

HOUSE ARREST: DOMESTIC SPACE IN CHRISTINA STEAD'S FICTION

Jennifer A. McDonell

'Home' and its attendant tropes were thickly overdetermined for Christina Stead. Houses and homes, both literal and figurative, are a preoccupation, not only in the fiction, but also in such non-fictional writings as 'A View of the Homestead' (1970) (written on her return to Australia after a forty year expatriation), the title playing on her own name, Stead, which derives from the OE root, *stede*, meaning place. In this extended meditation on home and homelessness, she reflects on her childhood homes and her wandering life to conclude somewhat optimistically that the dislocations of home enable art ('View of the Homestead' 130). Stead frequently insisted that she and her husband were home to each other, thus making heterosexuality her psychological home. 'When I was with him', she explained in an interview with Robert Drewe, 'we lived in twenty hotels in six countries and yet I was at home wherever he was'.¹ In a more sociological vein, she offers, in an open letter to the Women's Movement, published in *Partisan Review* in 1979, ideas about alternative household organisation along communal lines as a solution to suburban loneliness and the supremacy of 'the one-man family' (272). As a colonial woman writer of a colonising race, 'home' and 'exile', not surprisingly, were ambivalent concepts for her, a point discussed in detail by Judith Kegan Gardiner in her study of exile in the work of Stead, Lessing and Rhys (134-35). When Stead was writing *The Man Who Loved Children* in 1937-1938, there was homelessness on a mass scale in Europe, and in America, demographic uprooting as a result of the Depression. Just as George Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House* was an allegory of 'cultured, leisured Europe before the war' ('Heartbreak House and Horseback Hall' in *Heartbreak House* 7), Stead's representation of the two Pollit homes in *The Man Who Loved Children*, the rambling, disintegrating Tohoga House, and the more economically impoverished Spa House, is rooted in the political dynamics of America in the anxious, depressed pre-World War II years. Even this short inventory suggests how vast a web of intersecting concerns surrounds Stead's representations of house and home. My silence on these matters is not meant to deny the importance of these resonances in Stead's fiction. But in order to check these proliferating connotations of home, I will confine myself today to the two Pollit homes in *The Man Who Loved Children*, before moving on to consider ways in which actual living space, folded back on itself, becomes metaphorised in the novel. In keeping with our topos of spatiality, I want to offer some speculations about the way gender and power, particularly economic power, are interrelated through Stead's recreation of domestic space.

Apart from Sam Pollit's imperialist excursion to Malaya and Henrietta Pollit's trips to town, the drama of the novel is claustrophobically confined to the two houses, Tohoga House in Georgetown, a suburb of Washington DC ('the heart of Democratic Athens' as Sam calls it [54]), which was based on Stead's first childhood home, Lydham Hill, and Spa House, situated in a deteriorating section of Eastport, Maryland near Annapolis (based on the Stead family's

second home in Watsons Bay, Sydney). The houses are not mere background but part of the subject of the novel, and their physical details are rendered with scrupulous, even overwhelming particularity. While figurative versions of house and home proliferate wildly, each construction is particular to the individual experiencing subject. For Henny, Spa House is a Gothic space—'an ugly old castle comedown, with its rooms upon rooms and unkempt grounds' (331), with 'decaying timber and dirty panes' (332), 'a leprous sink' and 'wormy floor' (333). She declares that it is 'a stinking tenement: the animals have better cages' (335). To Henny, Toboga House is like a diseased body (45) or 'a madhouse' (90), but from Sam's perspective it is a 'Garden of Eden' (82), an 'island in the sky' (56), a utopia (84-5), a New Jerusalem. He builds a dream of an ideal community around the houses; at Toboga House 'he would make a nest, a haven, a palace, a university, all on his own plot of ground and this phalanstery of a house' (288).

By contrast, the home is a prison to 'the house jailed and child-chained' mother (72). It is Henny's 'cell' suggesting that she is a prisoner of a self-enclosed domesticity (45), a trope extended by Louie when she calls her father a 'mouthy jailer' (501). This metaphoric identification of the family home with a state penal institution is enough to suggest that the concept of 'domestic space' contained in the subtitle to this article cannot be thought of in isolation from, or in opposition to, the public world. Rather, Stead's fiction is political in so far as it contests this division, a point extended in different ways by such commentators on Stead's work as Susan Sheridan, Diana Brydon, Terry Sturm and Michael Wilding.² The warring parents blame each other for the family's economic and emotional disintegration, but the novel as a whole takes as its subject, not any particular individual, but the institution of the family itself, whose power, regulated by the laws of commerce and class, acts as a constraint on relations between the sexes. To apply a distinction borrowed from Benjamin, we might say that Stead's fiction offers a politicised aesthetics rather than an aestheticised politics.³

Stead's politicised aesthetics of the particular refuses the repression of content and resists aestheticising, formalising and abstracting questions of politics and language. It is not surprising then that Stead's text largely resists phenomenological readings of domestic space of the kind proposed by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard proposes that 'the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind' (6). The 'house', he goes on to say, 'shelters daydreaming, the house allows one to dream in peace'. Stead shares Bachelard's feeling for the poetic depth of the house and for the psychological elasticity of the image, but overall *The Man Who Loved Children* represents the reverse of this function of inhabiting. Rather, the depiction of Toboga and Spa Houses in various stages of decay and ruin symbolises the failure of the middle class ideal of home to provide what it advertises—integration, permanence, individual autonomy, protection, security and identity. Stead's radical political critique of domesticity shows little concern for the preservation of domestic proprieties, nor for the public and private division upon which the ideal is predicated. Parenthood is not redeemed, there is no idealisation of hearth and home, no valorisation of domestic harmony and conjugal bliss. On the contrary, *The Man Who Loved Children* suggests that homes are dangerous spaces for men and women alike. Stead is not a metaphysician of domestic space but rather an historical materialist critic of it.

In the power structure of the Pollit family, Sam is 'household czar by divine right' and Henny is 'household anarchist by divine right' (71). Against the rule of law represented by the father, we are told that the intuitions of Louisa and her stepmother (the two disruptive forces in the house) were forming an alliance according to the 'natural outlawry of womankind' (368). Although this bond is forged through mutual suffering and rebelliousness, the imagery of woman as nature, and, in the following quotation, of female intuition as animal instinct, suggests that the bond between the two women is primordial, instinctual and powerful enough to override differences:

this irresistible call of sex seemed now to hang in the air of the house. It was like an invisible animal, which could be nosed, though, lying in wait in one of the corners

of this house that was steeped in hidden as well as spoken drama. Sam adored Darwin but was no good at invisible animals. (72)

Sam is associated here with reason, specifically in its scientific form, as opposed to intuition or feeling, which is the domain of women. This gendered difference is reinforced through spatial metaphors. Henny's room is a magical private space, a dark and secretive 'cave of Aladdin', whereas Sam's room is compared to a 'Museum' (69), that is, to a public institution dedicated to the preservation of the hierarchy of sciences and knowledges. Henny is confined to, and defined by, the enclosed space of her bedroom: 'I have no home—they only allow me a room here, but it is my room'. She often eats alone in her room, she entertains the children in it, gives birth to her seventh child in it and dies in it (375). So much is Henny defined by this room that after her death the children imagine her 'in another room in the universe, which was now under lock and key' (515).

Do these extended representations of femininity as essentially private reinscribe gendered distinctions between thought and feeling, public and private spheres? Many contemporary feminist critiques of Western rationalism claim that reason has been elevated at the expense of the subordinated term in the binary.⁴ Genevieve Lloyd for one, has cogently argued that 'our ideals of Reason have historically incorporated an exclusion of the feminine, and that femininity itself has been partly constituted through the processes of exclusion' (x). In this way the thought and feeling dualism is gendered. In his analysis of the family in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel makes a distinction between the 'outer', as the realm of actuality, of citizenship, and the shadowy, insubstantial 'inner' world, which he calls the 'nether world' (266–89). As an exemplary and influential nineteenth-century formulation of 'male' and 'female' in the construction of citizenship and the private sphere, Hegel's analysis points up the difficulties of Stead's representation in passages like these of femininity as essentially intuitive. Since women are not citizens, they are debarred, not from ethical action itself, but from its self-conscious realisation in the public life of the society.

Hegel's analysis of women as the 'nether' world is locally applicable, but taking the novel as a whole, it needs to be contextualised by way of reference to Stead's broader anti-idealist critique of gender and class relations, one which suggests that femininity as a mode of alterity to masculinity is not logically or biologically given, but is an effect of patriarchal power relations.

Isidor Schneider suggested in a *New Masses* review in 1940 that *The Man Who Loved Children* can be thought of as a novelisation of Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (19). The novel does bear out Engels' thesis that bourgeois marriage had its origin in property relations. You may recall the detail with which Stead plots the economic fall of the House of Collyer, and the respective class backgrounds of Henny and Sam. In *The Man Who Loved Children*, as in all of Stead's work, class is foregrounded as a category of analysis, but class- and sex-based oppression are linked primarily through money, or rather the lack of it. The problem with Schneider's review is that it erases gender difference in favour of class, despite the fact that Engels explicitly states in *The Origin* that 'The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife' (137). This unrecognised slavery is graphically realised when Henny declares that were she to give 'her last drop of blood to wash the clothes in and her last shred of skin to carpet the house with', the husband wouldn't notice the sacrifice (123). The novel also bears the imprint of Marx's powerful analysis of the origin of the family in slavery (*servitus*) (Engels 121). The word family (*familia*) may connotatively refer to the mix of sentimentality and domestic strife sometimes associated with the modern family, but for the Romans *famulus* meant domestic slave, and *familia* referred to the total number of slaves belonging to one man (Engels 121). Indeed, Stead has Sam approve of the Roman *familia*: 'The home, the hearth, the family and fatherhood, the only ideals the Romans had that were any good' (479), and by extension its economic basis in slavery.

In order to further focus the relationship Stead establishes between ideology, power and the enslavement of women in the home, I want briefly to draw out two strands of Sam

Pollit's garbled discourse on home and home management. True to his Victorian upbringing (and sounding like the Ruskin of *Seaside and Lilies*), Sam talks of women as 'ministering angels', of the 'sanctity of home' (373) and 'the integrity of family life' (479). He is also an exponent of modern scientific management in the home. Lamenting the slovenliness of his female housekeepers he talks of modern household machinery (338-9), 'systems' of regulating housework (379), and of ways to 'organise them shemales,...under scientific management' (514). In response to his sister Bonnie's burning a blouse while ironing, Sam lectures the women: 'a kitchen is a laboratory: what would anybody think of a laboratory assistant that did things like that? Women need more scientific training!' (89). His ideas about the upgrading of skills required in 'home-making' are based, however, on a violent contempt for women (380). After lecturing Louie on how to wash the dishes he launches into one of his many misogynistic tirades on good housekeeping: 'a little scientific method would eliminate all work from the household, so to speak: now, if me and not Henny was tunnin' this institution, you would see: because all the improvements in household technique have been made by men, becaze women got no brains' (380). A few lines later he is quite explicit that in this 'institution' children are 'cheap labour well organized' (380).

This clash between an older ideology of home as a separate sphere and women as angels in the home, and a new emergent ideology of technical efficiency which surfaces in the novel, is the subject of a study by Ketron Reiger of the rationalisation of domestic life in Australia from the late nineteenth-century to 1940, entitled *The Disenchantment of Home*.⁵ She argues that the rational efficiency of experts was an effort to change the private sphere to make it more compatible with the public world (928). The extension of modern technocratic consciousness, preoccupied with hygiene, science, efficiency to the organisation of the home (and she further argues to other areas of personal life, including sexuality) was fundamentally incompatible with some of the assumptions upon which the dominant bourgeois family model was based. In the first place it contradicted the construction of femininity which stressed the naturalness of women's performance of domestic labour and of child bearing and rearing. Secondly, it belied the ideology of separate spheres, the middle-class home as a refuge, a sanctuary of affective relations opposed to the outer world.

Despite his euphoric support of community-based ideals, Sam Pollit, unlike his utopian forefathers, Owen and Fourier, does not oppose the exploitation of female labour in the home. Likewise, his seemingly progressive scientific discourse on home science and management of housework leaves intact a strict division of labour based on a division between the sexes, a fact underlined by Sam's chant: 'men must work, women must sweep' (implying that women's labour is not really work). Even though Henny is a breadwinner of sorts, Sam casts her as the source of the family's economic ruin, while indulging in blithe denials of material reality and maintaining unrealistic views of money as the root of all evil. Yet in Henny's absence, the family sinks further into chaos; slop pails stand unemptied, beds remain unmade, and Henny returns to find baby Charles-Franklin eating his own excrement (458). Some Eden. Sam's early poverty has turned him into an insensitive liberal whose utopian socialism, which shares features of the kind critiqued by Engels in the *Anti-Dühring* and in *The Origin*, is based on an idealisation of labour and a repression of the true economic basis of their family life. The extent of this repression becomes evident when Louie's schoolteacher, Miss Aiden, comes to dinner and notices the dark, dirty hall, defaced oilcloth, wind-broken porch, and the 'primitive' bathroom (421-423). Through this outsider's eyes 'the Pollits lived in a poverty that to her was actually incredible' (418).

As the family sinks further into poverty Sam's colonising of physical space through his control of meals, work, gardening and home renovations, extends to the invasion of the emotional and psychic space of the children. He attempts to police Louie's sexuality. He 'pokes and pries' in her bedroom, 'investigating her linen' (329). He also attempts to control the production of knowledge in the house by supervising her education, searching out her hidden diaries and ridiculing her poetry, and also by threatening 'to watch every book you read and every thought you have' (520). This attempt to monitor his daughter's thoughts (341-2,

356-7) evolves into the fantasy that he communicates with her through mental telepathy: 'between her and me is immediate communication, mental radio' (366, 475). Likewise, such declarations as 'you are myself' evidences his narcissistic wish to erase individual difference within the household. He spies on the children in the secrecy of their rooms or in the nooks they have made (379). This surveillance and interrogation in the home could be read as metaphorically proleptic of the victimisation suffered by many of Stead's friends in the McCarthy trials, which Stead herself escaped by leaving the US in 1947.⁶

There is literally and figuratively no private space in the Pollit houses,⁷ emotional or physical, a dissolution of boundaries which reaches an apotheosis in the twelve-hour Marlin boil down. The capture of the 'whopping big TETRAPTURUS (marlin)' (413) is meant to be the first stage of Sam's new home economy plan, and those familiar with the novel will, I am sure, remember this grotesque and monstrous episode. The separation between indoors and outdoors dissolves as the putrefying odour of the cooking Marlin in the wash-house spreads throughout the house. The oil soaks the timbers, invades Henny's room, which had been, to this point, her sanctuary, leaving oil stains on her pillow and her favourite book. Sam covers 'Little Sam' in Marlin offal and the other family members feel the oil in their hair and in the pores of their skin. The labour-intensive nature of the project leads Sam to invade the children's sleep hours—their last refuge of privacy—in order to organise the nightly Marlin watches.

This incident is one memorable example, among many in the novel, of the way domestic detail combines with the grotesque to produce the effect of the uncanny. While uncanniness manifests the return of the familiar repressed, as Freud said in his essay on 'The Uncanny',⁸ uncanniness also occurs, as Julia Kristeva notes in *Strangers to Ourselves*, 'when the boundaries between imagination and reality are erased' (188). This observation reinforces the concept arising out of Freud's text of the *unheimlich* as a crumbling of conscious defences. The collapse of the boundary between conscious and unconscious is accompanied by a return of the repressed material basis of domestic life, figured by the invasion of the marlin oil and its odour into every corner of the house. We are told that the smell is so strong that no amount of housekeeping can wash it away.

With no private space of their own in which to live, Louie and Henny have no alternative but to leave the house, Henny tragically and Louie somewhat romantically. Having lived her married life under house arrest, it is appropriate that Henny's last hours are spent in the rooms which most define her role in the family: she takes poison in the kitchen and dies in her bedroom. By contrast, the fragmentation of the family impels Louie to a reinvention of self, and hence, a renegotiation of the problematics of space and place. Unlike her stepmother, she creates an intellectual space, and a language, with which to represent herself. This will to power over her own life is represented spatially. Where Henny has been confined for a large part of the novel to her room, Louie often distances herself from the family by going outside, sometimes taking meals alone in the garden (515). When in her room, she is often found looking out of the window, projecting into unenclosed space in acts of imaginative flight and dreaming (92). For example, she stares through the back attic window while reciting lines from Thoreau and dreaming of a career on the stage (86), and in her dream of the rider on the red mare, she can again be found leaning out of the window (61).

Louie has a fondness for what Bachelard calls the 'intimate immensity' of space. In her play *Fortunatus*, she writes of 'vague regions of celestial space' (412), and elsewhere imagines herself geographically as the 'Western Isles of infinite promise' (439). Her romantic mind shores up this boundlessness as a symbolic compensation for the actual poverty of home: 'thus Louie had no time to think about the house, nor how it looked; she was quite satisfied with it—they were poor, but it was spacious and her expectations were infinite' (426). This sense of limitlessness is quite different, we are meant to understand, from Sam's delusional sense of expansionless ego as expressed in his 'hope for the proliferating human race in that shadow of dust and infinitesimal corner of dimensionless space' (237). Her search for a home beyond the family is symbolised by *Harpers Ferry* which is spatialised in geographic terms as

'a landscape to the far end of the sky—an antique fertile yeoman's country' (186), the image suggesting her desire not only for limitlessness, but also for the archaic and pre-industrial. This language of spatiality celebrates the power of the romantic mind to erase the physical or material home, by withdrawing from it, and by reconstituting it on imaginative ground.

The novel suggests, however, that these 'other' spaces are incompatible with the social expectations of home and family for women. The concept of space has, according to Henri Lefebvre, two aspects: 'representational spaces and representations of space' (299). Stead's text moves freely between representations of physical space and the construction of representational spaces. The last sentences of the novel refer to Spa House, which is mentioned twice by name in order to underline its representational status: 'but as for going back to Spa House, she never even thought of it. Spa House was on the other side of the bridge'. (523) The Eastport bridge referred to here is a liminal space—a border between past and future, oppression and liberation, the space which separates the enclosed space of Pollitry from the promise of freedom and possibility. For Louie there can be 'no going back' because when a woman leaves home she cannot leave and leave that realm unchanged.⁹

When Louie leaves home, she leaves behind the impossible space of lovehate, the psychic floundering of the father's narcissism and the mother's suicidal impotence, not for an imaginative transcendence of the social, but for an undecidable space. I intentionally use the word space here in its broadest sense to refer to many possible spaces—real, mental and social. It is true that Louie's destination is named. Harpers Ferry, home of the Baken family, has multiple significations in the novel, associated as it is with mystic song, old-style Christianity and John Brown's rebellion on behalf of slaves. But in another sense the place is so utterly other to Pollitry as to be unnameable. The narrator tells us that 'in the House of Pollit the people of the House of Baken remain unnamed' (187). Stead's unresolved juxtaposition of these two spaces suggests that at the historical point in which she was writing, she saw home and women's freedom as irreconcilable realities. Harper's Ferry is, in one sense then, a catachresis, since it names a place that is, strictly speaking, not yet nameable.

University College, ADFA

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Notes

- 1 Robert Drewe, 'Christina Stead' in *Yacker: Australian Writers Talk About Their Work* (23). See also 'We never thought of having a home: home was where the other was', 'Les Amoureux (Life of Two Writers)' in *Ocean of Story* (512). See also the interview with Guilia Giuffrè, 'Christina Stead' *Stand* 23. 4. (1984): 25-6.
- 2 See Brydon, *Christina Stead* (1987); Sheridan, *Christina Stead* (1988); Sturm, 'Christina Stead's New Realism'; Wilding, *The Radical Tradition* (1993), and 'Christina Stead's *The Puzzleheaded Girl*: The Political Context' in *Words and Wordsmiths* (1989).
- 3 These concepts are interpreted freely from Benjamin's essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations* (219-53). Isobel Armstrong employs the distinction in the different context of cultural formations in English poetry of the 1830s, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Politics, Poetics* (7).
- 4 On binarisms, see for example, Helene Cixous's list of 'hierarchised oppositions' in 'Sorties' in *New French Feminisms*, eds Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, 90-91.
- 5 I thank Ann Pender for drawing my attention to this book.
- 6 The harassment Stead and her husband were to receive for their communism is recorded in Chris Williams' biography (Williams 164-5, 177-9, 208-13). Michael Wilding discusses this in *The Radical Tradition* (63).
- 7 Often in this novel information is accessed or transmitted from marginal spaces. For example, in the absence of free and direct communication within the family, householders communicate or overhear the communications of others indirectly. The children hide with receptive ears around corners (431), or eavesdrop in the stairway or hallway. Sam's messages to his wife are sometimes delivered from outside her door,

often by a child messenger. Bonnie overhears from a vantage point on the staircase, Jo's and Sams' condemnations of her. Louie is an ear witness to one of Henny and Sam's vicious fights from the doorway of Henny's room (157), and listens to the gossip of Henny and her women friends outside a room at Monacacy. Louie overhears Sam's and Henny's most terrible fight from her bedroom window (437), while the children 'crept into the hall below and stood rooted to the floor, listening to this tempest' (496). The children try to disappear mentally and physically into the open air or into odd corners of the house (337) but usually these attempted escapes are short-lived, if not unsuccessful.

- 8 Freud in 'The Uncanny' (1955) relates the *unheimlich* to 'that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' (220), but which has become alienated from the mind through repression (241).
- 9 Transcendence is not a gender-neutral concept. In this respect Genevieve Lloyd concludes (on the basis of her analysis of Sartrean and Hegelian transcendence, as well as de Beauvoir's negative construction of male transcendence) that female transcendence must be different from male transcendence because it involves 'breaking away from a zone which, for the male remains intact – from what is for him the realm of particularity and merely natural feelings. For the female, in contrast, there is no such realm which she can leave and leave intact' (102).