

Christina Stead's Last Book: The Novel and the Best-Seller

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It is an intriguing feature of Christina Stead's novels that her protagonists often produce literary works that are consonant with their character and talents. This is especially notable with her women writer-protagonists: Teresa in *For Love Alone* writes herself almost to death with the obscure, brilliant, Wagnerian *Seven Houses of Love*; and Eleanor in *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)* triumphs with *Brief Candle*, a sentimental novel co-authored with her father (it receives poor reviews but sells well). But even Robbie Grant, the lecherous businessman anti-hero of *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat*, commissions a ghost writer to compose "his" Broadway musical, *Dream Girl*. Emily Wilkes in *I'm Dying Laughing* marks a change in this pattern. Already a successful writer, having gained fame and fortune as the author of humorous best-sellers about and for Middle America, she desires to write a great book, an epic of the stature of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*. She feels that the times being lived at mid-twentieth century call for a book on such an epic and tragic scale, and that she is the person to write it, even though her Communist Party colleagues (and indeed her husband and family) would prefer that she keep on successfully money-spinning. But can she do it? Would such a novel be consonant with her character and talents? These questions recur throughout the novel, which ends with her declining into madness and scattering the pages of her unfinished epic to the winds.

Such stories within stories provide Stead's novels with reflections on their own textuality, rehearsing other forms that the novel might have taken but chose not to (Sheridan, "The Woman Who Loved Men" 7). The nature of Emily's proposed novel, and its relationship to Stead's ambitions for *I'm Dying Laughing* are my central concerns in this essay. In *Christina Stead* I noted that in Emily's eyes the epic was to be a "compensation" for her disappointments in politics and love, that it was to be both a Tolstoyan epic "about the flood of time and how they were

carried along with it" (408) but also a detailed focus on a single life—that of Marie Antoinette, a strange choice of subject for a twentieth-century socialist revolutionary (131). The phenomenon of the book within the book, of the writer written, and its satirical function in *I'm Dying Laughing* have been illuminatingly discussed by Fiona Morrison, who takes up Emily's desire to write a "horror" book about failure in America or a "cruel" book that would be a critique of the revolutionary movement, and shows how these and her other literary schemes "write her," satirising her own failures and betrayals (227, 233). Further reflections on the relationship of her characters' stories to Stead's authorial presence and investment in her novels are suggested by Kate Lilley's discussion of *Miss Herbert* as a study of the "collocation of improper femininity and female authorship that produces the woman as (literary) hack," and of Eleanor Herbert as "fake double of Stead as the female author/connoisseur" (5, 11).

Judith Kegan Gardiner has suggested that "*I'm Dying Laughing* is presumably the novel Emily wants to write and never will" (77). But perhaps the parallel is closer than that statement suggests. It is well known that this novel caused Stead a lot of trouble: she worked on it on and off for 30 years, and never finished it to her satisfaction, so that it was published posthumously, put together from drafts and notes by her then literary executor, Ron Geering. The central character, Emily Wilkes, is based on her one-time friend Ruth McKenney, a best-selling writer of humorous fiction and Party stalwart, editor of the Communist Party weekly, *New Masses*. Her spouse, Richard Bransten, like Stephen in the novel, was an apostate from his wealthy, conservative family and wrote serious political essays (Rowley 276–77). Like Stead and her husband William Blake, the Branstens moved to live in Europe in 1947, but in contrast to the impecunious Blakes they lived an extravagant life on their American dollars, earned mostly by McKenney's writing. As Stead described the characters they became in her novel, they were "two Americans, New Yorkers" who "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" (qtd. in Geering vii).

In the novel, McKenney and Bransten are transformed into Emily Wilkes and her husband Stephen Howard. They, too, leave the USA to live in postwar Europe and, ultimately succumbing to the pressure of the contradictions that they live with, renounce the Party and their political associates. This renunciation, worth some \$30,000 from Stephen's family, is one of Emily's schemes to make more money—or at least pay off the debts accumulated by their extravagant life in Paris. Her other money-spinning idea is to produce an epic testament to her times that will also be a best-seller.

The book that is to accomplish this apparently impossible feat is *Trial and Execution*, a "re-evaluation of the French Revolution" but a "popular treatment," "as Dickens had done it, for she felt herself sometimes another Dickens, with the

humane, humorous and pathetic touch, not going too deeply into the social questions he understood very well, serving things up palatably for the kind of people who were her readers” (346). This would “make her name, both in a book and in a historical movie, a blockbuster” but it would also impress her European friends, survivors of the resistance, “people of the latest revolution, that to come” (347). But her right-wing friend Violet warns that it should not be too new or unfamiliar: “You must have mob scenes, darling, and tumbrils and the dreadful Robespierre at the guillotine; that is what people want. And of course, Marie-Antoinette [. . .] the things that really make their hair stand on end. After all, no-one really trusts the French ever, do they?” (346). How readily it becomes an anti-revolution story! Certainly it is part of Emily’s intention “to attract the romantic women who loved court dress and wept for those who died for it” among her readers, but she also wants “to exhibit to their one time companions [. . .] that they had the insight of Marxism, still had that discipline” (349). At the same time, the book will have “an angle to please serious readers, to present something new and yet old for Hollywood” (349).

The myriad and apparently contradictory aims recall Stead’s phrase about wanting to be on the side of the angels and also to make a lot of money—“of course [. . .] they came to a bad end.” For it must be a money-maker. Hollywood is essential to its success. Emily wants it to be “not merely an ‘A’ picture but a giant phenomenon of the Cecil B. de Mille sort, a blockbuster.” Thinking this as she holds in her hand Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, she resolves not to emulate Dreiser by “working in poverty, waiting long years”: “She was a money-maker, no need for her to crawl on all fours after the chariot of fortune. She would drive it” (350).

Yet, having re-read *An American Tragedy*, she raves to her husband about Dreiser’s power: “and for this wretched bit of human being, like us, like me at least—to show this severe terrible compassion—such compassion, oh, is terror, terror . . . He says, Here is the remorseless, logical, inescapable doom he brought on himself and the twentieth century brought on him and America brought on all . . . the tragedy of the century, the century of the common man, so common, so wretched” (351). Barely coherent here, Emily is visited by her recurrent nightmare of the Terror, accompanied by the sound of the tumbrils. Her book *Trial and Execution* will be not only about “those days” of past revolutionary Terror but also about the history of the present, where she can still hear the cries of Resistantists being tortured as she walks through the streets of postwar Paris (409).

The French Revolution was always a vivid presence in Stead’s imagination, an image of revolutionary heroism, unlike reactionaries, such as Violet, who never trusted the French since that time.¹ Her idea of Emily/Ruth McKenney was as “a Danton in skirts,” that is, a revolutionary of the bohemian rather than puritan caste like Robespierre. Danton, according to E. J. Hobsbawm, was remembered as a “dissolute, probably corrupt, but immensely talented revolutionary” (92–

93). This characterization is consistent with Marx's account, in "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," of the "heroism, self-sacrifice, terror, civil war" that were necessary to bring the French Revolution into the world, and of his describing its major actors as its "gladiators" (146–47).

Emily may retain some heroic status as a "Danton in skirts," but in her own novel, *Trial and Execution*, Marx's association of heroism with the great bourgeois revolution is quite lost: she comes to identify herself with Marie-Antoinette, with the last queen of the old feudal regime, rather than with Danton, one of the first "gladiators" of the modern state. She claims a broader and deeper significance for her book: "It's not only about Marie-Antoinette, that's for the Midwestern mammas; it's about the flood of time and how they were carried along on it" (408). Here is "the remorseless, logical, inescapable doom" she wants to capture in the "tragedy of the century, the century of the common man" (351). But by the time, late in the novel, when she visits Versailles with her husband's capitalist family, she appears to have switched her identification from "the common man" to the Bourbon family, with herself as the queen of Louis XVI. Versailles, she feels, is saved from vulgarity by her knowledge of the Bourbons' "stately doom," of "the slow-paced tumbrils, the towering guillotines, the last moment, the awful axe" (422). She imagines "the frightened, beautiful queen" showing herself to "the wild, wild, heartless, vicious mob" (424). But then, in a characteristic switch, she quickly moves on to celebrate her own American-ness, identified with the revolutionary tradition, "alive and so triumphant" over the old Europe (424). She imagines herself a modern "Madame Lafarge," knitting by the guillotine while the enemies of the Left lost their heads—"General Marshall and his plan in his pocket," for one (424).

The violent juxtaposition of Emily's original heroic ambitions and the fate of her "best-seller," of her revolutionary aspirations and her pseudo-aristocratic pretensions, recalls Marx's much quoted statement in "The Eighteenth Brumaire": "Hegel remarks somewhere that all the great events and characters of world history occur [. . .] twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (147). This insight haunts *I'm Dying Laughing*: "Stead's most passionately ironic comment on the terrible history of her times, on the coexistence of tragedy and farce" (Sheridan, *Christina Stead* 128).

A factor contributing to this element of farce in Emily Wilkes's tragedy is the association between her successful writing as a humourist and the degraded popular literary market. Emily is the first to point this out, in statements such as the one that Marie-Antoinette is only a sop to her despised female audience of "Midwestern mammas." Such a view is perfectly consistent with the hierarchical opposition between high art and popular culture that is characteristic of modernism. Given this divide, it is obvious that Emily's ambitions for her great work must fail, she can't write a Hollywood blockbuster that is also recognised as an epic of her era. She cannot serve both God and Mammon. Moreover, the opposition between

high and popular culture is conventionally gendered—popular culture is seen as feminized, as the realm of “Midwestern mammas,” incompatible with serious art and revolutionary ideals.

The concept of a feminized audience for popular fiction that Emily gives voice to is dramatically illustrated in a scene from *We Are the Makers of Dreams*, a novel by Stead's partner, William J. Blake. Peggy, the woman writer character (very like Stead herself) meets with her publishers, to whom she has offered a serious novel (reminiscent of Stead's *House of All Nations*) called *The Age of Brass*. It won't do, the two men explain, for it lacks love interest: “You see, Peggy, 85 percent of fiction is bought by women, who can afford the price [. . .] so that fiction is a product destined for a special market [. . .]. Now, women want to read about their interests, which are either getting married, staying married, or, if they lose the gentleman, acquiring another. This is their livelihood.” Peggy thinks about this, and retorts, “A novel, then, is their trade paper?” (301). The marriage market, then, has its own trade paper, the novel—a perception worthy of Stead heroines Letty Fox (who would say it with some irony) or Eleanor Herbert (who would recite it as an article of faith).²

It is at this point that Peggy recalls the poem from which Blake's novel probably takes its title, where poets are “the dreamers of dreams. . . / Yet we are the movers and shakers.”³ But are they to be worthy or unworthy dreams? Dreams of marriage as a trade, or dreams of freedom? Yet Stead herself wrote several other novels in which the dream of love is the subject, although the marriage trade is an object of satire. She would certainly not accept the argument that “love interest” defines the novel—indeed, she would no doubt have argued, as Blake has Peggy argue, that this “rich and Protean form” of literature should provide a home for “unique” visions while “cinema and radio thrive” as venues for popular stories with plenty of “S-E-X” (302).

There is no getting away from the argument that popular fiction is aimed at audiences of “best-seller” proportions, and these audiences are female. It is mirrored in Emily's scorn for “best-selling books of the humorous housewifely kind” that appeal to the “mamma public,” books that are “poorly written, vain, cosy, dull, ignorant and pitifully lacking in self-criticism, as were their readers” (56). Yet she claims that all the recent examples of this genre had plagiarized *her* successful book, *Uncle Henry*. Such a total confusion of values is characteristic of Emily. Stead, on the other hand, was very clear about what constituted what she called (memorably) a “best-smeller,” and why it was despicable. She described McKenney and Bransten's co-authored book about Napoleon in Egypt as “a monstrous pre-fabricated best-smeller” with “lush sex scenes and summer-tourist French and all kinds of Hwd [Hollywood] garbage about the French Revolution and absolutely hackneyed types and comic-strip conversations and it was all done purposely, every word done purposely to make it a best seller [. . .] with the intention of

being garbage but just the right sort to appeal” (qtd. in Rowley 406).

But was Stead always so clear that writing for the market was necessarily a form of prostitution? The great Hollywood venture that she and Blake undertook in 1942 suggests otherwise.⁴ In the summer of that year Blake went West to see for himself what prospects there were for the two of them to earn a decent living as writers in Hollywood. By 1942, after several years of being writers together, they had realized that writing was “another word for slow starvation” (Rowley 288). Frustrated in his attempt to sell the film rights to his second novel, *The Copperheads*, Blake thought it better to go to Hollywood himself. En route, he spent some time in New Mexico (where he envisaged they could live cheaply and well for six months every year) and some time in Beverley Hills, writing almost daily to Stead, who had stayed on in New York to finish *For Love Alone*, among other things.

For the past few years writing had been their main source of income. Blake was eager to give up his work in banking and finance, particularly his partnership with Alf Hearst (the prototype for Robbie Grant in Stead’s 1948 novel, *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*).⁵ In New York in the late 1930s, writing had at first seemed to be a possible career for them both. Blake had started writing fiction in the mid-30s, and by 1942 had published three novels as well as his book *Elements of Marxian Economic Theory* (alternatively titled *An American Looks at Karl Marx*). Indeed, in 1938 he had produced something of a best-seller with his first novel, *The World is Mine*. It has been described as a 700-page-plus blockbuster whose hero, a Spanish grandee, “makes himself the richest man in the world, avenges his father and indulges in a mad dream of destroying the capitalist system practically single-handed” before being killed in the Spanish Civil War (Harris, “To Hell with Conservatories” 162). Promoted as a best-seller, the novel soon rated ninth on *the New York Times Book Review* best-seller list, and within 4 months had sold 10,000 copies. In an interview at the time Blake describes himself as politically “an anarchist turned Marxist. Personally, he is a gourmand. Professionally, he is a successful capitalist” (Rowley 249–51). It appears Blake knew how to work the publicity machine to his advantage.

It was also in this interview that Blake claimed, “I write 10,000 words a day, and ninety-nine per cent of it stands without revision” (Rowley 252). Stead made the same hyperbolic claim for her own writing practice in an interview many years later in the 1970s, after Blake’s death. Although it may be that she could turn out 10,000 words at a sitting, as she claimed in a letter to Blake (24 June 1942), it can readily be demonstrated from her papers that she did revise, and heavily. So what did this appropriation of her partner’s self-description mean? What about the relationship between the pair of them—what potential for competition and collaboration was there, now that Blake too was a writer? In 1938, just a few months before Blake’s success with *The World is Mine*, Stead had published *House of All Nations*, also a novel about high finance, and with the same

publisher, Simon and Schuster. Despite critical acclaim, and having her portrait on the cover of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, her book sold slowly, and at the end of the year she was still battling to get the publisher to print more copies. This must have been vexing, and it revealed the power of publishers' marketing decisions: best sellers are made by publishers first and foremost.

Blake wrote enthusiastically about their prospects in Hollywood, especially for a movie of *For Love Alone* and Stead's other projected woman-centred novels (n.d. [26 June 1942]). Such scripts would be much in demand since young male stars were expected to be in war service, and so "the movies, perforce, are screaming for female roles." His friend Les River is "mad to do the screen play" and "he can get Hepburn to demand the role of Tess Hawkins. She is feminist and cries that women are only a plot convenience." So confident is he of Stead's coming success that he concludes his letter: "I see that I will soon do the housework while you smoke cigars in the piazza—may it only come." He emphasises that screen plays are not expected to match closely the novels on which they are based, as if implicitly reassuring Stead not to feel compromised by screen play ideas that would alter the plot of her novel. Stead's idea was less ambitious, more severe. In a letter dated 16 June 1942, she writes, "We must work at writing as a profession a trade, seriously, taking risks and living quite cheaply until we begin to make a small yearly income." She continues; "I am not going to write dreck for anyone, and we have a hedge in each other."

Blake worked out elaborate schemes of how they could earn a living without having to hire themselves out as studio writers on short-term contracts at weekly salaries (although this was in the end what Stead had to do). He praised the achievements of the radical Screen Writers Guild in gaining good conditions for its members, and expressed the view that Hollywood promised him a far more satisfactory living than business, or publishing, or the lecture circuit (16 June 1942). He described in detail how the money hierarchy determined where people lived and who they socialized with. He described—with great energy—the ignorance, snobbery and corruption of, as well as his pleasure in the occasional company of cultured and intelligent European emigres like Feuchtwanger (author of *Jew Suss*), of heroes like Groucho Marx, and of Left wing writers like Michael Blankfort, who had collaborated with their friend the Communist Mike Gold. Stead uses these letters extensively in the "UNO 1945" chapter of *I'm Dying Laughing*, attributing Blake's words to the character of Axel Oates. It is also from these letters of Blake's that Stead apparently took the name that Emily gives to her never-ending epic, her "*magnum dopus*" (7 June 1942).

Blake's own capacity for brilliant satire can be seen in the hyperbole of his letter to Stead of 9 June 1942: "I still think that Hollywood is the writer's lifesaver. Scraps, rejects, thrown-out sections, that have no literary merit or are outside the scope of our creative plan [. . .] may be the source of a good story [. . .]. Thus Hollywood is the writers' Waste Food Production Ltd [. . .] a conversion of the

waste basket into gold.” And later in the same letter: “nowhere else is literary prestige as high as here among writers,” where the serious artist “is their offering to decency and they know it.” Yet he seems constantly to have been let down by the men who offered to do business with him, and no contracts seem to have eventuated.

A recurrent theme in these letters from Blake was the potential for a big novel about Hollywood itself: “This is the only story I feel we can really collaborate on” (20 June 1942). He scoffs at the idea that there might be a “hoodoo” on such a novel: there *are* books, but they are “either supercilious, disenchanting, statistical, sensational but never literary.”⁶ In another letter he writes eloquently of the need for a real “treatment” of Hollywood that would also be an attack on the capitalist destruction of creativity:

No one has ever extended Marx’s notion of the market, that under capitalism living labour is known to have value, not through itself but in the body of *dead* labour of the article for which it exchanges, that all life is equated with the dead is to be *recognized*. The enormous implications of capitalism on our thinking cannot even be plumbed, the indictments of our honest artists are simply the human cries of the castrated but what the subject needs is almost another “Kapital” of Marx, but applied to the spirit and not just to the commodities themselves. ([?9] June 1942)

Stead’s letters strongly suggest that she does not share his enthusiasm for living in Hollywood and writing for the movies, but she is keen on the idea of using it as the subject for a novel. “I have written my last 2 books about my childhood and youth. Bad [. . .] I am looking forward to Hollywood: people say, I can do a good book on it and I think this is so” ([?7] June 1942). And she knows what it is she will find: “am looking forward to Hollywood’s Hades because I can see it is a grand subject for a novel” (9 June 1942). And later she writes “I am sure their vulgar conceit and disregard of everything decent in humanity is revolting, but so is S/S [Simon and Schuster] and so is the Authors League Bulletin” (13 June 1942).

“Another ‘Kapital’ of Marx, but applied to the spirit” does not seem to be quite the kind of Hollywood novel Christina had in mind, however. A note among her papers dated 29.7.42 suggests a book that would be more compatible with her own style, and have a good deal to do with sexual corruption: “Bill mentions the Hollywood story as the most fearful in the U.S.A. and most corrupt expression of American capitalism” (Box 19). She mentions directors who are sent women and girls, paid for by the company, where they are given small movie parts and tiny salaries, and “vain actors who believe they are sexual heroes.” “All crimes are hushed up,” including child rape and murder. The “story is that writers who have tried to

write the truth have been 'got'—most agents, writers, others completely corrupted and cynical, the directors like to get in the famous writers, for the [p]leasure of having them for office-dog, do not want their stories"—here she mentions Aldous Huxley. She goes on, "These are the people, this the machine which grinds out 'mother stories' and 'happy American family' stories for the syndicated movies." Notes to herself conclude: "Good subject but would have to be done privately."⁷ "Hollywood contrast—insturctions [sic] to authors 'put in more screwing' and out comes the 'American family' and bad man reformed by marriage at other end." She refers to Hollywood as a "perfect myth camp."

In fact the experiment of earning a living out of Hollywood did not succeed (they stayed there only a few months). Nor did their projected collaboration on a big Hollywood novel.⁸ Rather than the projected critique of the operations of capitalism in the studio system, what Stead ended up writing was a satire on the Communist Party in Hollywood, the "UNO 1945" chapter of *I'm Dying Laughing*. Perhaps, like Emily's projected "reevaluation of the French Revolution," the subject was just too big, too programmatic. The theme of literary production under capitalism is, nevertheless, played out through Emily's writing projects.⁹

Stead is sympathetic to Emily as a woman who sees her writing as "a profession, a trade." She portrays Emily as rightly proud of her success in making real money out of writing. She gives her some scornful comments on the Party Central Committee's hypocrisy in rejecting the sexual morality of her comic stories, while they (like Stephen) live off the profits she makes (79); and she shows Stephen's pusillanimity in trying to distract Emily from the idea of writing a great novel that would "give offence to everyone" (51). Making money is not a problem in itself. Nor is popularity, in itself: her American stories may be immensely popular, but they are the work of a "humourist" who has the comic's underlying bleakness of vision. Emily practises "American humour based on the American dilemma, based on, what you want most, you'll never have, but the plastic makeshift—ha-ha-ha! She laughed, biting her lip" (57). Like those of Stead (and Ruth McKenney), her great characters are based on members of her family. Nor is this kind of appropriation a problem. Even best sellers are not always meretricious (after all, Bill had written one). What Stead most objects to is the dream machine, the machine which grinds out "mother stories" and "happy American family" stories, transforming conflict, trauma and crime into ideological lies.

Where Emily fails, in her creator's eyes, is in ultimately believing in the dream machine, giving in to greed and self-delusion. In Paris, crazed and desperate, often hysterical, "dying laughing," she is bent on making herself and Stephen into a heroic myth, on transforming their failure as revolutionaries, on making a myth that will bring her fame and fortune as well. It will be "my great book; the great novel of our times. It will serialize, sell to Hollywood as a blockbuster; it will pyramid forever, you'll see," she assures Stephen (417). By this point of mania,

she no longer perceives the contradiction between the great epic of her times and the Hollywood historical blockbuster. More catastrophically, as Morrison puts it: “Emily’s relentless commodification of her political and personal life slides schizophrenically and incoherently between ‘she’ and ‘me,’ subject and object, and between public and private” (237–38).

Before she goes mad, Emily is very conscious of her capacity to undermine herself. She says at one point: “Medea in my heart and what comes out of my typewriter is the funny-mediocre” (391). This is not true of Stead (who is rarely funny, and never mediocre) but it resonates with Marx’s precept about the great events of history repeating themselves as farce. Farce is Emily’s mode, but Stead’s depiction of her lends her a tragic dimension, so that *I’m Dying Laughing* itself might be described as a “tragic farce,” a completely mixed genre. It is her capacity to realize the Medea in Emily that brings Stead’s characteristic Greek tragedy element into the novel.

Emily’s creativity is distorted and destroyed, but that theme comes to take second place to the politics of Left and Right. From the perspective of Europe, Hollywood fades into the background as the dream machine holding out a never-to-be realized promise of wealth for the writer of a “blockbuster.” Before they left America, Hollywood provided Emily and Stephen’s first lesson in political reality, where they learned that the Party can be the enemy. Their second major political lesson is learned in postwar Europe, and it is one that they cannot just move continents to escape: that collaboration is everywhere, and may be the condition of survival. Collaboration with the enemy becomes the central metaphor of Stead’s novel, the wartime phenomenon carried over into peacetime, into the moment that might have been revolutionary, at least in Europe.

This revolution, the potential triumph of socialism in the postwar world, informs Stead’s treatment of her collaborators, the “renegades,” Emily and Stephen, but it remains in the background. By focussing on the Howards in all their particularity, her subject becomes, like Dreiser’s, “an American tragedy.” As Gardiner rightly says, she “portrays the follies of American communism as indigenous contradictions rather than as the result of Russian influence” (80). The heroism and the betrayals of war and revolution in Europe are themes that Emily wants to treat, though she fails to maintain the heroic and falls repeatedly into hysterics and bathos. This, then, is Stead’s subject: not the revolutionary moment itself, but art and politics under capitalism, where heroics degenerate into farce. The degeneration is the tragedy. She did not, I think, share Marx’s capacity to thrill to the “gladiatorial” potential of the revolutionary moment, though I think it likely that William Blake did. Hers was not a positive art: “I believe it is impossible for an artist to be a great positive,” she wrote to Blake, in relation to her idea that “greatness of character in a book” always has negative aspects (June 1942). On the contrary, she is in her element in the grim times, the ages of lead, first the Depression, then the Cold War.

Endnotes

1. For example, her predilection for the name Marianne, the spirit of the Revolution, her naming of Adam Constant after Benjamin Constant, and no doubt other names and presences.
2. Such views are echoed by Blake elsewhere in *Dreams*, when he has Peggy declare that women “are in the marriage business. In that they are professional and men are amateurs [. . .]. Housewives plot as consistently in that game as men on the Stock Exchange” (178).
3. Identified in Margaret Harris, “‘To Hell with Conservatories’: Christina Stead.
4. Recently released letters exchanged almost daily between the two writers during this six week period of separation provide much of the evidence cited in the following paragraphs (NLA MS 4967). The letters are identified by date. The dates in square brackets are those suggested in Margaret Harris’s draft transcriptions for undated letters. I wish to thank Professor Harris for allowing me to see these transcriptions against which to check my own notes from these unpublished letters. These letters and others are the subject of Harris, “Dearest Munx.”
5. According to Rowley, he seems not to have wholly freed himself from Hearst until 1952, which was also the year he finally divorced his wife and married Stead. Harris notes that an additional reason for his trip West in 1942 was to establish residence in New Mexico or Nevada to enable him to secure a divorce (“Dearest Munx” 32).
6. Blake apparently does not consider that either Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Last Tycoon* (1941) or Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* (1939) come up to scratch. (West was married to Ruth McKenney’s sister, and both were killed in a road accident in 1939.) He does mention Ehrenburg’s *The Dream Factory* in one of his letters.
7. It is not clear what she means by “privately”—perhaps alone, not in collaboration with Blake?
8. They also flirted with the movie industry in England during the years they lived at Foxwarren Hall. See Rowley.
9. It recurs in *Miss Herbert*, as is evident in Stead’s note on the novel (apparently intended for an Eastern European publisher) as a study of capitalism in action in the writing trade (NLA MS 4967, Box 3, Folder 14).

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