

Crossing the Rubicon: Abjection and Revolution in Christina Stead's *I'm Dying Laughing*

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When Stalin died in 1953, Christina Stead wrote to her brother Gilbert about the great event, “so strange and so close to millions!” She remarked that, though to some Stalin was an “anti-Christ,” “to a lot of others he stood for the Soviet world” (*Web of Friendship* 135). Stead herself held the latter view, and continued to hold it throughout her life, though as the twentieth century wore on that would seem an increasingly perverse and untenable position. Her apparently unshakeable belief in Stalin provides, I think, an intriguing contrast to the rigours of what she called, in a letter to Nettie Palmer, her novel of “the Judas time” (*Web of Friendship* 121), *I'm Dying Laughing*. The novel is at once savagely satirical and deeply sympathetic about the fall from moral and political grace of renegade American writers Emily Wilkes and Stephen Howard. The text lingers over radically competing accounts of a revolutionary history, a dream of history turned to nightmare in the Cold War era.

My reading of the politics of *I'm Dying Laughing* finds conducive Judith Kegan Gardiner's view that Stead “was both ahead of her time and permanently shaped by the Marxist orthodoxies of the 1930s” (22). Recognising the complex mix of progressive and orthodox strands in Stead's political thought, I focus on how contradictory impulses structure her narrative, determining relationships among author, characters and reader. Yet, in her essay on *I'm Dying Laughing*, Susan Sheridan argues that while Stead's protagonist, Emily, wants her novel—the “book within the book”—to capture the elusive “moment of revolution,” Stead herself appears less interested in the gladiatorial spirit of revolution, and more focused on “art and politics under capitalism” (50). While this reading is compelling, my own discussion of the narrative's political frame attributes a greater weight to the theme of revolution in Stead's book. It is precisely through the ambivalent

representation of Emily as counter-revolutionary woman, I argue, that the strength of Stead's own political views is to be discerned. Encompassing and framing Emily's "magnum opus," the narrative of *I'm Dying Laughing* sustains a normative distinction, consistent with its author's adherence to Stalinist ideology, between what Angela Carter has described as "romantic, soft-edged and visionary" Anglo-American socialism and a "rational," "antiergical," harder-edged European socialism (Snitow 16–17). This distinction—most compellingly manifest in the narrative's abjections—is structural to the production of *I'm Dying Laughing*, providing fascinating, if contradictory, evidence of the durability—even obduracy—of Stead's pro-Soviet political beliefs.

The vision of post-holocaust Western culture that emerges in Julia Kristeva's study of abjection, *Powers of Horror*, shares much with Stead's vision of postwar America and Europe in *I'm Dying Laughing*. Focusing on the fragile borders of subjectivity and culture, both texts respond to the collapse of enlightenment values—of revolutionary optimism—in the wake of the genocidal horror of totalitarianism. The abjection that, Kristeva argues, is foundational to identity and culture persists at the edges of Stead's narrative, revealing and contaminating the author's pro-Soviet beliefs. It is not my argument that Stead, herself, entertained serious political doubts of her own—on the contrary. It is rather that the giddy material of her novel reproduces the tracery of a belief system poised at the edge of its own implosion. The volcanic ideological pressure of *I'm Dying Laughing* is, I believe, what endows it with its extraordinary power; such pressure may well have contributed to Stead's own failure to complete the novel—something usually explained on other grounds (see, for example, R. G. Geering's "*I'm Dying Laughing: Behind the Scenes*").

Though a number of commentators justly observe the heteroglossia or heterogeneity of Stead's narratives, I would draw attention to Michael Holquist's remark that Mikhail Bakhtin himself understood that in novelistic discourse the breaking of frames presupposes the continuing presence and power of frames.¹ So, too, even amid the heterogeneity of her narratives, Stead imposes, in subtle ways, a normative frame of judgement, one which is both moral and political. Two quite different statements Stead herself made about a book that so resisted her efforts of closure can be invoked to exemplify this point. These statements encapsulate the novel's contradictory pulses, highlighting variant expectations about whether and how its protagonists are to be judged:

It was all about the passion of—I use passion in almost the religious sense—of two people, two Americans, New Yorkers, in the thirties. They are doing well, but they suffered all the troubles of the thirties. They were politically minded. They went to Hollywood. They came to Europe to avoid the McCarthy trouble. Of course they were

deeply involved. And then, they lived around Europe, oh, in a wild and exciting extravagant style. But there was nothing to support it. At the same time they wanted to be on the side of the angels, good Communists, good people, and also to be very rich. Well, of course [. . .] they came to a bad end. (qtd. in Geering, Preface vi–vii)

Stead highlights the biblical dimension of her narrative, invoking the morality-play fall of the angels. Emily's and Stephen's political plight is thus transposed into a frame of judgement, theological and primal, involving rebellion against the Father, loss of paradise, and endurance of eternal exile. As aspirants to revolutionary heroism, the fall of these angels into political betrayal and moral cynicism is devastating, yet the analogy means that their "bad end" is also inevitable—a foreseeable and foregone conclusion.

In a second statement, however, Stead speaks of wanting to feed her narrative's burning ferocity. Here her emphasis falls not on divine judgement, but on temporally unfolding intensity of suffering and horror: "I meant it to go on from fire to more fiery to fierier still; it has a very terrible dramatic end, I wanted it to be a build-up all the way through" (qtd. in Geering, Preface viii).

Stead's authorial commentary parallels an oscillation in the novel itself between an invitation to judgement of its fallen angels and the awful, gorgeous scene of human suffering—a combination of sympathy and irony recognized as characteristic of her writing (Lidoff 56). The simultaneous exercise of sympathy and detachment is magnificently demonstrated in *I'm Dying Laughing*. Indeed, it is through the maintenance of this complex stance towards its protagonists, Emily and Stephen, that the narrative's own defining frame of judgement becomes apparent. It is, however, in the abjection accompanying the maintenance of this stance that such judgement is finally destabilized and the fixity of political belief called into question.

In discussing the abject in the novel, and the novel's own abjections, I first draw attention, as my title suggests, to the significance of its recurrent trope of crossing. The idea of "crossing" presupposes a border or divide—an abyss or gap. As well as the "abyss" itself, "crossing" therefore signals the uneasy conjunction of apparently divided states. In the narrative, these divided or opposed states can be identified as, on the one hand, the moral rectitude of strong revolutionary belief and, on the other, the giddy abjection that accompanies the maintenance of such strong belief even as the tide of history turns against it. In *I'm Dying Laughing*, crossings occur in multiple and contradictory forms—geographic, temporal, cultural, political and subjective. The narrative crosses, for instance, in time, from pre- to postwar eras. After the opening three chapters set in 1935, the narrative overleaps the terrible abyss of war and fascism, resuming with "UNO 1945." The marriage of Emily and Stephen crosses class boundaries. The couple crosses from

one side of the USA to the other, before crossing from the USA to Europe. They then cross from affiliation with French communists and resistance workers to alignment with renegades, criminals and Nazi collaborators. Cumulatively, this series of crossings effects a frenzied narrative propulsion. Yet countering this drive is the stalling of narrative momentum through repetition and contradiction. Crossings repeat themselves, becoming internalized in corporeal, psychic and abject forms. Repetition and return—the constant recurrence of fascist terror in dinner party conversation, for instance—steep the narrative in the imagery and processes of abjection.

In a prescient moment, Stephen compares their plight with Julius Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon, an act of treason that led to the downfall of the Republic and ushered in Empire:

He felt his gorge rise. He foresaw their slow separation from the Party, the beliefs of the Roosevelt era. He had a suspicion that Emily, who had jibbed at all marking time or trimming, would throw herself bodily over the Rubicon, would jump, laughing and hurrahing, the narrow deep river while he might forever hesitate on the banks. (275)

The Ancient Roman Republic's capitulation to imperialism is here analogous to the American Communist Party's self-serving capitulation to nationalism in the Roosevelt and McCarthy eras. Thus, in this early part of the narrative, the Howards are in trouble with their Hollywood comrades because they resist the Party's politically flawed doctrine, challenging its deviation from international socialism and from European communist thought. The implied privileging of internationalist over Roosevelt-era communism is also clear later, when Suzanne, Vittorio and Party comrades generously welcome the ostracized American couple, newly arrived in France, as fellow internationalists.

But this ostensibly worthy reason for the couple's ejection from the American Party is already shadowed by another that brings about their moral and political downfall—their reckless hedonism, and their use of Stephen's daughter Olivia to maintain access to his family's wealth (an inheritance constantly threatened by the couple's political clash with Anna, the Howard family matriarch). The couple's subsequent flight to Europe, therefore, does not resolve their political problems, but escalates them, precipitating a far more threatening series of crossings. Echoing the Macbeths, the reckless husband and wife who, having murdered the good father/king, now wish to "jump the life to come" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* I.vii.5–7), Emily and Stephen may dream of revolution—of crossing to that beautiful country—but their negative trajectory is fatally conditioned by their desire for consumer luxury and affluence. Thus they can never rid themselves of a primal fear of revolutionary struggle, and of the necessary terror of "the tumbrils." As romantics, idealists and

American writers, Emily and Stephen have no stomach for the privation, sacrifice or martyrdom that historically accompanies such struggle. So, like the Macbeths, they attempt to outrun or overleap such a fate. The holy drive towards a revolutionary subjectivity falls rapidly into the abyss of counter-revolution.

In *I'm Dying Laughing*, the abyss of terror to be crossed is corporeally configured in Emily's body and laughter. Emily is the narrative site of an abjection that, in Kristeva's account, always accompanies the maintenance of the subject, of culture and—I'd argue in relation to Stead's novel—of belief in revolution. Far from overleaping the abyss, Emily is thrust within manifold contradiction: Emily inhabits the abyss and the abyss inhabits Emily, so that she is abject. But abjection spreads beyond the novel's protagonist. Her abjections make Emily function as "the scalpel within," as the instrument with which the text performs a displaced anatomy of that which it does not wish to know—its own "jettisoned object." This process draws it close "to the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 2)—to the crimes of the Soviet regime and the corruption of the revolutionary ideal.

What, precisely, is abject in Stead's novel? Terms like horror or guilt do not—I think—suffice, though horror and guilt are characteristically linked with abjection. For Kristeva, the threat of the abject derives from its impossible status as neither subject nor object. Rather, it is "ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated" (1). Experiences, images or encounters that, on a daily basis, call up the repressed from the unconscious, serving to remind the self of its own transiently constructed nature, without which it would fall into the abyss of non-being, are termed "abject." Abjection is both the principle of cohesion and the threat of fragmentation.

Both Emily and Stephen react viscerally against abject things, exhibiting inordinate fear of contamination. Their bouts of optimism about them soon being unambiguously welcomed back into the revolutionary fold are often followed by some episode of irrational loathing directed at those suffering material hardship, or those offending against their living standards. Stephen finds virtuous Resistance workers like Vittorio and Suzanne irritating (267); he gravitates instead to high-living collaborators, renegades or criminals, like Johnny and Violet Trefougar. Likewise, Emily rages, in a symptomatic scene, against a starving cat that she finds licking an unwashed baking tray: "She took the cat by the scruff of the neck and hauled it to the door [. . .]. It had just had kittens. It was almost starved to death. She threw it on the hillside which rose behind the house" (113).

For Kristeva, food scraps typify abjection (76–77). The cat's visible need prompts an irrational loathing, and Emily's actions demonstrate a compulsive fear of the other, of what is residual to or excluded from her domestic order. Imperfection in a menu, the sight of plain food, or spectral images of the hungry masses "clawing at the cobblestones" of Versailles (423) increasingly preoccupy and disgust Emily. The starving cat represents the condition Emily must exclude from her home and

her self. Ironically, the ejection of the cat from the house to the cold hillside prefigures Emily's own fate.

Stephen and Emily are not merely sensitive to abjection: they themselves become abject—bodies that offend because they inhabit and incorporate boundaries. They are strays—“dejects” in Kristeva's terminology (8). In the double bind of their belonging to uppercrust society and to the Hollywood branch of the Communist Party, they stray from righteousness. Ultimately they stray from the category of the true communist—a category relayed in the text by characters like Ruth and Axel Oates, Vittorio and Suzanne, all loyal to the Howards, but also unsentimental, undeluded and committed revolutionaries.

Abjection accompanies the narrative's exhibition of a kind of voyeurism, a pleasurable disgust about Emily's body. Emily represents what Kristeva calls the maternal abject (12–13, 54). Her body's fatness, fullness, permeability—its otherness to the hygienically-bordered, “clean and proper” body—signals excessive “femininity.” Associated, as many have argued, with Rabelais' Gargantua, Emily's body is indeed potentially revolutionary as its carnivalesque excess disrupts symbolic order. Yet the category of the “carnavalesque” is not quite adequate here. Emily's body is far more painfully riven, functioning, I believe, to figure and displace abjection. Emily more closely resembles Kristeva's “deject,” a “tireless builder” who casts “within [herself] the scalpel that carries out [her] separations;” her laughter, erupting at the point of deepest horror, is a strategy for “placing or displacing abjection” (8).

Through Emily, Stead's text purveys horrors. These horrors, accompanying and producing the narrative's sense of moral and political boundaries, must be crossed or overleapt. Horror fissures coherence of belief in the Soviet system, a normative belief otherwise apparent in the political values to which Emily and Stephen aspire. During a conversation with old friends, Axel and Ruth Oates, and the rather world-weary British reporter Des Canby, Emily and Stephen declare their fidelity to the Soviet cause in its triumphant progress through history:

Emily said, “Oh, yes, indeed. We're still on that all-stations train. That omnibus. How many stops has that train got, that started at the Finland station in March 1917? At every whistle-stop people got off. Not us.”

Stephen said, “Romantics and mystics and people like ourselves looking for new energy, a new aim from the revolution. All there with a personal aim. Well, we're still on the train that started at the Finland station.” (183)

Somewhat listlessly, Des Canby replies: “Ah, the omnibus! The crimes of the Soviet Union! I know the full calendar. The ones that dropped off at each station

as you put it, throng like all the dead of the world” (183).

In the familiar narrative of Lenin’s train ride, episodes of revolutionary terror are recast as mere whistle-stops or stations along the way. Thronging like the dead are the renegades who got off early. Among her very detailed notes on Arthur Koestler’s *The God That Failed*—a famous 1949 collection of testimonies by prominent ex-communists—Stead records Louis Fischer’s use of the Finland train narrative.² Referring to the Soviets’ ominous and bloody repression of a 1921 uprising on the Island of Kronstadt, Fischer explains that: “The Soviet–Nazi Pact was ‘Kronstadt’ for me. Others did not ‘leave the train’ to stop at ‘Kronstadt’ until Russia invaded Finland in 1939.” “Kronstadt” here becomes a metonymic term for the believer’s signal moment of awakening to Soviet betrayal of the revolution. As their resistance to Hollywood communism initially promises, Emily and Stephen want to resist Fischer’s awakening, aspiring to stay aboard the Soviet train. But once they arrive in Europe they become derailed from this commitment by their own American “sentiment,” “softness” and predilection for luxury. Emily and Stephen stray from European communist circles—less because of outrage against any particular Soviet crime than because they are mired ever more deeply in the contradiction between their political beliefs and consumerist lives.

The devout Soviet train ride is thus swiftly overwritten in Emily’s discourse by another metaphor—that of an American road journey into darkness:

“all the stages on the road to socialism, all the turnoffs, all the milestones, until you get to the one that says, *No Turning Back*. Oh, what a shudder! I’d like to stand on that road and look up at that signpost. *From here no way back*. What would be my real feelings? I mean, without romance, without hazy illusions, without the idea that one day if it didn’t suit I could go back to the USA? It’s a fearful idea. For us all, socialism, even Russian Marxist socialism, is a somewhat Utopian dream; but there—at the dread signpost—”

She laughed. (252)

Here, with syntax arrested at the prospect of the “dread signpost” and with the eruption of Emily’s laughter, political commitment wavers on the brink of an abyss. The road journey to nightmare is later transfigured, and literally experienced, when Emily and Stephen are drawn in by the reckless and disorderly Violet and Johnny Trefougar, accompanying them on a smuggling trip. As well as intensifying the thematic of border crossing, this detour into criminal territory marks the increasing corruption of Emily’s and Stephen’s revolutionary energies.

The extreme tension between revolutionary certainties and the impossibility of closure that marks the narrative’s own abjection is manifested in at least two key moments in the text. The first relates to Emily’s letter of renunciation to the

Oates; the second appears in the conversation already referred to, among the Howards, the Oates and Des Canby, who jokingly enumerate the crimes of the Soviet Union.

Striking a Faustian deal with Anna, Emily writes letters of recantation and renunciation to all her radical friends and associates. Her letter to Ruth and Axel Oates argues the case against revolutionary socialism in terms eloquently reminiscent of *The God That Failed*, pleading that the Oates “be good to us, try to understand us and know that we did not act from the base motives we are accused of” (403). Undercutting Emily’s appeal, however, is what she has absentmindedly scribbled at the bottom of her note: \$30,000. It seems impossible to decide between these baldly competing pieces of evidence. Does the Judas-like sum of \$30,000 empty all integrity from the arguments Emily articulates in her letter? Or does the letter’s compelling rhetoric demand equal hearing?

Are there no innocent martyrs whatever in the bloody dark unrevealed chronicle of Bolshevik history, no innocent people afraid to return to their loved country for fear of a rope or a shot in the dark? No people hauled out of bed and brought suddenly up on strange charges, ignorant of the denouncer, the accuser? (401)

Emily’s letter not only addresses the bloody terror of revolution, but brings home the relevance of this problem to the question of what constitutes revolutionary literature:

Take Danton. Or Cicero. Their friends were overwhelmed by their characters, their own characters, rich, various, tortured, intricate and noble because human. They fill the soul with a great nostalgia because they are right, somehow entirely right. Reason, the fullness of humanity is so little considered in our doomsday world, that it is like a shock to discover man afresh. (403)

The irony here is obvious. Emily *is* Stead’s Danton or Cicero. Her self-consciousness erodes sure judgement, inviting sympathy, complicity. At odds with orthodox socialist realism prevalent in the 1930s and 1940s, Emily’s argument that the artist must discover man afresh is compelling. Stead’s own narrative bears witness to the truth of Emily’s argument, since Emily herself—“rich, various, tortured, intricate and noble”—is precisely the object of Stead’s narrative’s gaze. As things spiral out of control, Emily begins planning her blockbuster novel about the French Revolution. She turns for inspiration to Theodore Dreiser’s 1925 *An American Tragedy*. Even as Stephen rages about their deepening debt, Emily is gripped by Dreiser’s portrait of Clyde Griffith, whose desire for upward class mobility leads to his murderous complicity in drowning a factory worker pregnant with his child. Emily cries: “Oh Stephen, to choose such a doomed soul! Listen, Stephen! Like us, perhaps! He makes you feel it is like us. [. . .] to show this severe

terrible compassion—such compassion, oh, is terror, terror” (351).

Emily realizes that Dreiser’s severe and terrible compassion is the mark of the true artist, the true revolutionary artist who refuses to shrink from unpleasant truths and whose generosity and courage compel him to convey the wrenching emotional truth of humanity. Dreiser’s terrible compassion is correlative with Stead’s own in *I’m Dying Laughing*. Fastening its severe (because compassionate) gaze upon Emily and Stephen, the narrative skirts the nightmare admission that the worker’s revolution is drained of credibility. Its gaze upon these failed renegades abets its avoidance of more threatening failures, failures implicating stalwart Stalinists who *did* stay on that train from Finland station in 1917.

Near the end of *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva identifies the laughter of Celine as a response to abjection in which horror is not just confronted, but incorporated. This laughter is a “gushing forth of the unconscious”—“neither jovial, nor trustful, nor sublime, nor enraptured by pre-existing harmony. It is bare, anguished, and as fascinated as it is frightened” (205–06). Stead’s narrative approaches such a condition. What is both conveyed and obscured by her narrative gaze upon Emily is an extremely unpalatable version of history. That history is briefly articulated in a second and concluding example, from the ensuing conversation among sympathetic comrades. Overcoming initial embarrassment at having broached this dangerous topic, the Howards, Des Canby and the Oates compete with each other, hysterically, to enumerate the betrayals of the Soviet Union. They begin “to shout and crow and to throw dates and events at each other” (184). Their hysterical laughter opens onto a horror otherwise contained, suppressed and held—but only just—at the borders of Stead’s text. Dragged into view is the spectre of a revolution now blighted, corrupted, betrayed. Emily is permitted, momentarily, to think the unthinkable, and an intolerable knowledge briefly, with a brutally casual air, enters the text: “Well, honestly there have been moments when my heart failed. By golly, what a canticle you have made! [. . .] It’s quite a record, isn’t it? [. . .] Well—heigh-ho! History doesn’t bear scrutiny” (185). Horror surfaces but submerges again, returning as Emily’s counter-revolutionary discourse, and monstrously embodied as she transforms herself into Marie Antoinette.

During the last chapters of the novel, Emily becomes entirely abject. Her novel and her personal affairs incomplete, she is last seen as a homeless stray, having set up her home on the steps of the Forum Romanum, the forlorn site of the lost Roman Republic, and the scene of both the origin and ruin of Western civilization:

This old woman, with the straggling half-grey hair, the droll, hanging-fat face, the untidy silk suit [. . .]. She had a handbag on her lap and beside her a worn valise, of snakeskin with gold fittings, which lay open. Some loose papers lay on the steps and in her lap were letters it seemed. (446)

Emily's body—aged yet only half-grey—performs ambiguity and contradiction. The “scalpel” of “separations” cast within is now manifested in the disorder of her belongings and in her visibly torn, divided body.

Yet it is only with Emily as narrative “scalpel” that Stead permits herself the forbidden luxury of delving into an otherwise unthinkable complicity. Her fictional character incorporates the laughing apocalypse, representing even as she displaces not only the despair and horror of the postwar years, but also, it would seem, the difficulty for a generation of committed Marxists of reconciling with their beliefs the mounting evidence of Soviet atrocities. Temporarily staving off, therefore, the terror of final judgement, Emily and Stephen endure and abjectly figure the unendurable position of the fallen angels in a theological system that, while still holding them in place, is—for all practical purposes—permanently evacuated of god. “A laughing apocalypse,” says Kristeva, “is an apocalypse without god” (206).

Endnotes

- 1 In his introduction to *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Holquist reasons that Bakhtin's notebooks “are a useful corrective [. . .] to the carnivalesque image of Bakhtin now abroad, for they come back again and again to the power of frames” (xix).
- 2 Christina Stead Papers, NLA MS 4967, Box 12, Folder 87; see also Koestler 222. Stead's notes are fascinating and revealing. Each closely-typed page of notes on *The God that Failed* bears the curious heading, “Eight Rogues.” Presumably this is Stead's scathing characterisation of the six contributors (Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, Richard Wright, André Gide, Louis Fischer and Stephen Spender) along with the editor, Richard Crossman, and Dr Enid Starkie (who introduced Gide's essay). Stead's heading is the single but quite unmistakable sign of her contempt for the book's contributors. Otherwise her notes suggest her immersion in the task of combing the book for insights into what motivated the change of heart of these former comrades.

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