor Men* significantly bring out Stead's own familiarity with actual figures on the Sydney Left,² and some of their activities and preoccupations in the mid-nineteen-twenties. Stead's interaction after that with Left intellectuals and writers in London, and Paris, was also drawn upon in inventing or developing some of the characters in the Sydney-set novel.³

Expanding the focus from the men foregrounded by the title allows more attention to the styles of femininity, or psychic territories, that this novel by a woman writer depicts and investigates.⁴ Dorothy Green in 1968 argued that Catherine 'is the real centre of the book and it is her predicament as a woman, and as a woman who has come to maturity in Australia that is the seed from which the book grows' (Green 153). The title, and the list of *dramatis personae*—'The Seven Poor Men'—might have seemed to suggest that any women were written as significant in their relation to the men. The novel's main characters were described, in a review when it first appeared, as 'victims of the depression, all searching for jobs or loves or

happineses which in fact do not exist for them' (Charques 106), while Stuart Macintyre described them in 1998 as 'a circle of tormented outsiders who seek through politics and philosophy to assuage their unhappineses' (98–99). This seems a summary of the situation of the male characters, although the category might include Catherine (especially since the noun 'torment' is usually associated with her). But for Green, 'The inner world, in short, is the world, not of seven men and a woman, but of one woman, Catherine, whose selves have been separated and given a local habitation and a name. There are no separate dilemmas, which each character has to face singly . . .' (154). This might seem to ignore the dimension of gendered inequality (both economic and psychological) that can be observed in various experiences in Stead's own earlier life, as well as in the 'dilemma' Catherine might be seen to have had in her relationships with various men because of her inability to achieve any substantial agency for herself. But Green's reading is also suggestive for its insistence that the book is organised largely as 'a spiritual autobiography . . . of a highly-gifted and tormented girl . . . who has not yet found what it is she is to love or create' (153). Stead, herself experiencing a degree of dis-ease about her own life, is drawing out through Catherine what she can create from her available psychic territories. Catherine's aspirations for a different life, even a different world, are huge, but her situation is constrained and circumscribed. In Baruch's view, she is 'ruled by her impulsive passions which ever strove with her intellect for mastery.' He interprets her anger with him as saying, 'I am totally alien to you and you will never concede me to have your insight' (149). The femininity available to Catherine is based upon passion, centrally for social justice, but also upon a longing, powerful but ambivalent, for a partnership with a male comrade, since it was the case that, 'For many of Stead's generation, heterosexual coupledness seemed to promise, or embody, the ideal society' (Rooney, 'Loving' 96).

In the novel, three different predictive depictions of Catherine in artworks are telling, in relation to how her torment is contextualised, represented and viewed through a masculine gaze. Catherine shows Michael two pictures of herself, one done by an art student when she was a model for the art class of 'old Mr Benson'—who, she tells him, 'knows Father, but I have not let on that I know Father' (35). It is an oil painting of her as 'a worn, crazy, young gypsy,' and it is the only one of the three in which the woman is wearing clothes. The second, done by 'the young drawing master . . . I posed for him privately' (35), is as 'an emaciated naked woman lying dead on the quays,' that was 'labelled, "Fished Up"' (36). Michael is ashamed of how his sister has been portrayed, and her apparent complacency about it: 'Her vanity was intense.' He offers to have her live with him, 'until you are ready to do steady work . . .' (36). But Catherine says, 'You don't realise that I want to be alone so I can beat my head against the wall just when I want to' (36). The third depiction of Catherine is a drawing that Baruch shows Joseph; it is entitled, in French, 'Woman Escapes from the Forest.' Joseph's first reaction is that it is 'Queer' (155). The picture appears to him to be of 'a naked woman with agonised contortion of body and face bursting through a thicket, tearing her thigh on a splintered tree, while a boa constrictor and a tropical vine loaded with large lilies hung before her and impeded her' (154–55). Baruch explains its meaning as 'the middle-class woman trying to free herself, and still impeded by romantic notions and ferocious, because ambushed, sensuality' (155). Joseph offers Catherine a modified reading, not exactly that of himself or Baruch, in telling her later about Baruch's picture, 'The Free Woman'—'the free woman is like you, although you are not entirely free . . . You know Baruch: he is rather sentimental about women' (160).

Public and group engagement with the politics of class and of class struggle, along with an often more private resistance to the politics of patriarchy and struggles against it, including against psychologically internalised traditional masculinities and femininities, aligned with notions of private and public spheres (the preoccupation of the second-wave feminist critique to come),

mark Catherine's trajectory in the novel. On the urban terrain of the Sydney of *Seven Poor Men*, there are individual confrontations or exchanges within the more private spaces of homes, and there are public interactions and encounters—at meetings, political or cultural, on the streets, or at the printery that employs several of the seven. The minor character, Heinrich Winterbaum, photographer and assistant editor of the *International Worker*, the newspaper produced by the printery, is a sympathetic champion of Catherine; he tells Fulke and his wife, Marion (in an inversion of conventional public/private associations): 'Catherine is a fine soul, a vagabond queen. Catherine is the firebell clanging, and Michael is its echo in an empty house' (132). As does Baruch (and Joseph in his own way), Heinrich observes the motivations of those around him (and some of the characters could be seen as afforded by Stead an intradiegetic participation in the free indirect discourse of the narration of their stories).⁵ Baruch tells Catherine, when she visits him later, that those on the Left 'are all imperfect lenses for the sun of human liberty to shine through: in the clearest it shines like a flame, in others artistically as through a prism, in others murkily, and with specks of dark' (148). Heinrich, in his brief conversation with Catherine, tells her he has an article about which he would like her opinion, 'on the bourgeois origins of Freudian analysis. Your experience with these lay confessors would be most valuable' (130). Divulged here to the reader, is that Catherine has been in analysis of some sort; there is complexity to her dis-ease that she cannot easily communicate. By contrast, Heinrich considers: 'Marion had no troubles that she could not solve, and she discussed them without mystery or coaxing' (130). Like Baruch, however, he is wary of the treatment offered by nerve-doctors, who were then beginning to move into psychoanalysis.

The subjectivities, the inner worlds of some advanced social thinkers in Sydney are, then, placed in *Seven Poor Men* in interaction, both with their society and some of the 'global reaches' of the world without, in which the European empires continued to crumble, and be re-organised to stave off the potential of socialist transformation. Britain's former colony is trapped between 'cultural difference and colonial nonsense' that produces a 'more or less violent doubling' (Mackenzie 209) for its inhabitants, and a 'double vision'—experienced as potentially transformative and/or schizophrenic by the novel's characters. Fiona Morrison reads *Seven Poor Men* as 'an example of vernacular modernism, a radical mode emerging from and acting with regional and colonial modernity' (9), and finds in it a preoccupation with how inner life can be related to an intellectual understanding of 'every step' in quotidian existence: 'Stead, like Breton, saw that everyday life, including dreams, sexual desire, conversation and the negotiation of urban space was the terrain in which the revolution of perception and the revolution of society could and should occur' (Morrison n.p.).

When read with attention to the political, gender, psychological/psychoanalytic and philosophical discourses within its narration, *Seven Poor Men* travels with a strange or odd familiarity into the early twenty-first century, intersecting with recent preoccupations in literary and cultural critique with issues of trauma, femininities and masculinities, understandings of the relationship of agency to psychology, and of ways of representing and considering the interactions of the global and the local—or what Vilashini Cooppan calls 'the uncanny aura of history that emerges from . . . crossing and recrossing of distinct literary spaces and times' (Cooppan, *Worlds* xxii–xxiii), that the reader of *Seven Poor Men* can experience.

In the context of World War One, in which both international socialist resistance and psychological experimentation developed, Stead's reach goes from socialist internationalism to local Workers Educational Association (WEA) history as well as between Sydney as urban cosmopolitan space and imperial Europe as a place of both capitalist domination and practices of resistance. This makes her an early candidate for inclusion in Michael Denning's assembly

of writers from a number of countries (his account does not include Australasia), that constitute what he designates as a ‘world literature’ concerned with human progress, ‘a remarkable literary movement that emerged in the middle decades of the twentieth century under the slogans of “proletarian literature,” “neorealism,” and “progressive,” “engaged,” or “committed” writing’ (Denning 703). With *Seven Poor Men*, Stead has to some extent written herself and, initially, Sydney into this international(ist) tradition: even in her first novel—and her only one wholly set in Australia—it is true, as Rooney suggests, that ‘Stead’s fiction is not easily encompassed by any single national tradition. Rather it is oriented toward an international context, refracting and commenting upon the experience of her generation of Western intellectuals’ (Rooney, *DLB* 332). H.M. Green in 1961, in a manner described by Michael Wilding in 1993 as ‘strangely begrudging,’ suggested that *Seven Poor Men*, ‘incomplete and one-sided, uncharacteristic of any country as is the life that it presents, was yet somehow the first novel to convey an impression of Sydney as a world city. One of the foci of world life’ (qtd. in Wilding, *Radical* 60).⁶

Well prior to Denning’s identification of world literatures as a key component in a critical internationalism that contested capitalist/imperialist regimes, and earlier even than the twentieth century, socialist and feminist intellectuals placed themselves in contact with other cultures, particularly those in which social experiments or new radical ways of thinking were taking place (these ranging from setting up bodies such as the WEA to organising for socialist revolutions). Reading, study and discussion of ideas, made possible their testing out in practice. Creative literature could embody these in a particular time and place, and the ideas found in radical texts, both theoretical and creative, gave an impetus to various kinds of activism and organising for social transformation. In Sydney, the Haymarket Building was a meeting place for those looking for new ideas and experiences; and it was also where the Municipal Library was located, frequented by ‘voracious readers who had collected tickets from friends and owned from ten to twenty tickets instead of the regulation two’ (42). Various other activities, including the art classes at which Catherine is a model, were also held there.

Central to Stead’s evocation of the city of Sydney, as Fiona Morrison notes, is the negotiation of urban space engaged in by many of the characters: they roam and drift through its streets as *flâneurs*, though they are often on a purposeful way to or from work, or going to a meeting, a lecture, or some political activity. ‘Joseph wanders through poverty and wealth in Ultimo’ suggests Maria Teresa Bindella (101–02). Marion Folliot’s shopping, along with the other things with which she fills her days, is a measure of her lack of seriousness about the practical efforts needed for the class struggle. At the office of the *International Worker*, edited by Marion’s husband, Fulke, Catherine is hanging about looking for some serious work to do, but Fulke merely responds with, ‘Marion’s doing some shopping with some friend of her mother’s, and I am up to my neck in it’ (128). When Marion does appear, she tells Fulke that she has just encountered Catherine’s mother, Mrs Bagenault (also shopping) in Farmer’s, and that she had, ‘in a low voice begged me to tell her if there was anything wrong with Catherine that I know, that she found her so queer and the family could do nothing with her’ (131). Marion’s main concern, however, is not with the ramifications of why ‘the family could do nothing with’ Catherine, but with getting Michael employment (even if not highly desirable) for which his mother has petitioned.

Fulke gets some time to do his work by telling Marion he will have lunch with her later, so she informs Catherine: ‘I’m going to sleep for half an hour at the club, get my slippers for gym, and I’ll meet you all at the meeting at seven. I’ll have lunch with Patty and tea at the club’ (133). Marion’s habitually eating well, and her leisured lifestyle, contrasts with the impoverished situation of Catherine and the workers at the printery. After Tom Withers has put pressure on

Chamberlain, their boss, he pays some of their back wages and Baruch and Joseph, on their way to find ‘some little place to eat’ (117), look in the windows of the brightly-lit, expensive shops around Pitt Street, until Joseph finally buys a pair of socks from a street-vendor’s suitcase. Baruch jokes about his shopping habits (or lack of them): ‘You’re window shopping . . . the most satisfying and least expensive. You’ve never done it before. Strange is the influence of Marx on character’ (120).

For Cooppan, what can be found in the progressive texts of various world literatures offers ‘an opportunity both to learn from history and to change it’:

to read the past for its differences from, as well as its similarities to, the present; to locate our ghostly forefathers [sic] within their own historical and ideological moment, and to discern in them the skeleton of a method that might visit us again in the uncanny form of something at once old and new, familiar and strange. (Cooppan, ‘Ghosts’ 16)

We might, then, see Stead, in her 1928 travelling (to the imperial centre of Europe, as did many other writers from the former colonies), away from the Sydney in which she grew up and was formed, and then in completing her first novel about it, as being involved in reading, and subsequently writing, her own recent past, ‘in its differences from, as well as its similarities to, the present’ (Cooppan 16), when she arrived at the completion of *Seven Poor Men* in Paris in the first months of 1934. As an incidental comparison, James Clifford, talking about how he approached his research on the notion of travelling, describes in *Routes* how he ‘began to imagine rewriting Paris of the 1920s and 1930s as travel encounters—including New World detours through the Old—a place of departures, arrivals, transits’ (30). The ‘poor’ girl from Sydney, Christina Stead, arrived there to complete *Seven Poor Men* almost by accident.

From 1914, tens of thousands of Australians had travelled to Europe to the warfront, called to the defence of the British mother country, and of British imperialism. Many of them died and many more returned with shellshock, as does Stead’s character Michael. Since the nation on the other side of the world that they defended was imperialist, capitalist and patriarchal—it accordingly reproduced class war, the sex war, especially within families, and notions of white superiority, and this was similarly the case with the home fires these soldiers were told they were also defending. Cyrena Mazlin has discussed, in relation to some war novels by women, how the First World War brought out the violence of patriarchy as the key structuring element in gender relations as they existed in the family, including prior to the War, and how a widespread inability to perform desirable masculinity during wartime impacted upon those soldiers who returned and their families. The period of which Stead wrote in *Seven Poor Men* saw ‘the emergence of surrealism in the early 1920s as an *avant garde* effort to think/engage in an artistic set of social practices that engaged both Freud (freedoms of the unconscious) and Marx (social freedom) in the aftermath of such obliterating violence on such an extraordinary scale’ (Morrison n.p.). The yearning for a freedom both sexual and societal was central to the international socialist project, and Stead herself had consistently in mind how the Marxist, feminist and psychological/psychoanalytic styles of thinking she encountered could be brought into play in the discourse of her fiction.

Jennifer Gribble, considering in 1994 how she could best discuss Stead’s books, decided to ‘take account of Stead’s own comments and to relate that process . . . to her geographical and philosophical whereabouts at the time of writing’ (3). She might have added the category of the psychological, particularly given that Stead read and studied psychology during her teacher

training. Psychology was in its very early days of development in Australia. Tasman Lovell had worked at Sydney Teachers' College before he completed, in Jena in 1909, a thesis in German on Spencer's theory of education. In 1913, as an assistant lecturer at Sydney University, he expanded the psychology in John Anderson's course in philosophy and psychology to include experimental psychology. By 1917 there was a full-course alternative to philosophy, that included 'abnormal (including Freudian), social and experimental psychology.' By 1925 this formed the first Australian psychology degree program. Lovell dominated its early days, and his lectures focused upon cognition. 'He accepted that the mind was embodied, being influenced by both neurophysiological and endocrinological states and processes' (O'Neil n.p.).

Stead, after graduating as a teacher in 1921 became a demonstrator in Experimental Psychology at the Teachers' College in 1922, and also for a short time a junior lecturer in Psychology. Gilbert Phillips, principal of the College from the beginning of the century, employed Stead to do intelligence testing on schoolchildren using the Wade-Simon method. Stead, and others including Dymphna Cusack, were ambivalent about the uses to which the new developing 'science' was put, and Cusack had returned to specialising in philosophy during her studies (North n.p.). Florence James, who was enrolled at Sydney University from 1923–26, and who later lived with Stead for part of the latter's first period in London, had similarly gravitated towards philosophy, and studied with Bernard Muscio (who had gone from experimental psychology, to logic and mental philosophy, to industrial psychology, to becoming a professor of philosophy by 1922).

Stead herself clearly had some knowledge of, and interest in Freudian concepts. Theresa Holtby has recently demonstrated her detailed use of information about what Freud called 'the most common and the most significant of all the perversions,' sadomasochism, in the depiction of Sam in *The Man who Loved Children* (Holtby n.p.). Returned to Australia in 1975 after an absence of more than forty years, Stead wrote to Elizabeth Harrower:

I'm interested in this book you mention, *The Family as Patient*, but more interested in the idea that psychiatrists and their ilk (following Freud) have not noticed the influence your role in the family has in forming you . . . But when I hear about the Oedipus and the Electra (fortunately pretty much in the background these days), I think 'What about the family, the envelope in which we grew up.' (Geering, *Talking* 71)

Similar concerns to these about 'the envelope of the family' had been expressed by R.D. Laing and other members of the anti-psychiatry group in Britain, which began publishing with Laing's *The Divided Self* in 1957. In 1962 David Cooper recommended advocacy of 'the death of the family' as a solution (Ferrier, 'Death'). Susan Sheridan argues that Stead 'favoured' psychological theory 'over psychoanalysis,' quoting her 1976 interview assertion to Joan Lidoff, 'Freud is really for the abnormal, the unbalanced, but because of his lovely sexual line he was taken over by everybody' (Sheridan 16). Another comment Stead made about Freud, useful for thinking now about the sexually liberatory tendency, as well as the psychology and sexual politics of her writing, is quoted by Holtby: 'Life is not guilty . . . It can be deformed or sick or anything—but let us bury Freudian guilt, I say' (Holtby n.p.). While Diana Brydon sees Stead as 'not interested in exploring psychological depths' (qtd. in Gribble 6), there *is* interest in these in *Seven Poor Men*, especially insofar as Catherine and Michael can be viewed as experiencing neurosis arising from their lives within the family, their relationship with each other, and more generally also from other aspects of their surrounding society.⁷

Reading the female characters with more attention places Catherine as more central than she might appear, although she—and any other female characters in the novel—seems elided by the title. Who *are* the women among the characters—the other women in *Seven Poor Men*, apart from Catherine? There are three mother figures: the first is Mrs Bagenault, Catherine's mother (trapped in domesticity; turning to religion; abused by her son for both these things early in the novel),⁸ but having had an affair that led to the birth of Michael. The second mother figure is the less financially-comfortable single parent, Mrs Blount, who protects and cares for her disabled son, Kol, having supported him by 'housekeeping and cleaning' since his babyhood (199).

She was not unhappy. She had preserved her son for herself alone, and she always said, with the airs of a young girl, 'My son has his mother for a sweetheart.' Never wife nor mistress would come to disturb her maternal possession. (199)

In a 1935 interview with a Sydney journalist, Stead commented that 'the most depressed housewife, for example, can talk like Medea about her troubles . . . everyone, to a greater or lesser extent, is a fountain of passion, which is turned by circumstances of birth or upbringing into conventional channels' (Williamson 14). Nonetheless, she does not give either of these mother characters a large measure of eloquence—perhaps because her sympathies are with Catherine, who eschews 'conventional channels' and has confrontations with both of them—perpetual with her mother; a suppressed one with Mrs Blount. There is a strong sense of Mrs Bagenault's anxious concern for her children in trying to keep them 'safely' at home, but she can only answer Michael's aggression with weak pleas for love (30–31); she can 'do nothing' with Catherine. The third mother figure, talking to her son Joseph, another of the poor men, 'sums up' (278) the condition of her existence: 'I have never been happy in my life,' she confides, since the man she loved chose to marry another woman because she was poor (296–97).

Among the younger women, there is Mae, who uses Michael's sexual attraction to her to urge him to go off to the War, in the wake of her patriotic husband. There are various young women at the parties and outings—thinly sketched, in some ways foils or comparators for Catherine, often seemingly more confident about themselves and their opinions, perhaps because their political views are less seriously socialist or feminist, and hence less challenging, than Catherine's. One of these young women, while having a profession and the political conviction of an 'ardent Socialist' cannot, it appears, challenge the co-dependence of Kol and his mother:

Nell Waters, the friend of Kol Blount, a tall, plump, energetic blonde of twenty-four, an ardent Socialist, a School-teacher, with a clear sallow complexion, tinged with her night fatigue over exercises, and large brown eyes ringed with black, due to her weeping as some said, over the improbability that Kol Blount would ever be more than a stone. (195)

The wife Joseph finds, in accordance with his role as a bystander to history, is his 'haven in a heartless world,' an illusory notion for Laingian analysis. We know almost nothing about her except that she is 'a little blonde girl,' who can make seem 'attractive the small front gardens . . . with their cement paths and standard roses' (297), and she sits with Joseph by their unassuming home fire at the end of the novel.⁹

Catherine, among the poor women, expresses a far more overt rebellion than the others find they can. The strategies available to her are circumscribed, and her internal exile, and her

presence, or absence, at various junctures, dramatises the novel's tropes of psychic territory and double vision. In particular, there are tensions between various models or exemplars of 'socialism' and internationalism in the context of patriarchy. She is particularly appreciated by the two men with European, German backgrounds, Heinrich and Baruch—as well as by the Follots, Fulke and Marion, 'with their German political experiences and modernist tastes' (Ackland, 'Realigning' 51). At the beginning of the War, Catherine had 'immediately joined a pacifist league' (54), in defiance of her sock-knitting mother and sisters, as well as Michael's later anomic capitulation to enlistment. Her resistance, and her remaining true to her flame-like idea of herself, is expressed through moving out of the comfortable home in which she spent her early childhood, and rarely returning; she tells Baruch that her parents are uncomfortable with her unrespectable activities of bits of part-time work (she left school at fifteen) and political activism: 'I see they suffer. I simply stay away from home when I am organizing. When I get sick I go home till I am well enough to go on again' (146).

Catherine, searching for socialist theorisation of her life and theirs, had 'innumerable passions for intellectual men, but because her circle was small, she usually picked flashy egotists of unstable temperament' (58)—one such was Milt Dean, with whom she 'talked abstractions for months . . . argued with him and listened to his monotonous but persuasive discourses about himself' (58). But she finds aspects of a kindred socialist spirit in Baruch, who lodges in the slums of Woolloomooloo, his 'brown, twisted, nasty-smelling handkerchief' (123) materially embodying his lack of washing facilities or of any domestic ease. Like Catherine (and like the actual figure of the lawyer and writer, Lesbia Harford, with whom Marxist activist Guido Baracchi was also involved before his first marriage) he is motivated, even driven, by his concern for the condition of the impoverished to share their condition:

He lived by choice among the sordid southern lives of the native and immigrant poor to get himself impregnated with this fever so that it would never leave him. He suffered at all this misery, but he suffered less in the heart of it, because he thought he was nearer to understanding it and to solving it. (140)

Catherine's chosen lifestyle is described with a similar metaphor of personal commitment as a fever, burning like a flame:

she preferred her vagrant life and raffish experience. Some acrid experience stung her. She was in a fever at these times. It was not safe to speak to her much, she withdrew from argument: she paled perpetually with suffering, her eyes swam in a brilliant liquid, she cried aloud in a tempestuous voice, instead of speaking, or else turned her back on the company, her lips purple. (196)

Both refuse a comfortable home life that would be available—to Baruch, to make his own through his education, to Catherine through the comparative comfort of her family home (though her parents cannot tolerate the 'other' life she has when away). Both partly do this to avoid being corrupted by living a life removed from that of the working class—something that the Communist Party member Winter suggests can often happen: 'I'm suspicious o' all intellectuals, and we got a right to be. It's easy for yew fellers to pass over into the other camp, an' be a barrister, a historian, a clever journalist' (126). He tells Baruch, 'If yew don't look out, yew'll be a traitor to the working class' (124), to which he replies (with some anxiety): 'What makes you think so?' Escape *is* possible for Baruch, and he does leave towards the end of the novel for a job in America. Shortly before this, he discusses the situation of the alternatives offered by a middle class background and education with Fulke, man to man:

We are not workers and we don't fight with the bloody ardour necessary, and it's touch and go whether we'd sell out for a nice home and quiet life, if we thought the Capitalist system was going to last our lifetime . . . We are fighting a battle with our own class who hate us and our poorer brothers who suspect us. (283–84)

The Follits eventually leave Australia as well, going back to England when they come into an inheritance.

When Catherine had earlier visited Baruch at his home, he told her that she should 'drop the Follits'; that Marion was 'an unconscious prima donna' and she could not 'want to be a dilettante heroine' like her (150, 151). Catherine was angry but could not deny Marion's lack of seriousness compared to her own. Catherine had attempted to seduce Fulke, saying that she was 'insupportably lonely,' but he avoided involvement and reminded her 'compassionately, but nervously' that his wife would worry if they did not arrive at the meeting that night (137, 135). Fulke had also confided to her his lack of confidence in socialist revolution coming any time in the near future:

My secret thought is—but I never tell Marion this—this struggle will never cease, it will go on generation after generation. There is no system without its error, its revolting seed: the best will fall to subsequent revolt. What am I fighting for? I feel tired to think of history. (135)

Catherine, then, had responded, 'I feel I am history: that's how I feel' (135). Baruch offers her a vision, closer to her own than Fulke's, of the future of socialism: 'We will win, soon those who can carry a battle flag will have a host behind them; the host is there now, waiting in the twilight of morning by the wayside, after a long bivouac troubled by dreams and sickness. What are you waiting for?' (151).

Catherine sleeps rough and lives among the indigent, spending nights in places such as 'a shelter in a very poor section' (214). When she comes to a boat trip with the university group, she brings her bread as 'great thick sandwiches, cut for her by a laundress she knew and whom she lived with sometimes.' She has not washed, her nails show 'a little line of dirt since yesterday' (196) and, as Michael tells her: 'You've got holes in both your stockings.' Provoking her further, he adds: 'If you must be a rebel, you'd do better to go bare-legged' (200).

Escape by travelling away—from Sydney, from Australia—for Teresa, a woman with some similarities to Catherine, including her initial poverty, is depicted in *For Love Alone* (1945). Stead wrote to Blake about her earlier uncertainty regarding how to end the novel:

It was all due to my foolish insistence on having a morally satisfying solution—but I do not need a solution; a woman of twenty-three does not have any solution but marriage—she has got a start in life, and that after all is my subject, a start in life, isn't it? I have several tremendous weaknesses, one of which is this feeling that I am solving a moral problem every time I start a book; but a book does not have to be a psychic revolution. (CS to WJB, 6 August 1941, Harris, *Munx* 60).

In *Seven Poor Men*, marriage is recommended (with a degree of insincerity) by Michael to Catherine. Because she could not imagine bearing its customary constrictions or how it might provide 'a start in life,' she told him, 'no one wants me for a wife, and it's serious with me: I

want to be loved and leave of my own accord' (201). Catherine was advised against marriage by Baruch; he said she should use her relationships with men to advance her own political development, for example, by learning other languages (152). But in the final meeting between them just before he leaves, he is at a loss: 'Strange girl that you are. You will always be in trouble. You had better get married' (312). (There is no suggestion that Catherine might follow him to the States.) *For Love Alone* concludes with Teresa predicting that 'the sex war' will go on for a long time; recalling her entanglement with Crow, she says: 'It's dreadful to think that it will go on being repeated for ever, he—and me! What's there to stop it?' (502). Teresa has arrived, following her affair with Girton, at some contentment in her relationship with Quick, though it is interesting that H.M. Green expressed the opinion that 'Teresa has only a fraction of Catherine's personality' (1074).

Some depictions we find in Stead's fiction of 'solutions' to the predicament of young women ambitious about change, personal or on a much wider social scale, are partly informed by her sense in her own life of the cultural denigration of the 'old maid' (expressed powerfully in the competition for the bride's bouquet in *For Love Alone*), and her own ongoing battle to become legally the second Mrs Blake.¹⁰ Nonetheless many, including Susan Sheridan in the 1980s, have cautioned the critic to recognise ambiguities and ironies in using, as any more than parallel texts, any authorial (as in interviews or letters) or implied authorial (as in a novel) positions, in seeking to authorise their own feminist readings (Sheridan 15–17).

Following the Russian Revolution there had been a strong interest inside the newly-formed Communist Parties of the nineteen-twenties in the ideas of Alexandra Kollontai in relation to the economic and political situation of women (developed from working with Klara Zetkin in Germany), and in relation to sexuality (which she had developed herself in relation to the Winged Eros—a new model for sexual relations that refused the notion of women as property. Edna Ryan recalled 'getting Kollontai's pamphlet on the family': 'We were very proud of Kollontai' (Stevens 126; Ferrier, *Devanny* 87). Are the men in *Seven Poor Men* perhaps also 'poor' in being, for the most part, incapable of envisaging themselves as the New Man for the New Woman of the time? A scene in the novel in which sexual politics are debated is when, after the launch picnic, a group of young people goes to the Blounts' house. The conversation turns to what one of the more jaded of the young women calls 'the eternal man-woman question, the eternal struggle' (204). Baruch declares, 'There are no women' (a sentiment also articulated in Simone de Beauvoir's 'Are there even women?' on the first page of *The Second Sex* in 1949). He explains:

There are only dependent and exploited classes, of which women make one. The peculiarities are imposed on them to keep them in order. They are told from the cradle to the grave, You are a female and not altogether there, socially and politically: your brain is good, but not too good, none of your race was ever a star, except in the theatre. And they believe it. We all believe these great social dogmas. (205)

When Milt Dean responds, 'Where would be feminine charm? . . . I want a woman who waits for me at home, who knows how to arrange knick-knacks, who gives me children and wants to bring them up for me, to teach them at her knee, to look after me in sickness, to close my eyes in death' (205), there is a lack of enthusiasm for this position: 'his sweetheart looked a little embarrassed . . . there were shouts of "Mediaeval! Tyrant! Patriarch! Marry a children's nurse then!"' (205). Another young woman who has her eye on Milt does say, though, 'You are right, Milt, that is what most women want to do' (205).

Catherine missed this discussion. When they arrived at the Blounts' she had angrily shaken off Mrs Blount's intended sympathy in saying she knew she did not like darning, and then flown into a rage when Michael also reflected upon her stockings, and tried to strangle him: 'She was demoniacally strong and forced him into the dark corner under the stairs . . . she ground his head against the wall: her eyes started out of their orbits' (200). When she lets go, she says, 'my heart is bursting, that is why I have to go mad . . . If I could dash my head against the wall, I'd do it; I can't stand all this' (201). Michael conceals the violence that has occurred between them, and says: 'I'll get Mrs Blount to give me some liniment and put a rag round it so that they won't see. A nice scandal!' (201). Catherine goes off into the night for a walk, with her banging of the door triggering off some sympathetic comment: 'Poor Kate! If she would only settle down! She's very artistic, if she'd only settle down, as you say! . . . She's had a lot of experience! . . . Politics is a hard life for a woman! Well, if she liked it, but it's a *pis aller* for *creation*!' (202).

When she returns, Michael refuses to go home with her. After his suicide, and with the departure of Baruch impending, she tells her cousin, Joseph, why she is relatively comfortable in the mental hospital to which she plans a return: 'I can only rest where people are allowed to be queer . . . Every one in the asylum pities the insanity of the others' (261–62). Joseph asks, 'can anyone get in?' and she answers: 'No, I have a friend; a doctor who will certify me unbalanced. And I am.' She presents being admitted as in her own control. Joseph says, 'I don't think it crazy; you know best what you want' (262). They go together to visit Baruch, and Catherine tells him, 'I'm going into Forestville tomorrow, to rest and for psycho-analytic treatment.' Baruch says, 'I'm sorry to hear it: I don't believe in that treatment,' but Catherine responds 'I do' (262). It is then that she gives her Marxist 'lay confessor' the story of Michael and herself, designated as 'Catherine's Narrative' (264). When she finishes, Baruch says, in relation to Michael killing himself, 'Then it was Marion!' but Catherine says, 'No, it was I' (275). She tells Baruch: 'I don't really want to go into the asylum, but it's the only place where I have a home when I'm cranky and cracked. If I were always in touch with a person like you, with a golden sanity like yours, I wouldn't think of such things' (276). Baruch tries to change the subject, and answers, 'gently smiling,' that 'The Follies are quite sane,' but Catherine says: 'I'm mixed up in too many emotional relations with them. I was in love with Fulke at one time, and I disliked Marion at others for her trailing Michael around. You can understand' (76).

Another elusive actual figure from Stead's early twentieth-century Sydney who also had some significance in Stead's own life, becomes of interest here. Rowley suggests that Catherine was 'loosely modelled on Esther Wait, the elder sister of Mildred Wait, a friend of Christina at Teachers' College' (Rowley 130). Jeff Sparrow notes that when Guido Baracchi returned to Australia in 1924, he was living in Fox Valley Road in Wahroonga, not far from Esther (whose family lived in Water Street), who was, he says, 'vaguely interested in politics and friendly with . . . Stead . . . then a trainee teacher. Wait introduced Guido to Stead [who] continued to visit [Guido and Neura] in Wahroonga and went with Guido to the occasional meeting' (Sparrow 142–43). Sparrow's 'vaguely' might seem contested by some of Baracchi's short comments on their association in his 'The Twenties':

There was a girl called Esther Waite [sic] . . . who turned up one day on the doorstep. She was a member of the Labor Education League, was interested in Communism & liked to hear German workers' songs from the little book I had brought back with me. She looked partly aboriginal, had bushcraft at her fingertips & introduced me to two friends who were different kinds of teachers & also belonged, I think, to the L.E.L.¹¹ (Baracchi 38)

Wait also had a proposal for saving the two militant Seamen's Union leaders, Tom Walsh (Adela Pankhurst's husband) and Jacob Johnson from deportation in 1925, as Baracchi relates:

Well before they had been seized, Esther Waite [sic], the strange girl with bushcraft at her fingertips already mentioned, came to my home & said, 'Come out the back.' And there, looking down on the dense forest of the expansive Lane Cove Valley, she put to me this proposition: I can *guarantee* to hide them down there till this blows over so they will never be found & feed them adequately every day. (Baracchi 64)

She asked Baracchi to get the proposal put to them at once, and send an answer back to him. He comments, 'She was urgently and romantically in earnest, & I believe she could have done it. I said I would do as she asked, but the two Reds plumped for the constitution. So history was written Evatt's way, not Esther Waite's [sic]' (Baracchi 64).

Esther had been born in 1898; she was the eldest among four sisters and a brother, Mildred was the second child. Similarly to Stead, 'encouraged by her father, Esther took a keen interest in the natural history of her surroundings.' 'Bad eyes and bad health,' according to *Aurora Australis*, the P.L.C. magazine for December 1916, were said to have prevented Esther from getting into Sydney University from Presbyterian Ladies College, and also from completing her studies in art at Sydney Technical College in the 1920s, though she later took private lessons with the artist, Joseph Bennett (Rost 1, 2). Ethel Morton comments that Esther moved to P.L.C. because she 'resented the regimentation' at Abbotsleigh, and that she 'moved out of 'the big house' and took up residence in 'the man's house,' which had previously been occupied by a servant—this was out in the garden.' Esther seems to have had similar difficulty to Catherine's in conforming to the conventionalities of middle-class life. 'While at Technical College, Esther lived in Balmain' (Morton 2). 'She formed a romantic attachment with Lewis Rodd' (another person who attended Sydney Teachers' College), 'but he finally married Kylie Tennant in 1932. Esther never married' (Rost 3).¹²

Sparrow refers to Esther, when he first mentions her, as 'a rather unstable young woman' (Sparrow 142), and also adds that *Seven Poor Men* drew 'on Stead's experiences in the early twenties,' and that, further, 'Catherine, the troubled main character, derives from Esther, with whose mental processes Stead was fascinated' (Sparrow 143). Rowley also intriguingly mentions that 'Stead was fascinated by stories she had heard of this wild young woman who once went so far as to commit herself to a mental asylum' (Rowley 130, no source). These mental hospitals in the first decades of the twentieth century were not very congenial environments, even if one were in the position of both patient and a teacher in the workshops, as Catherine says she will be (and the latter role is the reason she gives her mother for going there at all). If 'Forestville' is Gladesville, despite the elegant architecture and the layout of its 'beautiful gardens . . . rich with flourishing arbours and parterres,' its 'far alleys and adjoining paddocks' (298, 310), the advisability of committing oneself to be there might be wondered at.¹³

In one of the final scenes of *Seven Poor Men*, a group including the Folliotics, Kol Blount, Joseph and Baruch, and a woman called Fayre Brant, has come to visit Catherine at Forestville; we are told that she 'smiled with anger at seeing them all there,' and 'designed the sort of conversation she wished to hold by asking Fulke long questions about Winter, still in gaol, but to be released in three days' (298). Baruch takes his farewell of Catherine in 'the workshop where she taught design and woodcarving' (310); she calmly cuts her wrist with a knife, for which Baruch

supplies a 'not very clean' handkerchief to staunch the blood, and tells him, 'You are the best man I ever met' (311). Contradicting his earlier assertion that she was not calculating in her relations with potential lovers, Baruch asks, 'Do you realise the relentless ambition at the root of all your loves?' and she answers, 'Yes, of course' (312). Baruch does not suggest that she might follow him to the States, however.

Manfred Mackenzie suggested that a 'cultural alienation' in the central characters 'so fundamental as to cause European Australian civilization to seem nothing more than a collective madness' (207) gave rise to 'Stead's setting of her novel's conclusion in the grounds of a Sydney asylum for the insane, in effect at a border between competing discourses of nationalism and of madness' (207), as though there were only two between which to choose. It is certainly the latter that struck 'CHG,' who observed in a review of *Seven Poor Men* in 1935, with some bemusement, 'There is madness here, and astonishing violence of imagination' (C. Hartley Grattan qtd. in Rowley 161). But Catherine is working out how to survive, in terms of what is available to her as a course of action: she has chosen to be there, as we are told she does periodically when she needs to rest. In the asylum, then, of the predictive representations discussed above, she is, 'in her old grey dress, woefully wan and dark-eyed' (298), most like the art student's 'worn, crazy young gypsy,' but she has escaped being fished up from the sea, as was Michael.

I have sought in this reading of *Seven Poor Men* to investigate some of the ways in which it embodies 'the structuring presence of both the psychic inside and the global outside' (Cooppan, *Worlds* xvii). *Seven Poor Men* can be taken as a text that does 'draw our gaze in two directions at once,' both towards the 'imaginary psychic territory,' the inner lives of the characters, and out towards the international connections of their experiences of living in Sydney in the period in the immediate wake of the Russian Revolution, a time of heightened class struggle, and the expectations of those in such groups as the newly-formed Communist Parties that challenging capitalism, and transforming traditional sexual relationships, was possible. Iconoclastic thinking that built upon Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, influential on the radical art and literature of Stead's contemporaries, circulates through a book that 'is full of political discussions,' while at the same time it exploits 'the modernist strategy of the indirect introduction of ideas through image, symbol and setting' (Wilding 66); and it does this with passion, and an irony often associated with a self-reflexive identification with character or situation. Stead presents different styles of political involvement in the struggles of the time through different characters, some partly drawn from life and the actual history of the period, while the physical environment of Sydney that provides the novel's context embodies aspects of the state of the purportedly postcolonial nation. With the space of a hundred years between the time of the novel and now, it continues to provide extraordinary examples of 'the old and new, familiar and strange,' that offer many possibilities for current directions in contemporary criticism, and some, perhaps, that might 'locate our ghostly forebears, and discern in them the skeleton of a method that might visit us again.'

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NOTES

¹ The novel was completed in first draft in London in 1928 (Rowley 129). Peter Davies accepted it early in 1931 after he met with Stead in Paris (Rooney, *DLB* 334). Stead did final revisions on it in the first half of 1934, in Paris.

² Michael Wilding noted, in Rowley's biography, something of an 'intellectual vacuum . . . the missing exchange of radical thought' (Wilding, 'Fiction' 9). Brigid Rooney documents Stead's serious, albeit complicated, engagement with Left politics, especially around the time of the Paris Writers' Congress in 1935 (Rooney, 'Loving' 87, 91). As Jeff Sparrow mentions, Guido Baracchi, a founding member in 1920 of the Communist Party of Australia had, following the failure of the German revolution by 1923, returned to Australia, and was in Sydney in 1924. George Winter, involved in the 1921 founding of Communist Party of New Zealand, came to Sydney in 1923 (Ferrier, *Devanny*, 28, 33), and was an important intellectual influence in the early 1920s, both from his studies in economic theory and in anthropological research related to early family forms (Baracchi 31–39, 56); he appears in the novel as Tom Winter.

³ Baruch Mendelssohn has many resemblances to Blech, who officially changed his name to William Blake in 1936 (Ackland, 'What a History' 192). Tom Withers has some similarities to a friend of Wilhelm whom Stead met in Paris, Eric Townsend (Rowley 111).

⁴ The seven poor men are Catherine's brother, Michael Bagenault, a returned soldier, and Joseph Bagenault their cousin; both, with Tom Withers, work in a printery managed by Gregory Chamberlain, an inept businessman. The other three are Tom Winter, a workerist Communist Party member; Kol Blount, who is paralysed and lives with his mother; and Baruch Mendelssohn, a Jewish American artist and printer, who also works at the printery. Not included in the 'seven' men who make up the *dramatis personae* listed at the beginning is Fulke Folliot, a socialist newspaper editor; he is another prominent male character, but is not subject to the penury that afflicts all the others (apart from Chamberlain).

⁵ Baruch, along with Joseph Bagenault, thinks about, comments upon, and interacts and talks variously with the other five of the seven poor men, and Catherine. He functions as a significant interlocutor. Almost at the end of the novel, resting in the Cathedral with Winter and Joseph, Baruch says, 'I'm a kind of endless gramophone record, a wax matrix that records the ideas of the time, not inspired' (315). Joseph responds, 'I'm not a missionary like Winter, not an intellectual like you, understanding every step I make. That must be queer, though, to understand what you are doing . . . I'm a letter of ordinary script. Events are printed with me face downwards . . . History is at a standstill with me' (315–16.) While clearly not a questing intellectual, who feels involved in an ongoing progressive history, Joseph nonetheless has a degree of commentating in his role, especially in the conclusion. Catherine is, in one section of the novel, accorded narrating authority in telling the story of herself and Michael, called 'Catherine's Narrative,' to Baruch (264).

⁶ The (census) population of Australia in 1928 was 6.3 million (as against greater London's 7m), with somewhat over a million living in Sydney.

⁷ Michael's going to the War is dealt with very briefly in the novel, and any detail of what happened only comes through in his nightmare recall, alone in the Folliots' house (233–35), shortly before his suicide. Like Septimus in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1926) he is preoccupied with a fellow soldier's death; never able to admit to anybody his deserting, at one of the two crises in the War, at Bapaume in either May 1917 or August 1918: 'When Michael at last returned, in 1919, he was weathered and self-centred. He had to go to a doctor regularly for nerve treatment, and lived apathetically at home, or in friends' houses, or in places unknown to the family, when the fit took him' (56).

⁸ Blake wrote to Stead in the early 40s, expressing a strong critique (but sympathetic compared with the one Michael inflicts on his mother, [29–31]) of the restrictive situation of women within the family in relation to domestic labour:

Every time I meet those American fetiches [sic], the mother and housewife, I want the damned family system of capitalism with its kitchens and scullery maids called wives to collapse for it is clear that whatever it does to the boys, and that is bad enough, its effect on the women is beyond calculation. Truly the feminist battlecries that look like calendar maxims, come to life when one sees these wasted lives, not so much like Norah Hoult's *Poor Women*, but it is the crack of the spiritual capital of the girls with a zest for life that is most interesting.' (WJB to CS, 23 May 1942, Harris, *Munx* 122).

The Irish writer, Nora Hoult, published a book of stories, *Poor Women!* in 1928.

⁹ Roses appear elsewhere in the novel; this is the only instance in which money for them might be counterposed to money for food. The American activist Rose Schneiderman's demand that, 'The worker must have bread, but she must have roses too,' was taken up by James Oppenheim, who published the poem 'Bread and Roses' in December 1911. It became widely known during a textile workers' strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912. Marion's house has King of Kings roses in vases: Baruch says to Catherine, 'you wake up at night with red roses in the vases and the head of Eros on the wall . . . dreaming you are a happy woman like your sisters' (151). The

roses in Catherine's mother's large garden are noticed by the priest to whom she has confessed that Michael has another father: he, 'with spite and pride,' observes the roses, 'with a vicious smile, as if he accused them for the soft effusion of their unreligious saps. "Not bad," said he' (21).

¹⁰ 'Marriage for us, has very little meaning, except that if we pass out, we will be buried as "Mr and Mrs Munx" and that is worth something,' Stead wrote to Bill in the course of the long-running persistence of his marriage to his first wife. She engaged in a fantasy of how Bill would be buried in the same plot as Molly, and she 'in white clothes, for "Old-maid, Woigin" . . . You are he who will save me from appearing in high school histories as a Battle-axe . . . Just the same it will be pretty terrible: "at 40 she married Mr Munx." They will imagine I just read books up to 40 . . . The only solution for us dames is complete immorality: then they will tell the truth about all' (CS to WJB, 10 June 1942, Harris, *Munx* 201).

¹¹ One of these 'two friends' was Clarice Irwin, who 'was attracted to Communism & wrote sympathetic pamphlets, one on education in the Soviet Union. Later she married Bill McNamara, of McNamara's rebel bookshop (like Andrade's in Melbourne), who subsequently led the campaign of the Socialisation Units of the A.L.P. & whose uncle was Jack Long' (Baracchi 38). The other was Stead: 'She was critically interested in Communism &, on occasion, I took her to the regular Sunday night lecture in the Communist hall, where I was a not infrequent speaker myself' (Baracchi 38–39).

¹² By contrast, her sister Mildred had a starry academic career, and 'graduated with First Class Honours in 1924 with the University Medal for Logic and Mental Philosophy'; in 1927 she 'married a rising young barrister named Alan (later Sir Alan) Stewart Watt' (Rost 3).

¹³ More can be done on the relevance of what we know about Esther Wait to how the novel might be read, or contextualised; to establish, for example, how unusual it would have been for a young woman to voluntarily commit herself to an asylum, in the 1920s.

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