When Was Modernism? The Cold War Silence of Christina Stead

Christina Stead (1902–1983) was a long-time expatriate Australian writer who lived in, and wrote about Sydney, New York, Paris, London and many other European cities—she was a ‘travelling modernist’ par excellence. Today this geo-political and cultural range earns her the fashionable epithet, ‘cosmopolitan.’ But in the two decades after World War Two, when she and her American writer husband, William J. Blake, moved back to Europe and eventually settled in England, that same range earned her nothing but rejection slips and poverty. Her politicised form of modernist fiction did not travel well into the post-war period.

This was especially galling because, at the time they left New York in 1946, Stead was recognised as a novelist of great originality, and her husband had published several highly successful historical novels. Yet Stead’s next two ‘American’ novels, which appeared in 1948 and 1952, were not successful, and for the next 15 years she published no new book, although she worked on at least four novels and numerous novellas and stories during that time. Blake published two novels during the period of Stead’s silence but, for the most part, he and Stead scraped together a living in London doing ill-paid literary hack work: reading manuscripts (mostly in German and French) for publishers, translating, editing, reviewing.

The reasons why these two formerly successful writers fared so badly are many, but the net effect was that, until Blake’s death in 1968, they lived in dire poverty. It was a dramatic case of ‘riches to rags.’ For the first few years back in Europe, moving from one small hotel to another in France, Belgium and Switzerland, they remained buoyant, though poor. But having decided in 1953 to settle in England after all, their literary luck failed. They occupied a series of dismal rented rooms and flats in London, except for a few years when Blake was employed as a researcher and scriptwriter by Sapphire Films, and they lived rent free in a chilly converted stable at Foxwarren Park in Surrey.

It was not until the mid-1960s that Stead’s luck began to turn. Her major novel of 1940, The Man Who Loved Children, was re-published in 1965, with an Introduction by the well-known American poet and critic Randall Jarrell, hailing it as a masterpiece. In connection with this re-launch of Stead’s career, her publishers brought out two of the books on which she had been working since 1948: Dark Places of the Heart in the USA, subsequently as Cotters’ England in the UK, and a collection of four novellas, The Puzzleheaded Girl, in 1967. From the mid-1960s she was also published in Australia for the first time, with Angus & Robertson reissuing her ‘Australian’ novels in paperback.
Tragically for Stead, this revival of interest in her work coincided with her husband's illness and death. After several unsettled years alone in London, she returned to Australia to live in 1974. *The Little Hotel*, published in 1973, *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)* in 1976, and the posthumously published *I'm Dying Laughing* in 1986, saw the bulk of the manuscripts on which she had been working during the post-war years in print. But Stead had not managed to produce any significant new work after Blake's death. She died in Sydney in 1983.

It is a story that can be read pessimistically, about how a writer can be paralysed through not being read, or not read at the right time. Or it can be read optimistically, about how brilliance will eventually be recognised. Either way, for Stead the long 1950s were bad times, an age of lead (by the 'long 1950s' I mean the period 1945–1965). She was no longer the brave young woman confronting her destiny, crossing the world to find a larger stage and a man who loved her, believed in her genius, and opened up the world of Marxist politics for her. Bill Blake was no longer the glamorous radical banker he had been in the 1930s, when living with him gave her the knowledge to write her huge novel of finance capital, *House of All Nations*. He was a writer too, now, and vulnerable to the attacks of the McCarthyites, and Stead and Blake felt they had to leave his native USA, where in New York she had been immensely productive. Bill was in his fifties, Christina in her forties—and, it is clear from her biography, suffering from depression. Despite their earlier decade together in London and Paris, they now had few close friends there, and those they did have were not literary. In England, everyday life was hard, as post-war shortages of goods and housing extended well into the 1950s. Politically, wartime hopes for a continuing alliance between the USSR and the capitalist democracies were dashed—not to mention hopes for socialist revolution in America and Europe. Communists were not only subject to discrimination but were challenged, compromised and divided by the revelations of Stalin's crimes. The lean years of Stead and Blake seem to correspond with the times—a kind of paralysis overtook these formerly travelling modernists.

To explain Stead's silence, most commentators assume that, as committed communists, she and Blake were blacklisted by publishers, or at least subjected to censorship. The evidence for this is scanty, however, and it may well be that their cosmopolitanism—and lack of local literary contacts—were also factors. A further and perhaps more significant reason, I will argue here, is the changes in Stead's writing, as she took on a more critical stance in her fiction. These changes made it difficult for her to complete to her satisfaction the manuscripts she worked on during this period. And they made it more difficult for publishers to accept her work, which was neither
high modernist nor social realist, in a period of ideological conflict between these two tendencies in literature.

Were Stead and Blake discriminated against as communist writers? Of course they had FBI records, but so did anyone who signed an anti-war petition, or protested against the execution of the Rosenbergs as spies. Stead's first biographer, Chris Williams, says that the FBI investigation into Blake and Stead, which continued until at least 1959, was 'an expensive international exercise in covert harassment and indirect but effective censorship.' To some extent, perhaps, this is true—certainly she and Blake had a word-of-mouth reputation in the United States as Stalinists. But formal blacklisting is highly unlikely: Christina was never a Party member, and Bill was only briefly. The FBI had begun a file on him as a Party 'key figure' in 1943, but despite his anti-fascist public speaking and fund-raising activities during the 1940s, he was soon dropped from its list of dangerous subversives. Some of his film industry associates, however, were among the 'Hollywood Ten' who were convicted and imprisoned by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947, but by then Blake and Stead had returned to Europe. Some of their left-wing American acquaintances who left at the same time were pursued across the Atlantic by the FBI and had their passports withheld or revoked, and no doubt Blake, at least, feared that this might also be his fate. Rowley writes that 'even with their papers, work was hard to come by for people in their position,' but there is no hard evidence of their being refused work. It is still something of a mystery why they stuck to literary hack work instead of looking for better-paid jobs when it became clear that they would not be able to earn a living from writing novels. It may have been that Bill could only ever take casual employment in England because he was still an American citizen.

They do not seem to have been well connected in left-wing circles in England—Stead turned down an invitation to write a 'London letter' for the New York leftist magazine, Mainstream, on the grounds that she was not 'in the middle of things here.' On the European scene Stead dismissed a potential ally, Jean-Paul Sartre, as 'an indifferent writer, a bogus philosopher' and 'a high-rating publicity talent'—this was on the occasion of his denouncing the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Stead and Blake were Marxist purists, harshly critical of both Labour welfare statism and Communist Party populism, and there is fascinating evidence of this in a letter Stead wrote to Annie Dooley (the prototype for Nellie of Cotters' England) explaining what populism is and why it is counter-revolutionary. They therefore missed out on support from Communist Party members and from the broad Left intelligentsia, from publishing houses like Gollancz (the publisher of Left Books) and Laurence and Wishart—Stead could not
even get this communist publisher to send her as many books for review as she wanted. Their most effective supporters over this period of extreme poverty were the East Germans, who published Bill's books—although his earnings had to be spent in the GDR. But Christina's books did not appeal—they were hardly good examples of socialist realism, and she would have no truck with the kind of proletarian novel then required by Communist Party theorists.

The impression that emerges from Stead's letters during the 1950s and early 60s is that she held out little hope of finding a publisher anywhere. Peter Davies, who had published her first books in the 1930s, was 'her sole champion in the British publishing world,' according to her biographer Hazel Rowley, and he considered her 'a species of genius though impossible to sell.' In a 1960 letter to a new-found Australian champion of her work, R.G. Geering, Stead reported that British publishers were far less enterprising than their American counterparts, and that the industry was 'diminishing.' Yet she fared no better in the United States. She reported that her American agent, Helen Strauss, disliked the manuscript that would eventually become The Little Hotel, and did not try to place it. Stead also told Geering that her 'novel about English worker intellectuals [Cotters' England] has not been sent around at all.' To another correspondent, she described Miss Herbert as a novel about 'a nice woman ... who has illusions about the literary life and drudges infinitely for the publishers,' adding 'naturally no publisher will take it.'

Novels about English people struggling with various kinds of poverty would not be expected to attract significant American readerships. Cosmopolitanism was by no means a selling point in the first decades of the Cold War. Further, stories about post-war life in Europe with its racism and financial scams (The Little Hotel); about Britain's failure to realise the potential for revolutionary change (Cotters' England); and about literary hackwork as an instance of more general moral and intellectual shabbiness (Miss Herbert); sounded unprepossessing. Stead herself knew this well. She told a correspondent: 'I never wrote for money—I scarcely write for publication.'

Changes in Stead's writing in the post-war years
Stead's subjects were always meaty, but her targets during the 1930s and 40s were more acceptable in literary milieux where left-wing ideas were being freely debated—finance capitalism, poverty, bourgeois decadence, the oppressions of family life. While none of those novels met with universal and unqualified success, she only began to have real trouble with publishers in 1948, when her novel about an American war profiteer and womaniser, A Little Tea, A
Little Chat, met a chilly reception and, for the first time, found no English publisher. After this, it took her agent a long time to place The People with the Dogs, which merely poked gentle fun at good liberals. This finally appeared in 1952, with Little, Brown in Boston—and proved to be the last Stead novel for a long time.

The themes she worked on during the 1945–1965 period posed new problems for her to solve—how to explore the motivations of a couple of Communist ‘renegades’ without selling out to Cold War anti-Communism (I’m Dying Laughing), or to critique, from theinside, the pervasive defeatism of post-war England (Cotters’ England). The central female characters in both these works ensured that the novels would have the additional disadvantage of unfamiliar and unsettling gendered perspectives on political issues, a problem which was only compounded in the female-dominated and apparently apolitical The Puzzleheaded Girl, The Little Hotel and Miss Herbert.

Stead’s style was always difficult, and difficult to categorise. The novels are based in character, ‘the psychological drama of the person’ and in conflict—or ‘strife’ (her favoured word). A kind of hyperrealism is created as her characters talk themselves into existence, obsessively and repetitively. Structurally, linear narrative is understated (her novels usually strike new readers as ‘rambling’), and characters do not reach insight, far less have epiphanies; indeed, most of them remain trapped in the circumstances that have produced them. Rather, they engage in endless conflict with one another, and each scene shift marks out an intensification of their passions and obsessions. This loose or fragmented narrative structure, as well as a fascination with the speaking subject, are features of modernist fiction. But Stead’s could be called a politicised form of modernism, in that the speech of her characters is not stream of consciousness but is always rhetorically purposeful, and is formed out of historically available discourses on class, gender, nation and sexuality.

Their speech has performative force, as an assertion of will over others, by manipulation and by seduction. Here are some examples from the first of Stead’s post-war novels to be published, Cotters’ England—the closest she ever came to a working-class novel. Nellie, the principal character, is frequently described as ‘crooning’ or singing to her listeners in her lilting Northern English accent, but her insistence on ‘introspection’ and ‘confession’ means that she bullies her interlocutors into submission. The seduction and the bullying are one and the same, as when she threatens her husband, George, whom she suspects is going to leave her: ‘You’re not going to get any sleep.... You’re going to have it out with me: I’m going to pull the woman act.’ As she rants at him all through the night, tormenting him, her darings and trillings, her ingenuous and disingenuous ways, lovely
voice and queer oaths, all the practiced art came to him, blew round him, lulled him and made him laugh ...’

The reader is positioned as yet another trapped listener, fascinated and appalled but, at the same time, we are also critically aware of the politics of these speeches, engaged in evaluating the ideas as well as being subjected to the rhetorical impact. Nellie Cotter is a left-wing journalist, married to George Cook, a trades-union big wheel who spends most of his time in Europe. Earlier in this scene, Nellie and George have one of their political arguments. She attacks him for abandoning England—and the working class, and her (they are all one, in her mind)—in favour of a good job among ‘foreigners.’ He attacks her in turn:

‘You’re helping your lords and masters by talking a lot of frill about patriotism. Whose country is it? Whose pound sterling is it?... Whose indebtedness is it? Whose empire is it?... Whose revenues are they? Am I going to lose my eyes and hair and get to be like your old Uncle Sime, old scrap nobody wants, and everyone spits on, to save their England? Or to save Cotters’ England?... The England of the depressed that starved you all to wraiths, gave Eliza TB, sent your sister into the Home, got your old mother into bed with malnutrition, and is trying it on with me, too, getting at my health. I never had an ache or pain in my life: I beat their England. I lived through the unemployment, the starvation, the war ... and now I’m going to live for my country. You stay here and die in it. Don’t you want to change it? ...’

Nellie ignores his criticism of her sentimental Englishness, but repeats her attack on his travels and his infidelity, playing on the metaphor of starvation and sexual deprivation as she does so:

‘You’re a bloody Cook’s Tours, that’s all you are,’ said Nellie; ‘you’ve got your spoon into the fleshpots; ... and now the smell of ragout is all you can think of.’ (216)

Stead described the kind of character-based novel she practised as being ‘all a sidelong critique and mostly ironic,’ where it is not easy to take sides: ‘the reader must draw his own conclusions from the diverse material, as from life itself,’ she wrote. In her later novels, like Cotters’ England, the irony takes on satirical force. Now there is no stabilising sympathy with a particular character, or superior position of knowledge, offered to the reader. But that is not because the narrative is impartial. ‘The author,’ Stead continued, ‘is not impartial, but not minatory either.’ It’s significant that she denies impartiality—the author is definitely ‘there’ in the narrative—but she is ‘not minatory either’: that is an odd choice of word. You would not expect a ‘minatory’—threatening or baleful—narrative tone. But in the late satires there is something of that quality of threat, an underlying rage, which animates the narrative. They are ‘rich in authorial scorn’,
as Anne Pender puts it in her extended study of Stead as a satirist. But, as well, there is a closeness between Nellie and her author which complicates the scorn and blurs its direction, involving the reader in a highly ambivalent relationship to the text. In the passage just quoted, Nellie’s sexual insult about George putting his spoon in the fleshpots deflects our attention from the weight of his political attack on ‘Cotters’ England.’ She wins us over in the process of winning the power struggle with him—as her rhetoric always triumphs over that of the other characters, however absurd or vicious her ideas are seen to be. At the same time, Nellie also embodies threat; she is a ‘minatory presence’ in the novel. The ‘conclusions the reader must draw’ about Nellie—that she is indeed a degenerate unnatural woman, a lesbian witch, as the novel presents her—demand a degree of submission to the author’s ‘partiality.’ Brigid Rooney’s reading of this novel demonstrates in detail the way ‘the narrative in Cotters’ England establishes its truth through ... a staged contest; it purports to outperform Nellie by exposing her ‘truth’ as ‘performance’ and by dissembling its own, aiming to label and contain her within the category of perversity.’ In effect, the ‘strife’ dramatised in the novels is also enacted in the reader’s resistant relation to the text.

The changes in Stead’s later fiction have been described by Hazel Rowley as a ‘metamorphosis’: ‘angrier, more relentless than ever, [it] did not appeal to 1950s war-scarred sensibilities,’ but ‘confronted readers with poverty, corruption and self-deception.’ Stead’s agent did not like these novels. Publishers did not like them. Stead herself did not like them much. It is surely significant that she could scarcely bring herself to complete any of the manuscripts and, when she did send one off, failed to insist that her agent keep pursuing publishers. I think what she was trying to do was so difficult and, in a sense, compromising, that she had lost her nerve. Difficult, because she was experimenting with new forms of satire, which demanded that she sustain a demanding degree of negativity. Compromising, because the principal characters of both Cotters’ England and I’m Dying Laughing were recognisably based on women who had been close friends—Nellie Cotter on Anne Dooley, a Communist journalist who had been a close friend in the late 40s; and Emily, in the American political drama, on Ruth McKenney, a well-known woman novelist. The release of either novel would have raised many problems of confidentiality and possible libel.

What’s more, the manuscript novels were complex, and she would move onto a new one without finishing the one before. She seems to have worked on them in novella-length sections—and novellas are notoriously unpublishable. She drew back from opportunities to publish stories from them. In 1957, she reported to some friends that she had sent part of Cotters’ England to the editor of the New York
magazine *Mainstream*, but 'he didn't like it and as it is part of a novel I have in which part of the drama is the mystery of the characters, I did not feel like writing an explanatory piece along with it.' It was too alien for American readers—the dialect English, and the 'old fashioned labour attitudes'—and so she asked for it back. 'I have a lot of all-but MSS. in bulk!' she added.  

When they were finally published in the late 1960s and 70s, the novels she had written during the long silent 1950s were not received with wholehearted enthusiasm. Few reviewers and critics realised that these apparently new works had been substantially completed in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The issues they addressed belonged to the post-war years, as did many of the attitudes and values they criticised. They addressed a society in the doldrums, a culture bereft of new ideas, people driven by fear for the future and suspicion of their neighbours. Poverty and struggle had always been Stead's principal subjects but, in a novel like *For Love Alone*, the struggle out of poverty and restriction drives the characters to energetic engagement. In these post-war English stories, a furious bitter energy permeates but there is 'neither moral integrity nor hope.'  

They are—as Thea Astley described her own final novel, *Drylands*—'bleak', but 'full of angry ideas.' And so they remained, 'a lot of all-but MSS. in bulk.'

**An unclassifiable writer**

Stead's writing was always difficult to classify, and it became virtually invisible in the context of post-war debates about the value and purposes of literature. Cold War priorities defined a major conflict between politically committed writing (broadly Leftist, usually realist) versus modernist, subjectivist, symbolic art. It was during this period that the earlier history of conflicts within modernism was forgotten, and 'modernist' came to mean a formalist art that claimed to be above politics. At the same time, any commitment to social change was aligned—however awkwardly—with realism.

Stead's writing was neither high modernist nor social realist. As a Marxist, she might have been expected to write realist fiction but, in fact, her writing had little in common with the 'new realism' of politically committed writers like the 'angry young men' of British fiction and theatre, or with Doris Lessing's statement of faith in the 'still, small voice' of humanist fiction in an age of 'public art, committee art.' Lessing's advocacy of the work of the great nineteenth-century realists, and realism as 'art which springs so vigorously and naturally from a strongly-held ... view of life that it absorbs symbolism' and 'transcends expressionism, impressionism, symbolism, naturalism, or any other ism' is reminiscent of the Marxist critic, Georg Lukács.  

Stead certainly read Lukács, in
German, and would have embraced his argument that the great nineteenth-century realists were engaged in experiment, expanding the capacities of the novel. The kind of ‘critical realism’ that he advocated was in some respects compatible with Stead’s post-war fiction, where her earlier linguistic extravagance was muted. But his attack on all modernist kinds of experimentation did not deflect her from using expressionist techniques and symbolism when they served her purpose in the pursuit of her politicised form of modernist fiction.

Stead’s Marxism, as I understand it, was of the Leninist variety, where the working class in itself was considered to be incapable of anything more revolutionary than trade-union politics, needing the leadership of a Bolshevik party, a theoretically informed vanguard, capable of analysing the contradictions of capitalism. This required a literature which could identify and dramatise these contradictions, heightening the conflicts in such a way as to make it impossible for the bourgeoisie to retain their complacency about capitalism, or to deny the historical necessity of revolution. Thus serious literature was a challenge to the bourgeoisie, and was not obliged to address and inspire the working class. This approach—essentially the way Marx and Engels read modern literature—was compatible with Stead’s kind of literary modernism.

Stead never had been a modernist in the sense of envisioning the new and utopian; nor did she share the surrealists’ belief in the primacy of the unconscious—she was scornful of Freud, despite her fascination with dreams and ghosts, and the centrality of desire and will in her fictions. But as a young writer she greatly admired Joyce, and also Thomas Mann and D.H. Lawrence. They, and the great nineteenth-century Europeans like Dostoyevsky and Balzac, were her training ground, and in the post-war years she stuck to the principles she had imbibed from them in further developing what might be called her satirical Marxist modernism. Her treatment of character, for instance, can be called modernist, not because it seeks to represent disjunctions between their subjectivity and external reality, but because she refuses that disjunction by making her characters talk themselves into existence, perform themselves in ‘strife’ with one another, apparently free of authorial control. Feminist critic Jane Marcus suggests Stead’s two great pre-war novels, The House of All Nations and The Man Who Loved Children, as key instances of ‘Marxist modernism,’ a category of fiction that still awaits exploration.

Historically speaking, her later novels were produced in that period of the ‘postwar settlement’ when, according to Raymond Williams, literary modernism had ‘lost its anti-bourgeois stance and achieved comfortable integration into the new international capitalism.’ A
modernism that had discarded its avant-garde credentials became, in
the post-war years, a vehicle of the cultural status quo. If he was right
about this—and he is suspiciously quick to accept an absolute
opposition between the avant-garde and the status quo in this
instance—then Stead was indeed poorly placed to succeed. She
strongly maintained her anti-bourgeois stance, and intensified her
social critique by more overtly satirical means. Her unpublished post-
war fiction belonged with neither of the then-prevailing forms of
modernism—neither the ‘romantic modernism’ favoured by many
poets and the Australian nationalist painters, nor minimalist
modernism like that of practitioners of the *nouveau roman* and
abstract art.

By 1965, when *The Man Who Loved Children* was re-published, the
ideological conflict between realism and modernism had faded in
intensity. Elizabeth Hardwick, in a 1955 essay, had seen Stead as
writing a twentieth century version of a nineteenth century realist
novel that included political themes. But ten years later, her novel
was enthusiastically welcomed as a book that transcended both
modernism and politics. English novelist John Wain welcomed it as
‘a real novel in this age of satire and documentary,’ with a ‘width of
range, universality of interest, knowledge of the human heart,’
qualities that had been discarded as old-fashioned. It says a lot for
the dominance of New Criticism in the 1960s that those critics who
sought to revive her reputation claimed the book as a classic in
universalist terms like this—Randall Jarrell did the same in his
Introduction, ‘An Unread Book.’ These claims brought Stead’s earlier
fiction into the magic circle of literature considered suitable for
formalist and humanist criticism, while the political dimensions of
her work were soft-pedalled. It was not until much later, in the
context of New Left and feminist critical discourse in the 1970s and
80s, that *Cotters’ England*, *The Little Hotel* and *Miss Herbert* were
recognised as powerful political novels in a harsher, more satirical
register than her earlier work.

Literary fashions change, so that a book may appear in a context
where its distinctive qualities are not recognised—or it may not
appear at all, without a publisher willing to take a chance on it. This
case of Christina Stead’s silence during the long 1950s brings out
some of the many conflicts that surround the term ‘modernism’. In
conclusion, I want to consider briefly some of the ways that the
meanings of literary modernism are constructed; in particular, the
question posed in my title, ‘When was modernism?’

**When was modernism?**

Raymond Williams (whom I quoted earlier) gave a patchy but
suggestive account of the discursive construction of ‘modernism’ as a
finite period. He claimed that "modernism" as a title for a whole cultural movement and moment has... been retrospective as a general term since the 1950s, thereby stranding the dominant version of 'modern'... between, say, 1890 and 1940" (italics added). He argued that this was an ideological move to privilege twentieth-century moments of artistic innovation over late nineteenth-century ones, like the work of the great realists. The resulting 'highly selected version of the modern' that was constructed in the 1950s locates modernism in that specific period and—ironically—stops history dead at that point. 'Modernism being the terminus, everything afterwards is counted out of development. It is after: stuck in the post'.

Here it is obvious that Williams is writing in contention with certain claims about post-modernism (his essay is dated 1987). Postmodernism brought its own reconstruction of the cultural past, revising the picture so as to demonstrate its own necessity, to bring freshness and innovation, and represented itself as drawing on, and renewing, the experiment and creativity of the early twentieth-century, after the mid-century betrayal of the original modernist 'revolution,' by commodification and/or institutionalisation. Such moves, of course, ignore modernism's diversity, not to mention postmodernism's own historicity. John Frow's more recent critique of postmodernism's claims about its own necessity argued that the necessity is discursive rather than descriptive: that is, postmodernism's binary oppositions themselves generate 'quasi-historical transitions.' He continues: 'The temporality of modernism requires its own obsolescence: a modernism that failed to age, that didn't demand to be superseded, would be a contradiction in terms.' In this sense, 'postmodernism is precisely a moment of the modern.' Its 'founding gesture is a modernist destruction of the modern'—as Lyotard expressed it, more like a repetition of the past than an overcoming of it.

Such undermining of postmodernism's claim to mark an absolute break with the past has continued to generate a new wave of interest in modernism and modernity, an immensely productive fascination with the modernism of 1890 to 1940. Yet there has been little work on the literature of the post-war years: recent studies have not critically addressed the 'postmodern' construction of the long 1950s as a period when a kind of reified and fossilised modernism, formalist and elitist, ruled absolutely in the arts, sideling politically committed art, inhibiting experiment and suppressing the full range of voices and of styles. A revision of this period is likely to result, however, from work that expands modernism's geographical scope, emphasising the transnational production and circulation of modernist arts. A major proponent of this view, Susan Stanford Friedman, has also called for
an extension of modernism’s temporality further forward—not just past 1950, but into the late twentieth century.45

Neither version of the long 1950s—as a battle between committed realist art and symbolic, metaphysical art, or as a period when an etiolated high modernism ruled—features a significant presence of women writers. Despite the prominence of a few female intellectuals, like Simone de Beauvoir in France and Iris Murdoch in Britain, women writers on the whole were poorly represented in the literatures of Europe and North America in the post-war decades. Indeed, Sylvia Plath’s brief and tragic life has become an icon of the constraints within which creative women lived. Women artists across the Western world shared to some extent the contradictory position of being women caught up in the massive changes that took place in everyday life brought about by the spread of post-war consumerism and media culture, and intellectuals who shared with others concerns about nationalism versus internationalism, artistic modernism versus realism, and the political responsibilities of artists in a post-holocaust and post-Hiroshima world. If ‘postwar modernity’ is understood in terms of both everyday life and the war of ideas, then women writers are positioned on the fulcrum of these two forces. It is a period ripe for reconsideration through their work.

Feminist criticism on female modernists, and gender and modernism, has largely followed the dominant definition of literary modernism as located in the 1890–1940 period. Such feminist work has definitively reconfigured that space of modernism, but it has not yet challenged current accounts of the literature of the 1950s and 1960s as seen from the perspective of postmodernism. Anglophone feminists have tended, for instance, to see nothing very innovative happening in women’s writing until Doris Lessing published The Golden Notebook in 1962, and Plath’s posthumous volumes of poetry appeared, from Ariel (1965) onwards.

Feminist reconfigurings of the earlier modernist period offer many new perspectives on the operations of gender, which could be applied to the art and writing of the long 1950s, especially the work of women. Questioning the priority given to the avant-garde as the only significant response to modernity, for instance, can clear a space for reconsidering women poets like Judith Wright and Rosemary Dobson, who took traditional poetic forms into new territory. Challenging the separation of high art and commercial culture has important implications for understanding the context in which women artists and writers got published (if at all) and how they were received. As women, their relationship to high culture would always be in question, since femininity, from a modernist point of view, is associated with the dangers attributed to ‘mass culture’: domesticity, consumerism, social conservatism, sentimentality. Consequently, the
positions they might take as writers were often oppositional, ironic or satirical—the work of Christina Stead being a case in point.

To challenge that break—the 1940 terminus of modernism—brings back into the picture continuing debates about modernism and the avant-garde, or modernism and critical forms of realism, and makes it possible to think of modernism as a continuing project of responding to modernity, a project that includes both the Cold War debates and the postmodern moment. From this perspective, we can see Christina Stead in the long 1950s as a Marxist writer developing her ‘politicised modernism’ with ever harsher satirical force. No longer the ‘travelling modernist’ that she was in the 1930s and 40s, but stuck in post-war England, she nevertheless went on experimenting.

Susan Sheridan

Notes

2 The advent of two new agents, c. 1964, Cyrilly Abels in NY and Laurence Pollinger in London, may have been the turning point; and certainly their New York friend Stanley Burnshaw’s successful efforts to get The Man Who Loved Children reprinted: Hazel Rowley, Christina Stead: A Biography, Melbourne: Heinemann, 1993, pp. 445–6.
6 A Life of Letters, p.212. Williams also reports on the ASIO file on Christina, which was initiated in response to a crackpot letter about her family — her brother Gilbert was a member of the Communist Party of Australia from 1941 until the 1960s — and was largely dependent on newspaper clippings (pp. 178–9). As her novel Letty Fox had been banned by Australian Customs in 1946, there was also a Trade and Customs Department file on Stead. These sources were also used by Rowley. Neither biographer mentions possible MI5 or KGB files on the writers.
7 Harris reports Randall Jarrell’s story of 1955 about an unnamed critic refusing to read The Man Who Loved Children, exclaiming, ‘Why, she’s a Stalinist!’: ‘Christina Stead and her Critics,’ p.16.
8 Williams, A Life of Letters, pp. 164–67.
9 Rowley, Christina Stead, p. 338.
A further possibility is that he may have been impoverished by his divorce in 1952.
A Web of Friendship, p. 156.
A Web of Friendship, p. 160; also 129–30.
Rowley, Christina Stead, p. 411.
Rowley, Christina Stead, p. 399.
3 May 1960, CS to Ron Geering, A Web of Friendship, p. 184–5. In this letter she also mentioned the death of Peter Davies.
Harris, 'Christina Stead and her Critics,' p.14.
Stead, 'Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel,' quoted in Lever, 'Christina Stead’s Workshop on the Novel,' 90.
A Web of Friendship, pp. 161–2, CS to Ettore and Jessie Rella, 4 February, 1957.
Rowley, Christina Stead, p. 340.
Rowley, Christina Stead p. 353.
Carter, 'Unhappy Families,' in Harris, p. 257.
V.I. Lenin, What Is To Be Done? (1902).
Rowley, Christina Stead, pp. 121–2.
Observer review, quoted on the dustcover of Cotters’ England.
By Angela Carter, 'Unhappy Families' [1982], as well as by academic critics.


This expansion of the spaces of modernism is well illustrated in the anthology edited by Bonnie Kime Scott, Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections, University of Illinois Press, 2007.