

## **SHE CASTS HERSELF AS REVOLUTIONARY: PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY IN *THE MAN WHO LOVED CHILDREN***

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This paper explores how Christina Stead's contact with Marxism and her reading of Nietzsche combine to shape the revolutionary subject in *The Man Who Loved Children*. This seemingly unlikely discursive crossing not only demonstrates Stead's practical engagement with and protofeminist deployment of master narratives, but also prefigures contemporary debates about subjectivity and agency within postmodernist theory.

Christina Stead's contact with currents of radical discourse and activity in Europe and America through three decades — the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s — has often been acknowledged but has rarely been the focus of detailed investigation. Hazel Rowley's impressive biography, for example, has recently drawn fire from critics who feel that it neglects and even undermines the significance of Marxism for Stead's work (eg. Wilding 8). Rowley's argument is based on a dichotomising paradigm: in opposition to the intellectual and masculinist world of Marxist politics is the vital principle saturating Stead's fiction. According to Rowley, this principle — manifested also in the writings of Stead's friend, communist activist and literary critic, Ralph Fox — is informed more by Nietzsche than by Marx (Rowley 253-5). The implied opposition here between Nietzsche and Marx takes insufficient cognisance of the genuinely eclectic spirit of the modernist avantgarde. As the work of Raymond Williams suggests, for many intellectuals of Stead's generation the spirit of modernism, 'in its most active and creative years', allowed for crossings and connections between anti-bourgeois discourses that now seem irrevocably opposed (Williams 3-7). In *The Man Who Loved Children*, both Marxist and Nietzschean discourses are crucial. A Marxist world view underpins the narrative's dialectical apprehension of power relations and change; but the narrative makes vigorous use of Nietzschean discourse in imaging the ground of a revolutionary subjectivity. In order to re-read Stead's novel for its harnessing and use of these radical discourses, I make an apparent digression into contemporary queer theory to trace the way the novel responds to the usual theoretical impasse of free will versus determinism. The notion of 'performance' is the means by which the narrative articulates and bypasses this problem: through 'performance', *The Man Who Loved Children* effects a radical reversioning of the individual subject. This reversioning has utopian implications for the social realm. In *The Man Who Loved Children*, Stead recognises but then quite deliberately casts aside the obstacles presented by simple determinism to individual and thence social change.

In *The Man Who Loved Children*, the chosen terrain of political struggle is the family; in Marxist theory, the family is the engine-room of social reproduction. In Stead's novel the Pollit family is a crucible of origins, a machine of reproduction of American patriarchal capitalism in the era of Roosevelt's New Deal. A Marxist review of the book when it first came out in 1940 emphasised its representation

of class, suggesting it was a novelisation of Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. (Schneider 19). Nowadays, however, feminists critics have highlighted the importance of gender in Stead's novel. *The Man Who Loved Children* speaks ahead of its time to contemporary feminists and Marxists – in almost Althusserian terms – of the ideological interpellation of the patriarchal subject (Althusser 160-165). Louisa Pollit struggles to emerge into a realm of freedom from the determining prison of the bourgeois family. But Stead's use of the *bildungsroman* form immediately suggests certain problems. The novel of emergence – as well as the *kunstlerroman* (emergence of the artist) – have historically been male identified literary forms. More problematically, does the emergence of an autonomous individual in the *bildungsroman* bespeak a liberal view of the subject? (See Midalia 89). Stead's use of this genre seems to militate against her novel's materialist understanding of the social. What does Louie's struggle and provisionally successful emergence imply about concepts like individual autonomy, agency, artistic creativity and liberated being?

Additionally, the idea of performance allows for a reading of Louisa Pollit's struggle as the figuration and declaration of performance within the literary field. If the novel is considered as a cultural performance, with real cultural effects, then rather than functioning as a mere passive ground or resource to be used in constructing the artist's biography, it becomes a performance of the artist's struggle within and against literary precursors, enacting the struggle for cultural recognition. In other words, and referring back to my title ('She casts herself as revolutionary'), Stead's novel not only inscribes but also performs, through a polysemic act of self-casting, the author's symbolic emergence from provinciality and oblivion into a wider cultural space.

'Performance' is a very fruitful idea in thinking about Stead's representation of character. Stead's fiction is notorious for its larger than life, overbearing talkers. These talkers are performers who dominate their fictional stages, threatening to overwhelm not only their fictional listeners but also, potentially, their reader. In *The Man Who Loved Children*, the world-weary Henny Pollit, for example, is one such performer. Her memorable tirades against the tyranny of being Sam's 'kitchenmaid and body servant' seem to perform her, almost against her will. Sam Pollit, the object of Henny's fury and of Louie's rebellion, is one of Stead's most voluble, fascinating, charismatic and exasperating characters. He is a mesmerising performer. It is through Sam's performance, through its compulsive repetitions – its performativity – that patriarchal significations are destabilised in the narrative.

It is necessary here to distinguish between the terms 'performativity' and 'performance'. Though related, they signal quite differently about the relation between individuals and language. 'Performativity' has recently become salient in queer theory as a result of Judith Butler's work on gender and sex. But, there are important precursors for Butler's work, such as Derrida's meditation in *Margins of Philosophy* on the work of linguist, J.L. Austin. In his book, *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin argues that the performative is a special form of utterance. Unlike an utterance that just describes something, the performative actually performs an action. The utterance *I do*, if it is spoken in the course of the marriage ceremony,

performs the social act of the marriage contract. More mundanely, words like *I bet*, *I dare you*, *I challenge you*, uttered in the appropriate context, do not simply make statements, they perform actions (Austin 4-11).

For Derrida, who takes up Austin's work, the performative utterance does not manifest an individual's ability to originate and enact social force, but reveals the constitutive power of signification and the instability of that signification. Whereas for Austin the speaker in the marriage ceremony performs an action in saying *I do*, Derrida works the category in reverse: the *I do* is not performed by the speaker, the *I do* performs the speaker (Derrida 321-2). The performative is where subjects are enacted through discourse. This of course deconstructs concepts of originality and agency. But Derrida also shows that because it is the place of repetition of discourse, a repetition that could fail, the performative reveals the instability of the signifying process. This potential failure of the performative would interrupt the smoothness and self-evidence of reproduction. The performative is the place where denaturalisation can occur and where *differance* can be produced, in and through the very process of a compulsive repetition (Derrida 325-7).

This idea of performativity can be applied to *The Man Who Loved Children*, where the spectacle of Sam's repetitive performances creates the scene for the destabilisation of patriarchy. Two theatrical moments in the novel illustrate this point. The first concerns the 'corroboree' scene in which the extended Pollit family gathers at Tohoga House to welcome Sam on his return from Malaya. Jonathan Arac shows that this scene amalgamates two of the narrative's precursors — Mark Twain and Charles Dickens — in the composite figure of the paterfamilias, Samuel Clemens Pollit. Arac reads this move as a cultural refunctioning which implicitly critiques the liberal humanist tradition (Arac 175ff). The 'corroboree' scene thus presents the spectacle of generational cultural reproduction. This reproduction installs the primacy of the paterfamilias, who establishes his own and his family's authenticity through a dramatisation of a myth of origins. This myth involves the repetition of a scene from Dickens's *Great Expectations*. In the novel, several generations of the Pollits ritually exhibit themselves as bombastic performers. It is indicative of the character of Stead's own more modernist project that the Pollits' chosen milieu is that of popular rather than high art forms. This characterises the Pollits — in contrast to the rebel daughter, Louie — as mouthpieces of a clichéd demagoguery rather than as critical practitioners of 'art'. Sam admirably declaims Aunt Jo's banal verse and patronisingly suggests that 'Looloo' might also turn out such a rhyme. This provokes his adolescent daughter's contemptuous resentment and resistance. Henny, true to form, had retired to another room and an offended Louie slips out to drink from the 'brackish well' of her hate. Meanwhile they all entreat the paternal grandfather, Charles, to do his 'stunt'. The stunt is an imitation of Dickens, an act he had worked up himself from *Great Expectations*. Louie returns just in time to witness the grandfather's performance:

The little ones sat round like idols in front of the throng or on their relatives' laps, with carved smiles on their faces and round, floating eyes. The old man, with nothing but a red bandanna, which he ordinarily used to brush off his snuff, became alternately Mr Wemmick and The Aged, Old Grandfather

Charlie, through some trap door of the imagination, disappeared until the act was over; when he suddenly popped up again with a here-we-are-again, crowing, and stumbling into his little buck-and-wing dance (276).

The scene of the grandfather's absurd magical act which bedazzles the children functions as placement and parody of Sam's performances throughout the novel. Their conjuring tricks suggest the seductive veneer of patriarchy. It is an interlude which bespeaks patriarchy as an act supported by the machinery and contrivance of the stage. It performatively exercises ritualistic power to enchant its child audience, to establish its 'reality', even as it is denaturalised before the text's implied critical reader. Revealing the apparatus of reproduction, the narrative constitutes Pollitry as performative, as a spectacle to be superseded. Old Charlie's act is followed by 'Cousin Sid doing his Yacht Club Boys, Mammy-Minstrel Act', Uncle Leonard's song, and a ritual 'Snake dance' in which all the Pollits form a human chain to dance and weave around the garden and house. The jubilant human chain figures the snakelike movement through Eden of Sam's own recurrent dreams of snakes.

The meaning of his snake dreams eludes Sam, but Louie makes use of them in her 'Snake-Man' play: *Tragos Herpes Rom*, a theatrically staged counter-performance, a 'play within a play', which turns the symbolic tables on Sam and prefigures the novel's theatrical finale. The novel's finale is strangely Oedipal, comprised of a cathartic sequence of dumbstruck daughter, blinded father and poisoned mother. Finally though there's the daughter's irrevocable departure from the family underworld. Other critics have discussed the Oedipal character of these events (eg. Sheridan 42-54; Boone 537), but I want to focus attention on how 'performance' is the vehicle of Louie's emergence from the Oedipal family.

The use of 'performance' necessitates a brief turn to a debate between Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick concerning the political uses of performativity. In Judith Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble*, gender is an act which is performative. For Butler — who co-opts performativity in theorising gendered and sexed subjectivity — the masquerade of drag dislocates fixed ideas about what is natural in sex and gender, and disrupts the presumed coherence of heterosexuality (Butler *Gender* 141). Taking up Butler's ideas about performativity, Eve Sedgwick focuses on the transformative possibilities of individual performance. Can an individual subject's *performance* potentially exceed the performative in its regulative, reproductive sense? Sedgwick finds Austin's emphasis on the exemplar of the marital 'I do' intriguing. She suggests an alternative formulation, 'Shame on you', to conjure up the experience of social censure attracted by a de-formed, or queer identity. Sedgwick sees shame — the shame attached to performance — as potentially linked to a differentiating process of identity formation (Sedgwick 8). Shame, with its blush contagiously suffusing the skin, is felt at the moment of performance. Via the skin, it directs the performer inward but also outward. Performance produces the pride and embarrassment of self-display (Sedgwick 5). Performance is thus potentially transformational when it signals the difference of identity. But in her subsequent book, *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler warns against reviving notions of the self-knowing, voluntaristic subject (Butler *Bodies*

234). The debate between Butler and Sedgwick suggests that one should be guarded in thinking through 'performativity' as a category somehow enabling of a utopian future. The question of agency re-emerges: to what extent can an individual, who knowingly sets out to perform a radical escape, escape being 'performed' by prior and disavowed discourses or experiences? Or can the individual perform at least an interruption to the apparently seamless system of ideological reproduction?

I would like to suggest such a possibility of interruption to patriarchy via the shame of individual performance is represented in *The Man Who Loved Children*. In her rebellion against Sam, there is an interplay of shame and performance which leads Louie to emerge through the shame of her difference. Where Sam's guilt and incomprehension interrupt and deny his daughter's identification, Louie's shame and performance enable her differential identity formation. Driven, as Susan Sheridan suggests, by repressed desires to penetrate his daughter's sexual secrets, Sam becomes irrationally angry about a scandalous newspaper report of incest between a local father and daughter (Sheridan 45). Identifying with the father, Sam completely misreads this report as malicious persecution of an innocent man. But Louie potently combines the story with the three books Sam had given her, one of which is Shelley's *The Cenci*. Louie scripts her own counter-version of the Oedipal drama, offering a truth which Sam — and patriarchy — do not recognise. Louie presents her play to Sam on his 40th birthday. She writes it in code, in a Latin-sounding language of her own invention. All over in one violent act, *Tragos Herpes Rom* performs from the daughter's viewpoint the fatal drama of the snakeman father's incestuous and smothering desire for his daughter.

*Tragos Herpes Rom* is often identified as the strategic and illuminating centrepiece of Louie's battle against Sam's dominion and it represents the flowering of her adolescent art. It is a thoroughgoing performance, putting Sam, for once, in the position of audience, and co-opting the children as performers. Louie's play is situated in a long tradition of subversive political theatre. Akin to *Hamlet*'s play within a play which displays the scene of regicide and incest before the usurping king himself, Louie's play dares Sam to recognise himself. Like the travelling players in *Hamlet*, the other children are unaware of the full import of their performance, but chorus-like respond excitedly to the air of rebellion. As noted by Richlin (281), the precise moment of escalation of the father-daughter confrontation coincides with Louie's personal intervention as performing protagonist. She declares:

...*timer este rom y este heinid pe ibid fill....*"Fear to be a father and to be hated by your daughter" (407-8).

Louie's movement from playwright to actor sharpens the political drama of the performance. The coded language of the play effects a specific relationship between the playwright and her audience. Stage directions written in English, inserted within the coded dialogue, remind the reader that for the duration of the performance bodies and voices rather than words carry the significance. It is crucial that the code prevents Sam's immediate understanding: Louie pointedly

refuses to surrender the right to be heard in full, and also asserts authorial control over interpretation. By imperiously locking Sam out of the meaning-making process, Louie makes him struggle simply to grasp its literal intent. Its initial obscurity shields the play against, or at least defers, Sam's usual ridicule: it both wards off and produces the shame of performance. Thus, in an imitatively colonising gesture — a Zarathustran gesture — Louie imperialistically asserts symbolic superiority over her father. The play dramatises the imperialistic power of the cultural sign — as Sam himself has wielded it — its ability to exclude and hierarchise, and to constitute subjectivity according to the rules. But in establishing and deploying the sign as arbitrary rather than natural and inevitable, the play simultaneously rehearses a potential for revising the Oedipal narrative of the father. Sam, who relies on a belief in the natural and self-evident relation between words and their meanings, between the signifier and the signified, is disoriented:

After this striking scene in double-dutch, Sam, looking with pale annoyance on Louie, asked what the devil was the use of writing in Choctaw. What language was it? Why couldn't it be in English?  
'Did Euripides write in English?' asked Louie with insolence, but at the same time she placed the translation in front of her father, and he was able to follow the *Tragedy of the Snake-Man, or Father* (408).

Despite these efforts, Sam still fails to recognise its revision of his world. Louie's staging of this 'melodramatic' script, while not sufficient to produce the change she desires, paves the way for her final scripting of the end of the 'family drama'.

Stead's novel grapples with the difficulty of emergence of a revolutionary subjectivity, choosing to end, in Sheridan's words, on a lyrical 'grace note' (Sheridan 54). Indeed, its final imagery of the transformed body and the walk around the world serve as an interruption to patriarchy, and to the closure of the novel form. The brief optimism of the 1930s — which now seems naive — is figured in this conclusion. To Western intellectuals in the 1930s, especially those who, like Stead, were steeped in radical discourses, the impetus of the avantgarde was as much attended by the erotic energy of *The Communist Manifesto* as by *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. *The Man Who Loved Children* co-opts the critical and transformative energies of both books. It is certainly Marxist in spirit, insofar as it exercises a dialectical critique of the patriarchal economy. But Louie's individual supersession of that economy is aided by a Nietzschean performance. Her performance scripts a subjectivity which is mobile and experimental. While emancipation is only ever provisionally achieved in Stead's fiction, its lyrical representation functions as prophecy. Momentarily — in the end of the novel — an unrepresentable post-revolution future is prefigured. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx indicates the inadequacy of language to represent an as yet unrealised future:

There the phrase went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the phrase (439; cited in Eagleton 214).

The absence of any definitive representation of a post revolutionary future in Marx's work is mirrored in Stead's novels, too. *The Man Who Loved Children*

suggests but does not dwell upon such a place or state of being. In her struggle to emerge from the patriarchal family, Louie first proclaims and then performs her literary kinship with Nietzsche's figure of Zarathustra. Not only does this strategy further the text's interrogation of complacent middle class morality, but Nietzschean discourse becomes a vital resource for the scripting of Louie's increasingly sophisticated and effective counter performances. So while the momentum of revolutionary change is initiated through performativity, through the text's destabilisation of normative, patriarchal values, beyond that it is the body of the performer that speaks to possible alternative futures, alternative subjects. In Nietzsche's words in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

You say 'I' and you are proud of this word. But greater than this — although you will not believe in it — is your body and its great intelligence, which does not say 'I' but performs 'I' (61-2).

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