Walking through
Seven Poor Men of Sydney

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I n an attempt to describe its narrative peculiarities, critics have called *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* 'poetic', and perhaps there's some value in the term. For example, Stead's biographer Hazel Rowley comments:

> The way the novel juxtaposes conventional realism with the poetic and hallucinatory has always disconcerted readers. There is no linear plot, no obvious authorial message; the characters are not yet the rounded portraits they would become in Stead's later fiction. She was a word-drunk young writer, and the novel contains some indulgent over-writing.

Rowley then quotes Dorothy Green: 'It was *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, rather than any early Patrick White novel, which broke free from kitchen-sink realism into the world of poetry, without losing touch with the ground.' Rowley adds, 'At the time of its publication, Australian critics were too intimidated by its eccentricity to realise the significance of its innovations' (129–130).

I want to explore this apparent disjunction between 'realism' and the 'poetic' in Stead's novel and will argue that the text's 'hallucinatory' qualities are, in part, a function of the constant peripatetic movements of Stead's characters. It's no coincidence the Tank Stream Press, around which the action in the novel revolves, is situated in 'Lachlan Place': Macquarie Place, that is, near Circular Quay, where Governor Macquarie's obelisk marks the point from which all distances in the early colony were measured. It is from this symbolic point that Stead has taken the novelistic 'measure' of Sydney in the 1920s.

The term 'spatial form' as applied to literary works originates in the groundbreaking essay by Joseph Frank, 'The Idea of Spatial Form', first published in the *Sewanee Review* in 1945, and reprinted several times, most recently in 1991. Frank described what he saw as a fundamental change in Western literary structures brought about by modernism. The causal connections and temporal flow of narrative events in works such as *Remembrance of Things Past* or *Ulysses* were now overwritten by a different set of relationships that had less to do with the referential status of the text than with its internal 'poetic' economy of meaning. In a nutshell, what mattered was the symbolic, even mythic arrangement of images and ideas: diachronic narrative 'time' was now subservient to synchronic poetic 'space'. Although the potential connections weren't available to him at the time,

Frank later acknowledged that parts of his theory intersected with ideas explored by the Russian formalists and by contemporary structuralism, especially the work of Roman Jakobson. In 'Spatial Form: An Answer to Critics', he subsequently refined his terms (Frank is here defending his analysis of modernist poetry, but he applies the same principle to modernist fiction):

> I stated what has become a platitude . . . that the synchronic relations *within* the text take precedence over diachronic referentiality, and that it is only after the pattern of synchronic relations has been grasped as a unity that the 'meaning' of the poem can be understood. Naturally, to work out such synchronic relations involves the time-act of reading; but the temporality of this act is no longer coordinated with the dominant structural elements of the text. Temporality becomes, as it were, a purely physical limit of apprehension, which conditions but does not determine the work and whose expectations are thwarted and superseded by the space-logic of synchronicity. (75–76)

It would not be hard, I think, to apply Frank's ideas to the structure of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. It is, after all, a novel with seven 'heroes', albeit of varying narrative significance. They are all 'poor' men too, although the word goes beyond direct associations with wealth and social class. Gregory Chamberlain, for example, listed in the dramatis personae of poor men, is the owner of the Tank Stream Press, and thus strictly speaking a capitalist, although not a very bright or successful one. Rather, 'poor' operates equally in the sense of 'humble' or 'ordinary': men whose lives aren't recorded in conventional literary or historical narratives, and who are thus among the dominant culture's others. I'm reminded of the way that Michael Ondaatje writes against imperial history in *In the Skin of a Lion*, where the others represented – migrants and rural poor – are similarly written out of the narratives of the state. Against the institutional genre of the linear, singularly focused narrative Stead, like Ondaatje, offers many stories, *other* stories: the stories *of others*. In the words of the epigraph by John Berger to *In the Skin of a Lion*, 'Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one'. We find in *Seven Poor Men* what Benedict Anderson might call an 'imagined community', but a differently imagined community from that of the state, the mass media, or the literary institution of the late 1920s.

The very different points of view of Michael, Joseph, Mendelssohn, Withers, Chamberlain, Winter and Blount mean that each character is variously perceived in relation to the others, there is no single focalising central character. It might be objected that Michael Baguenault exerts a stronger influence than the other characters, but his tale is ultimately a foiled *Bildungsroman* whose very unmaking draws attention to the absence of narrative linearity. Each poor man thus alternately occupies – just as they all share – the 'same' narrative position, so their links are paradigmatic, and need to be read collectively rather than individually; synchronically, that is, rather than diachronically.

This 'poetic' structure is thus the foundation of the novel's political meaning, and I now want to examine its relationship to the referential or 'realistic' elements. In particular, what does the spatial disposition of the narrative have to do with the movements of its characters through a landscape?

In *Seven Poor Men* Stead has tried to *write* Sydney. Nothing on this scale, with this degree of literary ambition and innovation, had been written about the city before (excepting, perhaps, Brennan's *Poems 1913*). The book takes in much of the geographical extent of Sydney in the 1920s, from Annandale in the west, to Watsons Bay in the east, and extending to the howling wilderness of the upper North Shore. Little wonder that Dorothy Green paid tribute 'to the intensity with which the whole 'feel' of Sydney is evoked: its sights, sounds, movement, its smells, the impression of streets, Harbour, University, Cathedral and bushland suburbs' (160). Across this landscape many of the characters wander, most frequently on foot – a measure of their poverty.

In literary history there are perhaps two key pedestrian tropes: the figures of the wanderer, and of the *flâneur*. The first is associated with exile, typically within the natural world beyond the polis; the second with being ironically at home in the modern city, even while enacting a restless complicity with its alienation. Literary wandering is as old as the *Odyssey*, *flâneurie* as relatively new as Balzac and Baudelaire. And yet the first is deeply implicated in the second. As Keith Tester reminds us, the *flâneur* 'is the man who is only at home existentially when he is not at home physically' (2).

Wandering, as either exile or *flâneurie*, is associated with particularly powerful processes of subject formation. The wanderings of Homer's Odysseus, as Adorno and Horkheimer argued in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, are connected with the birth of the enlightened Western subject. In Walter Benjamin's studies of Baudelaire, the *flâneur* is an aesthetic figure – a symbol of the modern artist – whose urban meanderings serve to negotiate the new relationships between time and space within modernity; in Baudelaire's famous phrase, 'to distil the eternal from the transitory' (402). But the pedestrianism in Stead's novel is not that of the bourgeois idler or aesthete; it's the product of need and necessity. We require another way of thinking about the peripatetic in this text, and it's at this point that Michel de Certeau's analysis of urban pedestrianism may be brought in.

Written against Foucault's universalising account of panoptic power in *Discipline and Punish*, Certeau's book *The Practice of Everyday Life* describes some of the ways in which the average citizen operates simultaneously both within and against the systems of power in which s/he is located. Against the 'strategies' of power, the ordinary person may employ various 'tactics' of resistance: minor rebellions, you might say. Walking through a city can also involve small acts of resistance, as anyone who has ever crossed a road against the lights will know. City authorities, architects and developers give us the grid of spaces in which we are supposed to move, and those spaces are regulated by barriers, signs, and property restrictions of all kinds. The map of the city streets provided for us by those in power can be compared to a language system that we 'speak' each time we walk through it.

Taking up this linguistic analogy, then, Certeau suggests that the diversions that we take from the politically sanctioned straight and narrow path – short cuts, jaywalks, scenic detours, minor or even major trespasses – constitute departures from the standard practice of urban space that can be likened to 'turns' or figures in rhetoric: 'There is a rhetoric of walking. The art of 'turning' phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path (*tourner un parcours*)' (100).

Taking up some ideas of J.-F. Augoyard, Certeau describes the two fundamental devices in this process as synecdoche and asyndeton. We know certain streets because of particular buildings, facilities or objects that we associate with them, and thus imagine the city in terms of these synecdochic fragments which, taken collectively, may be said to form a 'spatial narrative'. Linear and temporal connections are dissolved, so that the relationship between remembered places is asyndetic (a distillation of key sites, like a series of mental shortcuts), dominated by synchrony rather than diachrony. In the words of Jeremy Ahearne,

> The tropes of synecdoche and asyndeton . . . help us to describe the ways in which inhabitants appropriate their environment. Firstly, the subject detaches and cathects isolated fragments of larger wholes (this activity could be analysed also as an insinuation of metaphor). Secondly, these fragments are concentrated to create what Certeau calls 'spatial stories'. (181)

This is the role that walking plays in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*: to appropriate an environment. Specifically, an environment of social alterity experienced by those who normally go unrepresented: those who are poor or, in other than material ways, dispossessed. Robin Gerster argues that the strength of Stead's descriptions of the poor areas of Sydney counteracts the political impact such superficially sordid scenes might otherwise have: 'Who, one might ask, would want to do away with the poverty that makes such appealing squalor possible?' (572). But that's to read the book too narrowly as social realism. The political character of *Seven Poor Men* is most strongly present in those moments when the key characters engage with the ordinary life of the city where class politics is inextricably linked to a textual politics of representation and desire figured in pedestrian movement.

For example, in chapter 4 Baruch Mendelssohn and Joseph Baguenault take a walk downtown after they've been paid one evening. As usual, Mendelssohn is talking politics while Joseph is silently window-shopping and observing the passing parade. Most of this passage is written from Joseph's point of view, the narrator's voice at one point melding with Joseph's own in free indirect discourse:

> Weighing what he needed and did not need, he felt how round and complex was his personality. He almost felt the ebb and flow in the markets, the jostling in the streets, the polishing of counters by elbows. Supply and demand – or what was Baruch saying about supply and demand? Something, but never mind, he'll tell it again some other day.

Mendelssohn's explicit political discourse is overridden by the seductive 'discourse' of the city itself. He comments, ironically: 'You're window-shopping Joseph; it's the most satisfying and least expensive. You've never done it before. Strange is the influence of Marx on character' (120).

Eventually window-shopping is translated into a form of poor man's *flâneurie* in and around the working class area of Ultimo as various sights draw their attention, and their imaginations: a pool of blood, some gaudy chocolate boxes in a sweetshop, a doorman taking his ease, 'a well-dressed girl' who glances at Joseph in passing, a broken ostrich feather on the footpath, a lit doorway. These images are synecdoches that connect the walkers to potential stories that remain untold but at the same time retain their narrative seduction. Certeau says that the 'intertwining, unrecognised poems' of everyday walking in the city 'elude legibility': 'The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other' (93).

At the height of this everyday spectacle of the streets, Joseph thinks: 'This is my city, here I was born and bred, I cannot be lost here, nothing can happen to me. I am Joseph Baguenault of Fisherman's Bay. I know the stones, the turnings; I know where the Markets are, there to the right and behind' (121–122). Note the precision with which he locates himself: it's a moment of self-recognition intimately bound up with *where* he is. The speaking/walking subject is a function of place. This existential moment then unfolds a welcome: 'the street was not yet that covered way which is endless and mysterious at night, but the city had become warm, hospitable, a city of hearths and yellow-lighted interiors; spoons clapped on soup-plates, spoons clanked in cups, sugar-basins revolved' (122).

Dorothy Green took the idiosyncratic view that Michael's sister Catherine is in fact the novel's central figure, and that each of the seven men is a Blakean embodiment of one part of her character: 'The inner world... 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' (154). Certainly Catherine is by far the most unsituated character in the book, and this is perhaps a fact of her femaleness. 'In the lowest places I find my answers', she says in a well-known passage at the end of chapter 7:

> I've fought all my life for male objectives in men's terms. I am neither man nor woman, rich nor poor, elegant nor worker, philistine nor artist. That's why I fight so hard and suffer so much and get nowhere. And how vain ambition when you look at it, unambitious. (214)

This assertion of radical difference reads less easily as a feminist credo than as an affirmation of Catherine's protean, even indeterminate – dare I say nomadic? – character. Her subsequent madness is in fact her placelessness, as though the only place where she can teach design, and find meaning, is in an institution for the

mentally ill. Her place is marginality itself. That the novel is not called 'Seven Poor Men and One Poor Woman of Sydney' maybe says something about Stead's proclaimed anti-feminism, or perhaps it has to do with the absence of a 'place' for women in Australian culture in the 1920s. Or could it be that Catherine serves to symbolise the common plight of all poor 'men'? Dorothy Green's view may therefore be accepted to the extent that Catherine can be read as *the most representative* character in the novel: representative by virtue of her itinerant condition as an outsider among outsiders.

This homelessness, this itinerancy, implies a nomadic status. Thus *all* of Sydney is her home because – like the real-life Bee Miles – her schizophrenic movements transform the city from what Deleuze and Guattari call the 'striated space' of the state institution into the 'smooth space' of the nomad. Though I hesitate to go much further down that path, I think we can at least talk of the novel's nomadic trajectory. The Sydney represented in *Seven Poor Men* is not a phenomenological city like, say, the Dublin of *Ulysses*, of which Raymond Williams has noted, 'The substantial reality, the living variety of the city, is in the walker's mind' (244). The city in Stead's novel is a dominantly material presence. Its streets and wilder fringes constitute the topographical mesh which spatially unites the characters – a mesh transmogrified in Joseph's celestial vision of the web of Maya, 'woven of the bodies of flying men and women' (317) in the novel's last pages.

Like Catherine, then, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* finds its 'answers' in the lowest places. This is the hidden city of the poor, and of those who must walk to get around. In the meandering paths of its characters, Stead's novel presents a transgressive spatial narrative of Sydney in the 1920s, adding a distinctly Antipodean inflection to the history of the modernist novel.

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