

Modernist voices and the desire for communication in Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*

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Writing from Paris in 1932 to Sydney friend Gwen Walker-Smith, Christina Stead describes trying to listen to James Joyce reading the last four pages of the 'Anna Livia Plurabelle' section from the first part of *Finnegans Wake* in which two working class women gossip while washing clothes on the banks of the Liffey:

...a gramophone record of James Joyce the English litterateur, reading from his own works, a rare thing costing 200 francs: you pay that and you are not allowed to hear the record before buying, on the pretense that it wears the record (and I suppose once you have had the experience you are not so likely to buy it). I have had to telegraph and telephone and visit to get this record and now I am not sure of it. I hope to get it signed by the writer himself, as he lives in Paris, and I know his friend Miss Sylvia Beach, the one that published his great book *Ulysses*. James Joyce is the new Euphuus: the melting pot of the language and of present literary idiom and banality: ...no living writer in English there is who is not indebted to his methods and his vocabulary: he has been translated in all tongues, despite the enormous difficulty of the translation. (Geering 51)

This letter reveals Stead's pragmatic interest in new technologies for reading and writing the literary voice. To adapt Sara Danius, the gramophone held out the promise of bringing the sensuous aspects of literary experience into closer alignment with new technological forms of mediation—delivering the writer's voice literally into the ear of the reader/listener with an unprecedented immediacy (2). The ideal, however, failed to measure up to the reality for Stead in this case, she distrusts what she hears, the 'noise' of mediation—the hisses, crackles and static that were intrinsic to early gramophone recordings are too disruptive, reinforcing the appeal of more secure and verifiable forms of writing or inscription—the signature and the printed page.

Despite these technical flaws, many of Stead's modernist contemporaries responded very differently to the same recording. T. S. Eliot, for example, positively embraced the same recording of *Finnegans Wake* and was heavily involved in its production, working closely with C.K.Ogden at the Cambridge Orthological Institute to produce the recording in the summer of 1929 and disseminate the disc from June 1930. The recordings were sold in Paris through Sylvia Beach's *Shakespeare & Co.* Beach herself funded Joyce's earlier recording of the Aeolus section of *Ulysses* in 1924.

Yet, while their responses may have differed, the fact that both Eliot and Stead purchased a copy of the recording reveals a mutual interest in the new medium's literary and acoustic potential, that is also continuous with a more abstract and rarefied desire to communicate which shaped Anglo-American modernism from James to Fitzgerald, as Mark Goble has recently argued (2010). Developing this point further, Goble suggests that Anglo-American

modernists not only strove to channel and filter ‘the power of media technologies’ they did so ‘as a way of insisting that this power was already modernism’s own’ (3). Stead’s assertion of the value and authenticity of writing over the technologically mediated voice in the above letter is consistent with this account of modernism and Goble’s more general assertion that modernists, counter to their reputation for opacity and difficulty, ‘desired communication and the many forms it took’ (3). What distinguishes Stead at this seminal moment in her writing life, however, is how she translated this desire for communication into a form of cosmopolitan critical detachment that, in the manner Amanda Anderson describes, allowed her to ‘enact or embody universalism’(31). By setting her novel in Sydney, Stead detaches the locus of modernist narrative from its familiar Anglo-American co-ordinates—a self-conscious relocation that exposes modernism’s uneven developments and geographically normative silences by giving a face and voice to alternative localities and parallel histories of the modern.

Set during the seamen’s strike of 1925, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) marks the beginning, this essay will argue, of Stead’s enduring fascination with the novel’s unique capacity to mediate sounds, voices and sensory experiences that had previously fallen outside the auditory and aesthetic networks of Anglo-American modernism and its precursors. This essay begins by reading the Parisian context for Stead’s revisions of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* as a catalyst for the cosmopolitan detachment that shapes the novel’s mediation of voice through characters that function more as channels or media than fleshed out discrete subjects. Stead lived in Paris in the late twenties and early thirties, where she encountered, as Hazel Rowley’s biography vividly details, writers and intellectuals who answered her desire to be free of the parochialisms of Sydney and the isolation of London where she had worked on an earlier version of the novel then titled *Death in the Antipodes*. It was in Paris that Stead began reading the ‘in-progress’ installments of *Finnegans Wake* in the modernist little magazine *transition*, which was conceived as a manifestation of a new cosmopolitan modernism that both incorporated and challenged the technologies of mass communication.

This context, as the second half of this essay demonstrates, reveals how central the experimental exploration of the desire to communicate is to the contouring of character in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. Stead’s nuanced use of acoustic metaphor and, to quote Susan Sheridan, the way she makes ‘her characters talk themselves into existence’ through a series of prolix monologues that fall on deaf ears (17), insists on reading as a form of critical listening that, to adapt Garrett Stewart’s argument in *Reading Voices*, focuses attention on generating an affective play between graphic and phonic articulations in the ‘reader’s sensorium’ (2). This experiment effectively challenges conventional understandings of place and geographically grounded conceptions of reading, insisting instead upon a form of detached contingency that shapes both the writing and reading of this complex and sometimes opaque evocation of Sydney as part of an internationally conceived modernist cartography.

Voices in Transition

Stead observed of *Finnegans Wake* in 1929 that it was impossible to understand without ‘a rhyming dictionary, an encyclopedia, the grammars of ten languages, and an annotated ‘crib’ (122). Yet she also noted in a letter to Gwen Walker-Smith in 1932 that there was ‘no living writer in English...not indebted to [Joyce’s] methods and his vocabulary’ (Rowley 122). One of the places Stead had access to this new modernist lexicon was in the pages of *transition*. *transition* modeled a new form of literary internationalism, which Joyce’s work typified for Stead—a revolutionary fusion of voices blended together in a self-consciously

modern medium that promised to transcend the limits of translation, to quote the buoyant editorial introduction to the first issue: 'We believe, that although art and literature are, in many quarters, growing more definitely racial and national in coloring and texture, their appeal is becoming distinctly international. The reader is coming into his own' (22).

While Stead resisted the exultant utopianism of Jolas' brand of modernism, her interest in new technologies and forms of writing paralleled that of the international avant-garde network that were drawn to the alternative public sphere *transition* created. Founded in 1927, *transition* reflected the fusion of Dadaism, Surrealism and German Romanticism of the American expatriate Jolas. Initially published as a monthly magazine it was cut back after twelve issues to four issues a year and repackaged as 'An International Quarterly for Creative Experiment'. Issues continued to appear, sometimes sporadically, until 1938, with later incarnations bearing the suggestive subtitle 'International Workshop for Orphic Creation'. The revolutionary project of wresting the voice and the word from the machinery of mass production and rational communication, as this later subtitle indicates, was sustained throughout the life of the magazine. As the twelve point proclamation of 1929 signed by Jolas, Hart Crane and others declared: 'The revolution in English language is an accomplished fact' (13). Another notable contributor, Harry Crosby, drove home this point in an early short piece published in *transition* in which he defined 'The New Word' as 'the clean piercing of a Sword through the rotten carcass of the Dictionary' (13).

While Stead's correspondence focuses on her reading of the 'Work in Progress' serialization of *Finnegans Wake* in *transition*, the cosmopolitan ethos of the network of writers and artists that Jolas' magazine drew together typifies the intellectual freedom and possibility that Stead associated with her Parisian exile. Writing once again to her friend Gwen Walker-Smith, Stead described the 'free commune of the mind and the senses' inspired by the French people's unique combination of 'suavity, intelligence and amiability' (113). She continues in the same letter: 'Paris is the refuge of most Anglo-Saxon artistic gentry with free minds, who have not been able to support the stupidity and intellectual deceit of their countries. England is of course worse off than any: New York produces some good work, but the futurists work over here' (Rowley 113). Detached and writing from a distance, inspired by such a liberating milieu, the acoustic topography of *Seven Poor Men* could finally begin to take shape.

In the 9th issue of *transition*, Eugene Jolas urged writers and artists to harness the power of the machinery of industrial capitalism by channeling its relentless rhythmic force and cacophonous noise into their art:

The vertiginous pseudo-progress of industrialism has blinded us to the immense psychological importance of the machine. The latter which surely is the greatest single aesthetic contribution of our age has enslaved human spirit instead of liberating it...America, where the technical mechanical development of our age reached its zenith, shows conclusively to what destructive ends the instrument of the machine can lead...Noise has become the surrogate of beauty. (192)

Stead writes of the demonic creativity of the global printing industry with equal theoretic force in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*:

And the whole printing-world is not like this miserable workshop. There are giant workshops with hundreds of men, artists, engravers, lithographers, electric etchers, superb lights blazing like suns in the roof, workers shut off in gauze

covers, benches yards long covered with clean trays of brilliant cast lead, linotypes by the half-dozen. There are great buildings for the printing of books and newspapers, where the lights burn all night, as if in a palace, and reporters and photographers run in shoals; where the news goes to the editor through circles of decreasing diameter of rewrite men, the seven spheres of editing, and runs out again through the corridors of the news print machines... (83)

The noise of mass-produced print, of monstrous machines generating a seemingly infinite stream of information, is a figure of infernal beauty here, exuding ‘a diabolical air’, as Judith Barbour has described it, that fills the silent reverie of Joseph Baguenault, one of the seven poor men whose voice bears the imprint of the machinery he operates (Barbour 409). A sense of possibility, of transcendence even, mystifies these palaces of industry, viewed through the Catholic mysticism that residually shapes the associative drift of Joe’s mind as his body works in time with the machine. There is also an absence of didacticism, Joe’s reverie is simply recorded and then the narrative moves on as Joe’s eye is caught by the clock and his mind momentarily drifts back into the prosaic demands of work: ‘Joseph looked at the clock—five minutes to one’ (83).

Writing on ‘The Revolution of Language and James Joyce’, Jolas praised Joyce for inventing a new ‘universal language’ for expressing the unconscious:

The word presents the metaphysical problem today...The discoveries of the subconscious by medical pioneers as a new field for magical explorations and comprehensions should have made it apparent that the instrument of language in its archaic condition could no longer be used. Modern life with its changed mythos and transmuted concepts of beauty makes it imperative that words be given a new composition and relationship. (109-10)

Stead’s adamant assertion of the debt all writers writing in English owed to the experimental elasticity and dissociation of words from their accustomed relationships that Joyce’s work modeled echoes Jolas. The transformative force of this new revolutionary modern literary form that Joyce symbolized for both Jolas and Stead lay in its power to wrest the word and with it modern literature’s vocalizing potential away from the standardizing machinery of modern mass-produced culture.

Seven Poor Men of Sydney is compelled by the possibility that a new kind of literature can create an alternative space or sphere for dissonant sounds and voices to be recorded. Stead’s reaction to the changed state of reality that Edison’s inventions made possible is to transform the novel into a compensatory soundscape that attempts to materialize, with a lyrical virtuosity, multiple voices, noises and sounds in a chaotic modern revolutionary language. Reading against the grain of Walter Benjamin’s melancholic reflections on the impossibility of recovering what is lost in the age of mechanical reproduction, Thomas Rice has argued that artists like Joyce reacted to the ‘talking machines’ of Edison and Berliner with ‘a new awareness of the beauty that had vanished in the silent reading of the printed text’ (150). Michele Pridmore Brown makes a similar case for Virginia Woolf’s use of the gramophone in *Between the Acts* (1941), arguing in terms that also resonate with Stead’s more political understanding of the modern novel’s potential as a revolutionary medium:

[Woolf] uses a gramophone to demonstrate how patriotic messages, inscribed on bodies through rhythm and rhyme, can transform individuals into a herd that

can be controlled by a charismatic leader. She aims in the novel to warp sound waves and so to short-circuit the herd impulse by privileging the receiver's interpretive act. (408)

While Stead makes no explicit references to the gramophone and only incidental allusions to the cinematograph in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, there are considerable parallels with Woolf and Joyce's disruption or short-circuiting of the herd impulse in modern life that suppresses critique. Early in the novel Stead makes her readers listen to the inner voice of one of the novel's central characters, Michael Baguenault. Michael compares looking at microscope slides to a 'series of poses like a cinematograph' (16), a suggestion of mechanical continuity which is immediately dismantled in his angry response to his teacher's platitudinous advice to be a captain of his soul that follows this internal monologue: 'I wish to watch the ordinary movement of life and I see only a succession of dead, shed moments without interrelation: Like a man walking through a hall of mirrors and seeing a thousand reflections of himself on every side, each one a shell of himself, and insubstantial. Time, tide, order. I cannot understand; I would go mad; I would rather believe in fairies' (17). Unable to hear or comprehend this degree of psychic fragmentation, his teacher misinterprets Michael's angry words as a symptom of Antipodean amnesia: 'It is this new country... You have no notion of history; you began yesterday and you all think you are the first men' (17).

Exemplifying Stead's exploration of the many ways in which communication breaks down, this scene captures the way *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* dwells on the chaotic ways in which meaning is made and unmade. In 'Writers Take Sides', her report on the first international congress of writers for the defense of culture', Stead described the crisis of voice consuming her generation of modern writers:

Many books of these writers in the present day remind one of the cub-reporter sent to report a rail smash in a country town. His paper waiting with presses ready and editors fuming for twenty-four hours and, hearing nothing, finally wired him, 'Report at once!' The honest young one wired back, 'Nothing to report; all is confusion here.' We are all in the position of the young reporter; all is confusion here. (453)

Finding a way of recording the confusion nevertheless remains the artist's work. If artists 'are sensitized plates, bathed and kept out of the glare of the day, to be, when exposed, indicators and interpreters', she continues, they must record, 'grasp the truth' and 'translate their environment' in pace with, or in reaction to the 'speed of development' ('Writers' 454-56). *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, as the remainder of this essay will demonstrate, is Stead's first attempt to record the confusion of voices in a form that challenged her readers to listen and translate the soundscape of Sydney into an alternative public sphere where silenced voices are marked and stored up for later critical reflection.

Listening to 'Seven Poor Men'

The central characters of the novel are two siblings, Michael and Catherine Baguenault, who begin their lives in Fisherman's bay (Watson's bay) before moving out to the stifling banality of Sydney's bush encircled suburbs. From the beginning they are out of place, alienated nomadic souls that refuse the claims of middle class convention. This leads them into the world of the other six poor men of the novel, including Joseph Baguenault, their cousin, who works at a small printery teetering on the verge of bankruptcy alongside the novelist's political philosopher, the American Baruch Mendelssohn, Tom Withers, a scheming

character who scams the printery owner, Chamberlain, who correspondingly never has enough money to pay his workers. Michael, whose brief service in the First World War leaves him traumatised, is alienated from the world of work. Instead, he finds solace in the company of the north-shore based bourgeois socialists, Marion and Fulke Folliot, whom he had met in post-war London, as well as Kol Blount, a disabled young man inclined to lyrical monologues that verge on reverie. Catherine is also drawn into the world of the Folliots, desperately clinging to the meaning and purpose their support of the seamen's strike brings into her life. But, in the end, her relentless activity sends her mad, a tragic fate that mirrors her brother Michael's decline into madness and his ultimate suicide off the cliffs of Sydney's iconic gap.

These entangled plot lines are only part of the story. Modern Sydney is also a central character, if not the main focus of the novel. The noises of modern Sydney continually disrupt the associative flow of the voices and conversations of Stead's seven poor men, as well as the frenetic consciousness of Catherine Baguenault. During interludes of free-indirect discourse, the city becomes a soundscape that estranges and unsettles easy habitation. As we see in the following passage, the noises of the city interrupt the speculative machinations of two minor characters, the venal speculator Montagu, and Chamberlain, the improvident owner of the printery that employs three of the poor men:

Typewriters tapped, loiterers and unemployed men lounged in the little park, a hydraulic lift wheezed up and down in the cart dock. The City Council took up and down tar paving which would not set on account of the heat...The whistle blew for the cranes working on the Harbour Bridge, ferries whistled, a liner coming down the harbor to berth at midday bellowed, cars rattled past...The heat increased, the machines meshed their rhythms, the coursers swerved round the track towards midday and the offices sweated. (109)

Stead's acoustically sensitized prose makes the reader listen both closely and critically to the distinct sounds of working Sydney. The soundscape takes shape through carefully calibrated dissonant sounds that refuse the pleasures of immersive aesthetic experience. The reader hears the city at one remove, filtered through the gossipy irreverent chatter of Montagu and Chamberlain.

Stead's acoustic evocation of Sydney implicitly registers the alienating effects of modern urban everyday life. The city has a rhythm of its own that is sublimely indifferent to the lives of the people that lay the tar, operate the cranes and crowd its streets. This form of critical listening aligns with Henri Lefebvre's theory of 'rhythmanalysis' as a mode of revolutionary cultural critique. Lefebvre suggests that:

'When lives are lived and hence mixed together, they distinguish themselves badly from one another. Noise, chaotic, has no rhythm. However, the attentive ear begins to separate out, to distinguish sources, to bring them back together by perceiving interactions...A certain exteriority enables the analytic intellect to function' (27).

Stead shares Lefebvre's interest in listening from a distance. For Lefebvre this meant listening from a window rather than being immersed in the noise of the street, for Stead the geographic distance required to summon the soundscape of 1920s Sydney is far greater. Each sound in the above passage marks a point of difference, an acoustic specificity that

exemplifies Stead's interest in making the sounds of Sydney audible to an international modernist literary network. She demands that her readers listen to the whistle of a Sydney ferry, the bellow of a ship's horn as it makes its way down Sydney harbor, and the mechanical drone of cranes constructing the Harbour Bridge.

Moving through a series of long lyrical monologues that give voice to the unspoken thoughts, dreams and reveries of the novel's central characters, Stead consistently presses against the limits of rational communication and the rationalizing force of capitalism. This effect is heightened by one of the novel's main settings, Chamberlain's printery. The printery functions as the primary locus of the novel's critique of the conditions of working men and the capricious greed of their employers. Joseph Baguenault reflects on his working conditions in the printery: 'His future was a procession of days, laying down line after line of clear print, with a few errors, no doubt, each year sidling into place and followed by others...' (83). These unspoken thoughts give voice to Joseph's alienation and make the reader more receptive to the visionary revolutionary monologues of his friend and co-worker Baruch Mendelssohn, who urges Joe to speak up for himself. Such autonomous self-representation is, however, beyond Joe's inarticulate reach. His voice is drowned out by the relentless rhythms of the printery and his capacity to resist stifled by hunger and dependency on the vagaries of his improvident employer. As he later poignantly observes:

I'm a letter of ordinary script. Events are printed with me face downwards. I will be thrown away when I am used up and there will be an 'I' the less. No one will know. The presses will go on printing; plenty more have been made to replace me. History is at a standstill with me. (316)

Joe's grimly accurate assessment of his historical legacy is indicative of the novel's sustained movement against the grain of progress. Characters and plot lines develop in anti-teleological allusive patterns that demand the reader attend closely to the transition between internal and external voices and soundscapes. As Dorothy Green observes in her early seminal essay on the novel, Catherine Baguenault's quotation from Nietzsche— 'They are alien, so alien that they cannot speak their difference to each other' – could serve as an epigraph for *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (41). Yet this resonant exploration of the affects of alienation often comes at the expense of the novel's description of the destitute conditions of Sydney's working poor. Instead the reader moves through a confusion of voices of the minimally developed central characters, Catherine and her brother Michael, their cousin Joseph and the novel's two political and philosophical monologists, Baruch Mendelssohn and Kol Blount.

The novel begins with the tortured adolescent reveries and splenetic outpourings of Michael Baguenault that express his resistance to the demands of family and religion. When Michael falls in love it quickly ends in tragedy: enlisting to fight in World War One to impress the indifferent object of his affection, he propels himself into the next phase of his life—his friendship with the Folliots and his continuing agonized relationship with his sister Catherine. Michael and Catherine's mutual excoriation of social convention inevitably sounds a discordant note in the midst of the chorus of bourgeois radicalism that surrounds them. The only voices that they choose to hear are, in Michael's case, the visionary lyricism of Kol Blount, whose physical paralysis mirrors Michael's psychological immobilization, and Baruch Mendelssohn, whose monologic intensity momentarily penetrates Catherine's selective blurring of inner and outer experience. These moments of connection are, however, necessarily fleeting deferrals of Catherine's ultimate descent into madness and Michael's suicide—nihilistic actions that, as the final paragraph of the novel observes, 'cannot have a

sequel' (319). What remains at the end of the novel is the impulse to return, repeat, and make sense of the past, a bearing witness to voices now silenced by the roar of the 'pacific sea': a recursive impulse captured by the novel's incomplete concluding sentence, as Joseph Baguenault begins to tell his wife 'the history of him, Joseph, of Michael and Catherine, his cousins, and of many others who surely live no more': 'We were seven friends, at that time, yes, seven poor men....' (319).

Joseph's determined mediation of voices from beyond the grave aligns with Paul Giles' recent observation that the strength of Stead's work resides 'in its capacity to situate itself in between, rather than within, different national domains' (346). Out of the confusion of voices that build to a crescendo in the final pages of the novel, Joe wills the beginning of a history of the seven poor men into being, an incomplete transition materialized by the broken sentence that concludes the novel. Ending on an opening, the novel locates itself in the space between the spoken and unspoken, a space that simultaneously confronts the reader with the limits and possibilities of mediation.

Joe's desire to record and communicate also articulates a drive to store the voice outside the body that the novel gestures towards and the gramophone record contemporaneously materialized. Citing Rilke's reflections on the gramophone in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Friedrich Kittler suggests that the possibility of capturing the voice outside the body initially signified a revolution in reading and writing practices. As Rilke observed:

We were confronting, as it were, a new and infinitely delicate point in the texture of reality, from which something far greater than ourselves, yet indescribably immature, seemed to be appealing to us as if seeking help. At the time and all through the intervening years I believed that that independent sound, taken from us and preserved outside of us, would be unforgettable. That it turned out otherwise is the cause of my writing the present account. As will be seen, what impressed itself on my memory most deeply was not the sound from the funnel but the markings traced on the cylinder; these made a most definite impression. (39)

Rilke's play on the double sense of 'unforgettable', Kittler argues, is not as significant as the author's captivation by the technological revolutions of reading that the phonograph and gramophone augured. According to Kittler, Rilke's focus on the 'markings traced on the cylinder' registers a desire to decode 'physiological traces whose strangeness transcends all human voices' (43). The voice alienated from the subject and reified in a non-mimetic form, Kittler argues, indicates a fundamental shift in the texture of reality in 'the founding age of media' (43).

Stead's neutral recording of her characters' voices in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* resonates with Rilke's interest in the non-mimetic inscription of voice on the surface of a gramophone record or phonographic cylinder and exemplifies David Trotter's distillation of 'modernism's axiom or formula' that 'literature as (recording) medium [came] before literature as a (representational) art' (5). Like Joyce, Stead disembodies the voices of her characters, rendering them thing-like in a manner that insistently privileges the recording of the heard over the seen. Contemporary reviewers were also quick to note the aural, poetic quality of the novel and its refusal of the conventions of prose description. Writing of the novel as an exemplar of the 'Australian Moderns' in the *New York Times* in 1935, Jane Spence Southron observed:

Over and above we have the movement and liveliness for which words—or musical sounds—are the finest mediums. Of color she is chary; and deliberate descriptions of scenery are almost non-existent in the novel. The beauty of Sydney's harbor, for insistence, is taken for granted. The famous 'Gap', near its entrance, is the scene of the culminating tragedy; there is a picnic up the Lane Cove River; and the ferries that carry residents from point to point are constantly mentioned. Place is, however, subservient to human interest (6-7).

Southron's stress on the mediation of sound is also significant for this essay's reading of *Seven Poor Men* because it links Stead's prioritizing of the acoustic over the visual to the novel's primary concern with the communication of a universal human experience that transcends geographic limitation.

The Limits of Communication

In an interview in 1935 Stead describes her interest in the multi-channeled nature of human communication. Recording the rhythms of conversation, its intimate banalities and revelatory moments opens up a space for new ways of attuning the reader's ear to the peculiar traits and experiences of character:

Conversation is diffuse, disjointed, full of popular sayings and banalities local in time and place which do not express character at all, or very little.

My purpose, in making characters eloquent, is the expression of two psychological truths; first, that everyone has a wit superior to his everyday wit, when discussing his personal problems, and the most depressed housewife, for example, can talk like Medea about her troubles; second, that everyone, to a greater or lesser extent, is a fountain of passion, which is turned by circumstances of birth or upbringing into conventional channels. (Rowley, 130)

The superior wit silenced by the banal effusions of everyday speech is a passionate flow, an inner eloquence that deviates wildly from mimetic expression, yet can still find its way into the conventional channels of the printed page and narrative prose.

Stead's interest in the productive dissonance between the banality of everyday speech and the passionate surges of inner eloquence is most poignantly dramatized in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* by Michael Baguenault's struggle to be heard above the conventional rhythms of polite conversation and rituals of bourgeois suburban life. Whenever he confronts orthodoxy, be it theological or political or national, Michael rails against its suppressive impulses. As a child he preferred to wander alone 'beside the sea, in the wind, in the bush rushing with storm where he could divine or imagine presences, voices, miracles':

At such times he would feel a rush of saliva in the mouth, and his jaws would work themselves as if it were imperious for him to cry aloud, to make a speech, to chant. And when he was alone at night, drowsy, he heard long conversations carried between his teeth and his tongue, between the towel and the washstand, the mosquito and the ceiling he was hitting. Whenever he stood on one foot gazing into the garden, or propped himself against the door looking dreamily about him, or pored a long time over some stuff or surface examining its grain, he was listening with half his mind to these interminable, stupid conversations which went on inside him. (15)

This passage typifies Stead's preoccupation with transmitting sensory impressions that intimate rather than describe character. The emphasis here is on the physical process of giving voice and attuning one's ear to the peculiar rhythms of a character's speech, whether as interior monologue or in dialogue. Speech comes through the body, throat, mouth, tongue and teeth. Registering a debt to Joyce's balance between internal and external vocalization, the body grounds and localizes the associative drift of Michael's inner conversations.

Stead's idiosyncratic and enduring preoccupation with what Fiona Morrison has described as the 'motion capture of speech' is also apparent here. As Morrison argues, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is an instance of 'the expatriate modernist woman's worldly recuperation of her colonial hometown': 'Speech is the most intense form of action in any Stead novel, trumping plot or purpose or narration. It was speech that carried material vitality' (8). Drawing parallels with the 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism' (1929), Morrison contends that Stead's 'motion capture' of Michael's speech in *Seven Poor Men* is akin to Breton's account of the revelatory force of the unfiltered monologue, liberated from critical self-consciousness and transcribed automatically in a form 'akin to spoken thought' (23). Yet I would argue that Stead is also interested here and throughout the novel in speech that does not automatically flow, broken sentences, conversations that go nowhere, and voices that fall on deaf ears. Like the gramophone that doesn't work properly, Stead's Sydney, with its bankrupt printers, homeless souls, gaudy shops and smug middle class revolutionaries, is both a product of technological progress, and a dysfunctional machine that signals its own potential obsolescence.

Michael Baguenault embodies this precariousness in his irretrievable alienation from the normalizing order of work, family life and ritualized sociability. As one of his fellow Communists describes him in a conversation overheard by Michael's sister Catherine: 'Something in Michael is unhinged or missing, and I think for good; perhaps it was never there. He's one of the derelicts left by the flood-tide of war' (132). Comparing Michael to his sister, another member of the group observes that Catherine is 'a firebell ringing', while 'Michael is its echo in an empty house' (132). Appearing in the doorway Catherine proceeds 'in a ringing voice' to tear away at the casual cruelty underpinning this seemingly civil rational exchange:

...you see a single gesture and you build a sage out of it; you see a person faint and you invent a debile universe; a toothache and humanity, a lazaret: from a crooked bone invent a crooked genus!...Michael is better than I, but it is all overlaid, and by all you chatterers. You tear each other to pieces, and all in kindness. Michael burrows into the earth, and he might go too deep. I fly off the handle. You are killing us both! (132)

Catherine's passionate, slightly unhinged speech dismantles the clichéd generalizations and false rationality of her smug fellow middle class revolutionaries. Her odd usage—'debile', for example, for weak or fragile—and fractured exclamatory speech disrupts the rhythms of the conversation.

Aptly, Stead associated fighting and passionate speech with creative thought. She observed of herself:

I have naturally the truculent mind which solves problems, while fighting, (fighting the material or fighting the problems of another)...This churning is accompanied with passions, the shooting forth of ideas both germane and accidental, with fighting, with nightmare...Now in this turmoil, there is anger, will, rebuttal, violence of all sorts; and it is this violence which is part and parcel of and perhaps helps to produce the artistic idea (193).

In the above scene, however, Catherine's fighting words hit up against the smooth surface of Marion Folliot, who with her husband Fulke typifies the worst kind of bourgeois hypocrisy. Catherine's voice falls on deaf ears, her creative force and brilliance is simply swallowed by the party machine, represented by Marion's silencing patronizing response. While conceding that Catherine is of course the authority on her own brother, Marion then gets on with the business of being a worthy helpmeet to the real visionary, her husband, by announcing her departure for the 'club' to prepare for his next inspirational oration to the working men of Sydney.

In the wake of this conversation Catherine oscillates wildly between adulation of Fulke and anger towards Baruch Mendelssohn, who challenges the grounds of her belief in Fulke as the embodiment of the Communist ideal:

'If I must say what I think,' said Baruch, 'they are romantics. They would be delighted to have a police raid. Ever since their marriage they have had nothing but splendid adventures with the police and frontier guards, and have got off scot-free, of course. Fulke's father is a rich amateur collector of paintings. Marion's people are high up in the Government service in England. There are no romantic scuffles with a policeman in the life of the working-people. It riles me when I see Fulke get up before a body of bleak faced, whiskered, half-starved men and get off his cheese-cake eloquence and well-bred witticisms. I don't care if he has passed a merry quarter-hour with a traffic policeman in Moscow and discussed breakfast with Lenin.' (148)

Baruch's stark assessment of the Folliotics brutally cuts through Catherine's passionate defenses. He also provides one of the clearest snapshots of how she appears from the outside, a rare visual in a stream of voices that speak of and about her: 'He looked at her as he knew her, a friend of the Folliotics, dark, furious, thin, poor by choice, a woman of revolution without a barricade' (144). But Catherine is unable or unwilling to make sense of his words. When she eventually speaks, the stream of words she utters is an agonized vocalization of the chaotic internal reverie that his words have inspired:

My character is to undergo. Everyone and everything I meet is a further instrument...Stability, that is the only character we have never – but we are always in that state of delirium, folly, passion or drunkenness, which is our life. Such is a life without time, it is out of the presumptions of clocks... (150)

Baruch, in turn, does not respond to what Catherine says, but to the way her voice registers something that transcends the limitations of the banal world of bourgeois radicalism in which she has become immersed. He calls her a 'pure artist' and urges her to flee Australia, to go anywhere where her irritable brilliance might be heard and her potential for political martyrdom realized (151).

Reading the above scene and correspondence, it is hard to imagine how Stead's biographer, Hazel Rowley, concluded that Stead's involvement with radical leftwing politics in Europe during the 1930s was incidental to her work. As Brigid Rooney, and more recently, Simon During, have both argued, Stead's communism is, to quote During, 'crucial to her writing and to her claim to global canonicity' (81). As Rooney notes, in the early 1930s Stead was heavily involved with the Popular Front, culminating in the International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture held in Paris in 1935 and attended by Louis Aragon, Andre Breton, Paul Eluard, Andre Malraux, Bertolt Brecht and many other modernist luminaries (81). As secretary to the English delegation, Stead wrote a detailed account of the Congress and edited highlights of the speeches for the *Left Review* and yet, as Rooney argues, Rowley insisted that this was yet another instance of Stead's 'political sympathies' being 'motivated by her adulation of left-wing men' (Rooney, 84). In this case, Rowley dismisses the significance of Stead's invitation to participate in the Congress as an indulgent act of friendship on the part of Ralph Fox, the author of the influential posthumously published *The Novel and The People* (1937). Fox, Rowley assumes, admired the fact that *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, her novel about struggling workers strangled by their material circumstances, contained solid Marxist dialogue' (170). This misconstruction of *Seven Poor Men* as a formulaic echo of Fox's Marxist theory discounts Stead's primary focus and persistent technical and philosophical interrogation of the conventions of bourgeois false consciousness and the limits of human communication.

Of all her novels, *Seven Poor Men* is the most resistant to literal biographical reading. Stead removed herself from the scene in this novel and insisted that her characters were 'not actually drawn from the life' (Rowley 130). There is no didactic omniscient narrator in *Seven Poor Men*, instead the characters speak, often in long digressive monologues, a 'mode of distantiation' that Simon During argues positions Stead 'outside the outside' (83). Catherine embodies this double alienation in the novel. She resists Baruch's urgings to embrace his version of the Communist real, ultimately preferring to retreat into an internal reverie in which it is still possible to imagine an idealized collective that can transcend the mechanical rhythms of clock time:

We are willing to cast away our life because we are always at the end of it, every moment is an experience. We are willing to begin anew because our strength is always fresh. We are insensible to great disasters, because we have met them often and often on our path in company with death; they are old acquaintances. We feel small things so sharp because they mock our heroics. (150)

Catherine's insistence here on the revolutionary potential of the dream where voices can merge into an orphic unity resonates with Walter Benjamin's account of the first wave of Surrealism as a 'dialectics of intoxication':

...it seemed the most integral, conclusive, absolute of movements. Everything with which it came into contact was integrated. Life only seemed worth living where the threshold between waking and sleeping was worn away in everyone as by the steps of multitudinous images flooding back and forth, language only seemed itself where sound and image, image and sound interpenetrated with automatic precision and such felicity that no chink was left for the penny-in-slot called 'meaning'. (178-9)

This interpenetration of sound and image, image and sound in subconscious acts of expression liberated from sense and time was also central to the Surrealist inspired mission of *transition*. Given this parallel, we can read *transition* and the work of the modernist avant-garde on which it drew as part of the conditions of possibility for Stead's modernist inspired experimentation with sound and voice at this seminal moment in her writing life.

Returning to *transition* and the Parisian milieu with which this essay began, Stead's acoustic mediation of modern Sydney detaches it from the limitations of a specific geography. The novel is literally written from a distance and demands a corresponding critical distance from its readers. This is not a homely novel. It estranges and challenges the reader to read through the ear, and by so doing elicits a more embodied response along the lines that Garrett Stewart describes in *Reading Voices*:

The question is no longer the presence (or index) of voice in text but, instead, the presence *to* evocalization...No longer a metonymy of voice as *origin*, the idea of an 'embodied' voice emerges as just the opposite: signaling the very *destination* of the text in the reading act, the medium of its silent voice, sounding board rather than source. (3)

Read through this critical lens, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* enacts an open ended process of mediation that moves Sydney into the reader's mind as they read, a process that is resolutely indifferent to whether that reading takes place in Paris, New York, London, Sydney or elsewhere.

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