

# Medley and Hotchpotch

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Anne Pender

*Christina Stead: Satirist*  
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IN 1960 CHRISTINA STEAD wrote: 'Every artist, writer and scholar lives for his country and does his best when not cut off from his country.' She confessed that she longed for the distinctive splendour she found in Australia: 'a sort of physical and mental health and a fiery vision.' She had left in 1928 and was not to return until 1974, in poor health, grieving for her late husband, never quite able to settle or to write. Yet a life spent wandering between England, Europe and America had given her the experiences that shaped what Anne Pender describes as the 'paradigmatic places' of her satirical novels: Paris, London, Manhattan, Hollywood. And the 'fiery vision' she took with her found a fertile seedbed in the intellectual partnership with her Marxist husband, Bill Blake, and the left-wing circles into which he introduced her. Diaries and notes held in the National Library in Canberra confirm what Pender's study of the novels unfolds: the detail in which Stead recorded and reflected on the history through which she lived.

Pender's is the first study to focus on Stead the satirist (though the claim that 'critics have chosen to ignore the satire in her fiction' overstates the case considerably). She locates Stead within a tradition that begins with Horace and Juvenal, and is still current in the postmodernists Pynchon and Rushdie. Pender reads her as part of a general emergence of parodic satire between the wars, in company with Huxley, Waugh and Orwell, and, during the cold war, with Lillian Hellman and Arthur Miller.

Pender argues that Stead's blend of comic, grotesque and realist elements transforms the traditionally masculine genre of political satire, and that some of the most frequently criticised aspects of her style — distortion, excess, crowdedness — are best understood as part of satire's traditional discourse and weaponry of medley and hotchpotch. A development is traced from the Horatian satires of Stead's Paris years, which expose the capitalist excess and moral torpor that accompany the rise of Hitler, through studies of commodified and predatory sexuality on both sides of the Atlantic in Letty Fox and Eleanor Herbert, the Juvenalian satire of greed and depravity in Robbie Grant, and the more gently ironic analysis of failed Utopianism in the Massine family, to the anatomy of dysfunctional postwar society in *Cotters' England* (1966), and of the

unravelling of the American left in *I'm Dying Laughing* (1986). Pender's case is persuasive. It's hard to think of a body of twentieth-century political satire of comparable stature.

There are some inconsistencies in Pender's argument. In focusing on Stead's historical referentiality, she seems aware of the degree to which any history is mediated, yet claims at one point that 'the excesses of Stead's satire distance it from historiography in its conventional form' and, in another, that the English stories present 'a picture of London that is verifiable. They are therefore offering history.' In discussing Stead's characterisation, she drives a wedge between its 'allegorical' and 'psychological' aspects. Robbie Grant's attractive villainy is praised yet seen as 'threatening to obliterate the thematic and allegorical integrity of the work'. The portrait of Miss Herbert has 'hauntingly original psychological power', yet Stead has 'no interest in her inner psyche'. Emily Wilkes is seen as triumphantly individualised but is later compared with the characters of Rabelais, who must be seen as 'representative' rather than looked at 'psychologically'. Recent post-colonialist and feminist discussions of Stead's satiric vantage point deserve more consideration than Pender gives them. She is inclined to take Stead's protestation that she was a 'naturalist', not a moralist, the gusto with which she endows even her most repulsive characters, and the absence of overt narratorial moralising as indicating that these novels are 'morally ambivalent', even 'amoral', in a way that seems to drain them of satire's 'purposive intent'.

Is *I'm Dying Laughing*, as Pender contends, Stead's 'most powerful novel'? Most readers would find her fire burning brightest in the novels in which she draws most directly on autobiographical, Australian experience. *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) and *For Love Alone* (1944), mentioned only glancingly by Pender as novels in which 'the historical dimension' is less important than 'the psychological and artistic journeys' they chart, surely hold the key to the 'moral vantage point' of her satires: in the integrity that distinguishes the writer from the fraud, the hack, the political opportunist, in which love is contrasted with predatory and commodified sexuality, and genuine political commitment, intellectual curiosity and imagination struggle into being. The protagonists of the satirical novels fail in their ostensible quest for these values, and it is that failure that engages the reader in the moral drama they enact.

But it is perhaps significant that *I'm Dying Laughing* is the story of a home-town girl who takes on the world by wielding her pen as scalpel, and that Emily Wilkes, a satirist who wants to tell 'the godlike truth' about history is, like her creator, unable to complete the great work she carries around with her from place to place. In this last novel, in which she saw herself moving 'from fiery to more fiery still', Stead arrives at a vision of human vice and folly that cannot comfortably be accommodated within the conventions of satire, and that is impatient with its generic constraints.