



MONASH University

The far left, cultural politics, and the question of style in Australian literature

Naish Gawen
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Abstract

This thesis investigates the role of the far left in literary production in Australia, with a particular focus on looking at how political tensions were invested into debates about literary style in the middle decades of the twentieth century. I argue that the far left has played a central albeit often unacknowledged role in literary production in Australia as, variously, an inspiration for literary depictions, a framework for the production of literature itself, and as an ideological force that inspired reaction. Each chapter looks at a moment in twentieth century Australian literature when realism, modernism, and the organised political left came into contact. I begin with a reading of Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) in which I argue that her modernist experimentation dramatically clashes with the realist mode in a way that registers concomitant tensions between emancipatory socialist politics and individualism. I argue that the novel can be productively read alongside thinkers of Western Marxism such as György Lukács and Walter Benjamin as a response to the conditions of capitalist modernity. In the second chapter I discuss the socialist cultural project launched in the 1950s by the Realist Writers' Movement in Australia, locating the ideas of the group within previous bourgeois, Marxist, and Soviet ideas about realism, and examining how they used modernism as a constitutive other against which to conduct their politico-aesthetic struggle. In the third chapter I look at how debates about Patrick White's fiction became a proxy for a reckoning with questions about class and elitism in Australia. In particular I look at White's *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), examining the ire it drew from contemporary socialist realists, and I offer a reading of the novel that sees it as a response to a structure of feeling grounded in Australia's post-war, increasingly affluent suburbia. I conclude by looking at the trajectory of *Overland* an instantiation of the historical processes examined in the thesis, namely the decline of the organised old left and the rise of heterogenous social movements unanchored to specific artistic practices and not embedded within a mass party.

Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Naish Gawen
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Publications during enrolment

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| <u>Introduction</u> | 8 |
| I. Rationale for research and research scope | |
| II. The development of realism | |
| III. Cultural materialism as methodology | |
| IV. Chapter overviews | |
| <u>Chapter One: Socialism in the modern antipodes: politics and aesthetics in Christina Stead's <i>Seven Poor Men of Sydney</i></u> | 21 |
| I. 'Red Stead' in modernist Australia | |
| II. Workers' voices in <i>Seven Poor Men of Sydney</i> | |
| III. <i>Seven Poor Men of Sydney</i> as Lukácsian critical realism | |
| IV. Modernism and socialism in the antipodes | |
| V. Chapter conclusion: an alternative modernism | |
| <u>Chapter Two: Socialist realism with Australian characteristics</u> | 45 |
| I. The emergence of communist literary institutions in Australia | |
| II. 'Between Two Worlds': Modernism as constitutive other | |
| III. The influence of Soviet ideas about art in the Australian context | |
| IV. Cold War Culture | |
| V. Chapter conclusion: the fate of the movement | |
| <u>Chapter Three: Class, elitism, and the debates over Patrick White's <i>Riders in the Chariot</i></u> | 74 |
| Part One | |
| I. The socialist reception of White | |
| II. 'Elites' and the literary sphere | |
| III. The contemporary liberal reception of White | |
| Part Two | |
| I. Reading the category of class in <i>Riders in the Chariot</i> | |
| II. The spiritual vision of <i>Riders in the Chariot</i> | |
| III. Conclusion to discussion of <i>Riders in the Chariot</i> : both 'expression of' and 'protest against' | |
| <u>Conclusion</u> | 106 |
| I. Reading <i>Overland</i> as a synecdoche for the fate of the cultural left | |
| <u>Bibliography</u> | 115 |

Introduction

I. Rationale for research and research scope

Literature is necessary to politics above all when it gives a voice to whatever is without a voice, when it gives a name to what as yet has no name, especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude. [...] Literature is like an ear that can hear things beyond the understanding of the language of politics; it is like an eye that can see beyond the color spectrum perceived by politics.¹

This quotation comes from a 1976 speech given by the writer and former Italian Communist Party member Italo Calvino, entitled ‘The Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature’. In the speech, Calvino looks back over the previous decades of Italian history and examines the vexed relationship between literature and politics—a relationship perceived to be so important, Calvino tells us, that for a period “I might even say that every discussion revolved around this point”.² By the mid-70s Calvino had landed on the position that literature should provide an avenue for exploring that which is absented by the language of politics; such a conclusion should be seen in the context of the Italian left’s move away from the doctrine of socialist realism, its rejection of the idea that literature should “voice a truth already possessed by politics”.³ The notion of the ‘committed’ writer, the relationship between the writer and the Communist Party, the usefulness (or not) of literary writing to workers’ struggles, and the role of the avant-garde as opposed to more heritage forms of literary writing all became topics of vigorous debate amongst the post-war left in Italy, and around the world.

These topics were debated in Australia too, albeit in this context they are far less well known. While the realist-versus-modernist debates of the Frankfurt School, or the Soviet Union’s promotion of socialist realism against a bourgeois modernism, are canonical moments in the literary history of the twentieth-century, in the Australian context the significant role played by the left in literary production remains underappreciated. My aim in this thesis is thus to account for the generative role played by far left politics in the development of Australian literature across the mid-twentieth century, beginning

¹ Italo Calvino, ‘The Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature’, in *The Uses of Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 71.

² *Ibid*, 68.

³ *Ibid*, 71.

roughly in the 1930s and running through to the 1970s. I argue that far left politics played a role not only as an inspiration for the content of literary texts, but also as an institutional network for the production of literature itself, and as a cultural and aesthetic presence to be reacted against by rival literary modes such as modernism. Neither the centrality of the Australian left's role in literary production, nor the diversity of ways the latter has been influenced by the former across the twentieth century, has been sufficiently appreciated by scholarship.

As with the European and Soviet debates, matters of cultural politics in Australia were often funnelled through the question of literary style. Realism and modernism are contested terms with resonances specific to an Australian context. I will introduce them in the next section of this introduction, and then throughout the thesis examine the ways they have been posited in opposition to each other. I argue that these ostensibly formal tensions stand in for deeper cultural and political fissures in twentieth-century Australia, such as that over the vexed question of Australian cultural nationalism, and the tension between individualism and collectivism. For reasons of space, this thesis will only look only at prose fiction and not poetry, since the trajectory of Australian poetry's development in relation to modernism and realism is entirely different from that of prose and would require the same number of words again for it to be adequately examined.

This thesis combines close reading of literary texts with historical and theoretical investigation of the institutions that supported the production and reception of literature. The two novels I look at are Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) and Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot* (1961). Stead's novel explores the proletarian milieu during which the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was founded: Sydney in the 1920s. The novel hosts a clash between the realist and modernist modes, and I hold it up as an example of Australian literature that expresses a sophisticated, nuanced balancing between the demands of aesthetic freedom and political commitment. White's novel is examined because his oeuvre, and *Riders* in particular, acted (and still acts) as a vector for debates about class, politics, realism, and modernism in Australian literature. The novel was received with great hostility by the socialist literary sphere, and in this thesis, I will analyse the significance of this reception and how the contemporary left subsequently retreated from most of the positions espoused by the socialists in the 1960s.

My reading of *Seven Poor Men*, by emphasizing how the novel speaks to the broader social moment of capitalist modernity, departs from the prevailing critical tendency to focus on the novel's local coordinates in an Australian milieu. For White's novel, the emphasis taken by scholarship tends to be the opposite: to read the novel as the expression of a general, post-war spiritual condition. As such, I have found it productive to locally historicise the novel. That I have chosen to focus on two writers about whom a great deal has already been written is intentional; this thesis is as much about the politics of literary criticism and cultural debate in Australia as it is about the fiction itself, and it is these major writers around whom public debates agglomerate. My second chapter, on the socialist realists, in which I make a claim for the remembrance of the Realist Writers' Movement that is potentially at risk of being forgotten, should serve as a corrective to the focus elsewhere in the thesis on two major writers.

Each chapter examines the organised political left at a different stage of its development and considers an accompanying formative tension or debate in the realm of cultural production. I have chosen to focus on moments of conflict, tension, and debate in Australian literary history in order to show that the literary history that does exist is a product of active contestation in which certain historical factors triumphed over others. To bring Australian literature into dialogue with socialism may seem, to a socialist, a frivolous gesture, and to the aesthete, an uninteresting one. But as this thesis will show, socialism and Australian literature have historically not only much to say to each other but were deeply imbricated at many major points along their respective developments. Understanding the reasons for the decline of the quest for a socialist literary sphere and the nature of what has been left in its wake is a major impetus behind the writing of this thesis.

The rest of this introduction will serve two main purposes. I will introduce "realism", a term that is central to this thesis, tracing its development as a literary mode up to its twentieth-century confrontation with modernism, before turning to an investigation of the term's deployment in a specifically Australian context. Then, I will discuss Raymond Williams' theory of cultural materialism, its lessons for the study of literature, and why I have enlisted this framework in my study.

II. The development of realism

One of the concerns of this thesis is how certain literary modes are invested with political possibilities. Debates about style, about ways of apprehending reality and transfiguring this reality into

the written form, were deeply connected to questions of cultural politics in Australia and elsewhere. It is therefore important that we first clarify what is meant by a term like realism and how it has been deployed in an Australian context.

I demonstrate in the second chapter that the socialist realists in Australia valued the novel for its ability to provide the reader with knowledge about Australian society, knowledge that they saw as helpful for transforming society in accordance with their socialist vision. This notion that the realist novel has an intimate connection with knowledge, that it has an affinity with science as much as art, is an idea rooted in the genesis of realism itself. While contemplating the relationship between art and reality has been a central component of philosophical thinking since Plato and Aristotle, the theory of *mimesis* being a particularly well-known case in point, realism itself as an aesthetic mode has a more recent history. Realism does not posit a general, speculative relationship between art and reality, but advocates for a particular way of representing this reality.⁴ It is a reaction against Romanticism that flourished at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. In a review of Jane Austen's *Emma* in 1815, Walter Scott discussed the "new novel" as a move away from "romantic affection" towards the "copying of nature as she really exists in the common walks of life".⁵ This new portrait of life must have "depth of knowledge", and Scott praised Austen's "knowledge of the world".⁶ The concept of realism inherited the Enlightenment-era fixation with knowledge production. Erich Auerbach has made the point about French realist fiction, but the claim applies to a broader context too, that in the 19th century literature was "under the influence of the enthusiasm for science which marked the first decades of positivism".⁷

Realist writers such as George Eliot described their work in terms of professions that produce knowledge. In *Middlemarch* (1871), the narrator calls herself a "historian" and the full title of the novel includes the sub-title *A Study of Provincial Life*.⁸ At other times, the work of the narrator is described in terms akin to those of a scientist:

⁴ A clear explanation of the distinction between *mimesis* and realism is provided in Jan Bruck, 'From Aristotelian Mimesis to Bourgeois Realism', *Poetics* 31, no. 3 (1982).

⁵ Walter Scott, 'Art. IX. *Emma: A Novel*', *The Quarterly Review* (October 1815), accessed online <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/review-of-emma-in-the-quarterly-review-1815>: 195.

⁶ *Ibid*, 197.

⁷ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition, translated by Willard Trask, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 496.

⁸ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 68, 151.

In watching effects, if only of an electric battery, it is often necessary to change our place and examine a particular mixture or group at some distance from the point where the movement we are interested in was set up.⁹

The parameters of the novel are imagined here as scholarly and social enquiry. In Eliot's 1856 treatise on realism, 'The Natural History of German Life', she observes:

How little the real characteristics of the working-classes are known to those who are outside them, how little their natural history has been studied, is sufficiently disclosed by our Art as well as by our political and social theories.¹⁰

Eliot proceeds to call for a "real knowledge of the People, with a thorough study of their habits, their ideas, their motives".¹¹ Here literature is imagined specifically as a way of coming to know a national community. Such an emphasis on the epistemological function of literature would later prove particularly influential for generations of both socialist and non-socialist realists in Australia. T. Inglis Moore, for instance, would argue in *Overland* in 1956 that "[o]ur writing is an expression of ourselves an important mirror of our society reflecting our history and our distinctive way of life, a treasure house of our national traditions".¹² But the notion of literature as a vehicle for social knowledge would undergo several theoretical adjustments before it made its way from the bourgeois French and British writers of the nineteenth century to the realist writers of the twentieth in Australia. Marx and Engels' own writings are one such bridge between the aforementioned contexts. Their statements about art are also deeply influenced by the notion of art's epistemological value, that literature's foremost task is to provide accurate knowledge about society. Marx, for example, praised the Victorian novelists for having "issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists, and moralists put together";¹³ Engels wrote in a letter to his friend Margaret Harkness that he has learned more about post-Revolutionary France from Balzac than "from all the professed historians,

⁹ Ibid, 437.

¹⁰ George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life' in *The Complete Essays of George Eliot*, edited by Nathan Sheppard (Washington D.C.: Funk & Wagnalls, 2009), 142.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² T. Inglis Moore, 'Australian Literature in Our Universities', *Overland* 6 (1955-56), 2.

¹³ Qtd in Ali Alizadeh, *Marx and Art* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 84.

economists, and statisticians of the period together”.¹⁴ In a letter to the playwright Ferdinand Lassalle, Engels criticised his play *Franz von Sickingen* for not being “realistic enough” and inaccurate in its historical representation, but commends that the “protagonists in the action *are* representative of certain classes and tendencies, hence of certain ideas of their time”.¹⁵ Engels’ most explicit definition of realism, provided in the Harkness letter, is notably apolitical but retains the emphasis on epistemological concerns: realism, he writes, is “the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances”.¹⁶ Although not a fully developed theory of art, in these comments we can nevertheless already see the beginnings of an explicit realist tendency which will eventually harden into orthodoxy, in a context other than Marx and Engels’ own, with socialist realism.

The doctrine of socialist realism was officially declared at the 1934 Soviet Writers Congress. Soviet theoreticians such as Zhdanov, Maxim Gorky, Karl Radek, and Bukharin gave speeches expounding the role of art and culture in Soviet society. They defined the role of the writer as someone who, in the words of Radek, “create[s] the images of the new life—of life in the epoch of victorious socialism”.¹⁷ Features of this socialist realism included trenchant opposition to contemporaneous modernist tendencies, and a prescriptive aesthetic programme centred on positive portrayals of the new socialist man. Zhdanov emphasizes the importance of “truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic portrayal”.¹⁸ Gorky makes an almost identical point: the work of the Writers Union should be “aimed at a full knowledge of our country’s past and present”.¹⁹ The emphasis on knowledge that I have traced throughout the bourgeois context, and then through Marx and Engels’ own writings, appears here as doctrine. Soviet socialist realism had four official elements: *narodnost*, *ideinost*, *partinost*, and *tipichnost*. The first refers to the technical requirement of popular simplicity, the second to correct ideological content, the third to the partisan affiliation demanded of realism, and the final is the crucial

¹⁴ Frederick Engels to Margaret Harkness, April 1888, in *Marxists Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1888/letters/88_04_15.htm

¹⁵ Frederick Engels to Ferdinand Lassalle, 18th May 1859, from *Marxists Internet Archive*, https://marxists.architexturez.net/archive/marx/works/1859/letters/59_05_18a.htm.

¹⁶ Engels, Letter to Harkness.

¹⁷ Karl Radek, ‘Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art’, speech at the 1934 Soviet Writers Congress, *Marxist Internet Archives*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/radek/1934/sovietwritercongress.htm>

¹⁸ A.A. Zhdanov, ‘Soviet Literature: The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature’, speech at the 1934 Soviet Writers’ Congress, *Marxist Internet Archive*,

https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/sovietwritercongress/zhdanov.htm

¹⁹ Maxim Gorky, ‘Soviet Literature’, speech at the 1934 Soviet Writers’ Congress, *Marxist Internet Archives*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorky-maxim/1934/soviet-literature.htm>

recognition that, according to Williams, “alters ‘realism’ from its sense of the direct reproduction of observed reality” into “instead, a principled and organised selection”.²⁰ This notion of *tipichnost* breaks with the earlier positivist bourgeois notion of realism. The epistemological criterion has been strongly repurposed in a politically charged, instrumental way. As Radek says, “socialist realism does not set out to portray the world in order to satisfy curiosity [...] it sets out to be a participant in the great struggle for the new Renaissance of mankind”.²¹ He continues:

We do not photograph life. In the totality of phenomena, we seek out the main phenomenon. Giving everything without discrimination is not realism. That would be the most vulgar kind of naturalism. We should select phenomena. Realism means that we make a selection from the point of view of what is essential, from the point of view of guiding principles. And as for what is essential – the very name of socialist realism tells us this.²²

In other words, a pre-determined field of sociological discourse exists, and it is literature’s task to provide images of life which confirm the existing worldview expressed therein. This Soviet doctrine of socialist realism was to achieve influence in Australia primarily through the Soviet-aligned CPA and the various communist-aligned writers’ groups that began in the 1950s—a phenomenon that will be discussed in the second chapter of this thesis.

Where the Soviet Writers’ Congress developed a socialist realist doctrine in explicit reaction to two decades of modernist experimentation, in Australia the sequence is in a sense reversed, whereby it was (socialist) realism that—at least according to CPA members such as Katherine Susannah Prichard—was chronologically prior to a foreign, imported modernism, as is discussed further in Chapter Two. What, then, does modernism mean? The historian Perry Anderson defines modernism as a “specific set of aesthetic forms...dated precisely from the 20th century...typically construed by way of contrast with realist and other classical forms of the 19th, 18th, or earlier centuries”.²³ This is a useful, restricted definition, establishing the term’s difference from a more expansive concept ‘modernity’ which I will discuss further in the next chapter on Stead. Overwhelmingly, recent scholarship has challenged the view

²⁰ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Penguin Books: 1965), 303.

²¹ Radek, online.

²² Ibid.

²³ Perry Anderson, ‘Modernity and Revolution’, *New Left Review* 144 (1984): 102.

that modernism in Australia was a one-way cultural import from Europe, and in the following chapters I discuss some of this scholarship in reference to the socialist realists' portrayal of modernism as a cultural incursion.²⁴

From the 1920s onwards a famous set of exchanges occurred between György Lukács, a prominent defender of realism, and his opponents from the Frankfurt School, such as Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno, who were defenders of literary modernism. This was a debate about philosophical aesthetics and all its participants had broken, most of them drastically, with the Soviet position on literature. But in a crucial way this debate is unlike that which occurred in Australia, for the Frankfurt School realism-versus-modernism exchanges happened *within* the Marxist left, representing a rupture with the thought of socialist realism from a perspective sympathetic, not hostile, to Marxism. In Australia, on the other hand, the socialist realist position was waged by the left *against* an ostensibly reactionary threat. The debate was not internal to the left. As Nicholas Mansfield states:

In the post-war period, the dichotomy between Realism and Modernism seemed to summarise all the important rivalries in Australian fiction — nationalist enthusiasm and political responsibility lined up against cosmopolitan sophistication and formalist experimentation.²⁵

This dichotomy is a feature of each of my chapters and I follow its trajectory throughout the thesis, paying attention to the ways it was shaped by historical factors specific to Australia but also informed by theoretical influences from overseas.

III. Cultural Materialism as methodology

²⁴ See for instance David Carter, 'Literary, But Not Too Literary; Joyous, But Not Jazzy: Triad Magazine, Antipodean Modernity and the Middlebrow' *Modernism/modernity* 25, no.2 (2018); Bill Ashcroft and John Salter, 'Modernism's Empire: Australia and the Cultural Imperialism of Style', in *Modernism and Empire*, edited by Booth and Rigby, (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP 2000).

²⁵ Nicholas Mansfield, 'The Only Russian in Sydney': Modernism and Realism in *The Watch Tower*, *Australian Literary Studies* 15, no.3 (1992).

P.R. Stephensen's influential study *The Foundations of Australian Culture* (1936) adopted a specific approach to the study of culture. Stephensen, a pioneer of Australian cultural nationalism, wrote of his:

desire to find a non-political, non-economic, basis for the development of culture, or more specifically for the *development of literature*, in Australia. I thought that such a basis could be found in the Spirit of the Place, in the physiography of Australia, this unique and lovely land...²⁶

In this thesis, I am similarly concerned with the development of Australian literature but am guided by an almost opposite approach to that of Stephensen's, with his desire to find a "non-political, non-economic, basis" for culture. Stephensen is reacting, at least implicitly, to the Marxist base-and-superstructure model for analysing social phenomena. Where Stephensen has obvious intellectual debts to Johann Gottfried Herder's romantic nationalism—debts that are also played out at the level of his proto-fascist politics—my inquiry is instead guided by a materialist study of culture.

The Welsh Marxist scholar Raymond Williams' notion of cultural materialism significantly influenced the study of culture, including literature, in the second half of the twentieth century. Following Aijaz Ahmad, I see Williams as "the best single guide in deciphering that complexity" of relations between literature, labour, politics, and capitalism.²⁷ One of Williams' central theoretical contributions is to develop Marxist thinking about culture to see culture itself as a material process rather than a superstructural reflection of something more basic. Williams laments that for generations of Marxist scholars:

instead of making cultural history material [...] it was made dependent, secondary, 'superstructural': a realm of 'mere' ideas, beliefs, art, customs, determined by the basic material history. What matters here is not only the element of reduction; it is the reproduction, in altered form, of the separation of 'culture' from material social life, which had been the dominant tendency in idealist cultural thought.²⁸

²⁶ P.R. Stephensen, *The Foundations of Australian Culture*, (NSW: W.J. Miles Gordon, 1936), 140.

²⁷ Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures*, (London: Verso, 2007), 282

²⁸ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977), 19.

Williams calls the position that “the arts are passively dependent on social reality” a “vulgar misinterpretation of Marx”.²⁹ To assert the materiality of culture, as Williams here does, is to defend culture, including literature, as an appropriate and fertile subject for Marxist study.

Williams is particularly alert to the challenge that Marxist literary criticism had before it, recognising that as a field it “was weak in just the capacity where practical criticism was strong: in its capacity to give precise and detailed and reasonably adequate accounts of actual consciousness: not just a scheme or a generalisation but actual works, full of rich and significant and specific experience”.³⁰ This tendency to quickly convert “specific human experiences and acts of creation” into mechanical “classifications which always found their ultimate reality and significance elsewhere” has arguably led to Marxism’s marginalization in literature scholarship.³¹ But in diagnosing the problem, Williams at the same time also offers a solution. He proposes that the intellectual task of studying literature from a materialist perspective is to “give an account of art which in its closeness and intensity [...] correspond[s] to the real human dimension in which works of art are made and valued”.³² For this reason, I have devoted part of this thesis to textual analysis. By closely engaging with two particularly rich and rewarding texts I hope to do justice to the reasons scholars and readers alike are drawn to literature in the first place as an object worthy of study, and why so many on the far left in Australia allocated arts and writing such a central importance in their worldview.

At the same time, I maintain a thoroughgoing focus on the extra-textual institutions involved in the production of literature, acceding to Williams’ “necessary theoretical acknowledgement that literature is a process of production”.³³ This focus is most pronounced in the second chapter’s discussion of the Realist Writers’ Movement as an alternative mode of socialist literary production, but is also a feature of the third chapter where I look at the historical forces shaping the Australian literary sphere and its relationship to Patrick White during the latter third of the twentieth century.

²⁹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, (London: Hogarth Press 1993), 293.

³⁰ Raymond Williams, ‘Literature and Sociology: In Memory of Lucien Goldmann’, *New Left Review* 67, (May/June 1971): 19.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*, (London: Verso, 2015), 305.

As the subsequent pages show, the thesis is invariably informed by generations of Australian scholars, such as Susan Lever, John McLaren, Carole Ferrier, Andrew Milner, Michael Ackland, Brigid Rooney, Fiona Morrison, Nicole Moore, Lisa Milner, and David Carter, who in their own way have demonstrated a commitment to, broadly, a kind of ‘cultural materialism’, studying not just texts and writers but also the institutions and society that produced them. If there is something that distinguishes my approach in this thesis from these scholars’, it is a more pronounced engagement with Marx and Marxists on art and culture, especially the figures of Williams and Lukács, to underscore their relevance to reading Australian literature. A Marxist approach to Australian literature has been historically less popular than one which utilises ‘the nation’ or ‘the sacred’ as paradigmatic frameworks, despite the prominence of literary writers in Australia who themselves professed an affinity with Marx, socialism, or the broader left.

IV. Chapter overviews

The chapters following this introduction are organised chronologically. In the first chapter I examine a novel that is set in the proletarian milieu of the early CPA, Christina Stead’s *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. I argue that the novel enacts a formal tension between a dominant (realist) and an emergent (modernist) mode of literary writing at a particular juncture in Australian literary history, and that it uses this formal tension to access a broader political tension between individualist and collective responses to capitalist modernity. To this end, I posit that the novel can be productively read in relation to the tradition of Western Marxism, and thus enlist the works of György Lukács and Walter Benjamin in my reading. There has been recent scholarly interest in making the claim, to use Michael Ackland’s phrase, for a ‘Red Stead’, that is, a recognition of the central importance of socialist politics to Stead’s life and work.³⁴ I seek to extend this understanding by reading the novel as being responsive, as the tradition of Western Marxism was, to what the changes brought about by modernity meant for the articulation of a left-wing political and artistic vision outside the confines of an organised communist party. I make the case for a reading of Stead’s novel that sees it as an early and sophisticated mediator of the aesthetic and political

³⁴ This argument is prosecuted throughout Michael Ackland, *Christina Stead and the Socialist Heritage*, (Cambria, 2016).

forces I examine throughout the thesis: realism, an ascendant modernism, and an Australian cultural nationalism.

The second chapter looks at the CPA-aligned Realist Writers' Movement, which I argue was the zenith of closeness between the organised political left and literary production in Australian history. I trace the influence of the Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934 on the artistic activities of the post-war CPA, examining how the doctrine of socialist realism was adapted to an Australian context. Since there was little familiarity amongst the Australian socialist left with contemporary European developments in cultural theory, the movement's positions on aesthetics never achieved the theoretical sophistication of those in Europe. But what the Realist Writers' Movement lacked in theoretical sophistication they made up for in their practice. I argue that the movement needs to be understood as doing more than just producing proletarian novels, that what it attempted was nothing less than the creation of a socialist literary sphere aimed at bringing the production, distribution, and reception of literature under the control of working-class institutions. I examine the movement's (erroneous) notion that Patrick White was single-handedly introducing a foreign modernism to Australia thereby threatening the 'native' democratic tradition, seeing this idea as a powerful cultural myth that animated much socialist literary production. My reading serves as a corrective to two pervading scholarly assumptions: that the movement was characterised by an uncomplex attachment to nationalism and that it had a dogmatic commitment to Marxism. In fact, I argue that the movement was international in its solidarities while expressing at the same time a distinct Australian workerism, and rather than being *overly* committed to Marxism, had an insufficiently sophisticated understanding of Marxist cultural theory.

In the third chapter I examine how the socialist literary sphere reacted to and was changed by the arrival of Patrick White on the Australian literary scene. I trace the reception of White from the 1960s until the early decades of this century through the lens of cultural politics, noting how criticisms of White's alleged elitism migrated from a position espoused by the left to one manipulated by the right. In identifying the historical reasons for this shift, I pinpoint the institutional changes that befell the old left, as it morphed into a variegated New Left, as a key moment in this development. Through the example of the reception of White's work, I look at the particular characteristics of the contemporary, liberal literary sphere and how this sphere has been influenced by the decline of the socialist sphere described in Chapter

Two. To this end, the novel *Riders in the Chariot* is examined particularly for the way it became a vector for a debate about class in Australia. I offer a reading consistent with a materialist framework that treats the novel as a complex record of the changes occurring in mid-century Australian capitalism and the structures of feeling this period produced.

I conclude my thesis by briefly looking at the trajectory of the journal *Overland*, reading its development as an instantiation of the historical processes examined in the thesis, namely the changing fate of socialist realism as the organised old left declined and was replaced by the rise of heterogenous social movements unanchored to specific artistic practices and unembedded within a mass party.

Chapter One: Socialism in the modern antipodes: politics and aesthetics in Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*

Having grown up in Sydney in the first decades of the twentieth century, Christina Stead left Australia in 1928 at the age of twenty-six and returned only forty years later. Critical responses to Stead's work have tended to repress her Australianness, even when those critical responses came from Australians themselves; in 1948, Nettie Palmer commented upon walking past an "impressive shopfront showing American and English classics and moderns in good editions: Shakespeare, Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Whitman, Quixote (English), Christina Stead, Thackeray".³⁵ As Robert Dixon has demonstrated, literary production in Australia in the first decades of the twentieth-century was largely subordinated to commercial prerogatives of London.³⁶ Stead's first novel, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, was first published there by Peter Davies in 1934 and not published in Australia until Angus and Robertson picked it up in 1965. While Nettie and Vance Palmer were forging an attempt to create a local, nationalist literary culture, Stead was not deeply connected to this milieu. She left Australia in 1928, the same year the Fellowship of Australian Writers was founded, and the Australian Literature Society's Gold Medal established. Stead's cosmopolitanism notwithstanding, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is the most obviously Australian of all of her works, centred on a group of workers at a printing press in Sydney in the 1920s.

Stead's novel is important in the history of Australian literary fiction, arriving early in the development of an ossified split between modernist and realist modes—a split that was to become a defining schism of Australian literature in the subsequent decades. Unlike the later Australian socialist realists, who I examine in the next chapter, Stead did not polemicise from either side of this debate. The social, political, and cultural tensions that fed the perceived split between modernist and realist writing in

³⁵ Nettie Palmer, *Fourteen Years*, (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1988), 149.

³⁶ Robert Dixon, "Australian fiction and the world republic of letters, 1890-1950", in *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, edited by Peter Pierce, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 225.

Australia—tensions that revolved around the role of organized left-wing politics in social life, and the relationship of Australia to modernity and empire—receive a deep and extended treatment in Stead’s novel. Both realist and modernist strategies of representation are present in *Seven Poor Men*, influenced as it is by Stead’s reading of both nineteenth century French realist fiction and the modernist avant-garde. The challenge when reading *Seven Poor Men* is to be sensitive to both the European literary and intellectual tradition that undoubtedly nourished her work, as well as the Australian context out of which it was borne.

In this chapter I look at Stead’s novel as an example of how socialist politics interacted with a commitment to creative autonomy to produce a novel deeply sensitive to the historical and social changes wrought by capitalist modernity on the individual’s experience of social life. I find theoretical resources in the tradition of Western Marxism, specifically the writings of Walter Benjamin and György Lukács, to understand the novel. I argue that this tradition is a useful intellectual inheritance with which to read Stead’s work, as she too is engaged in searching for appropriate artistic and intellectual methods to apprehend the world from a Marxist perspective that exceeds the strictures of socialist realism. In doing so I am responding to Robert Dixon’s observation of Stead that “the influence of Marxist theory on her fiction, require[s] further examination”.³⁷ At the end of the chapter, I return to the point of Stead’s Australianness and examine how the novel consistently foregrounds its own antipodean location in order to undermine the eurocentrism of modernist discourse and problematise the narrative of temporal rupture.

Whether Stead’s work, and specifically *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, should be read as modernist or realist or both, is the subject of ongoing scholarly debate. Stead is considered by some to be the forerunner of “high modernist experimentation” in Australian literature;³⁸ *Seven Poor Men* specifically is seen as “the first high-modernist novel by an Australian writer” that belongs to “modes of international modernism then associated, with Joyce, Lawrence, Woolf”,³⁹ and as an example of “modernist inspired experimentation with sound and voice”,⁴⁰ with an identifiably “modernist narration”.⁴¹ Others see *Seven*

³⁷ Dixon, “Australian fiction”, 248.

³⁸ Melinda Cooper, “Adjusted” Vision: Interwar Settler Modernism in Eleanor Dark’s Return to Coolami”, *Australian Literary Studies* 33, no.2 (2018).

³⁹ Simon During. *Exit Capitalism: Literary Culture, Theory, and Post-Secular Modernity*, (Routledge, 2009), 66.

⁴⁰ Helen Groth, “Modernist voices and the desire for communication in Christina Stead’s Seven Poor Men of Sydney”, *JASAL* 15, no.1 (2015): 13.

⁴¹ Brigid Rooney, *Suburban Space, the Novel and Australian Modernity*, (Anthem Press, 2018), 53.

Poor Men as a “recognisably proletarian novel”,⁴² one of the “working class novels of the 1930s”,⁴³ and a “great work of Australian social realism”.⁴⁴ At the time of the novel’s publication, a reviewer in the *Courier Mail* commented upon the “stark realism” of the novel.⁴⁵ That the same work of fiction can generate such disparate critical judgements tells us not only about the contradictory nature of the novel itself but also about the inadequacy and slipperiness of the terms of reference. In this chapter I do not entertain the illusion of having a final say in an academic exercise of classification. Instead, I want to explore the significance of the co-existence of these two currents within the work and the resulting aesthetic and political tensions.

A brief discussion of definitions is necessary before proceeding, for a plethora of ways to understand modernity and modernism are available. In the introduction I have used Perry Anderson’s restricted definition of modernism which refers to a “specific set of aesthetic forms”. Modernism in this view is associated with techniques such as stream of consciousness narration and interior monologue, and writers such as Joyce, Woolf, Pound, and Stein. This restricted usage is common and is consistent with the various attempts just cited by scholars who make claims for Stead belonging to this or that aesthetic mode. Yet there is clearly a more expansive, socio-cultural concept that is necessary to grasp, and this is more adequately described by the term *modernity*. Marshal Berman locates the pulse of modernity all the way from Rousseau through Goethe, Marx, Baudelaire and Joyce, up to the 1970s, calling it a “a mode of vital experience” that implicates our conception of space, time, and the self.⁴⁶ Modernity is a term which encompasses a variety of ways of thinking about the change in humankind’s experience of itself in the world, from “profound disorientation and insecurity, frustration and despair”,⁴⁷ the famous iron cage of Weber’s coinage, to the theories of emancipation and liberation, socialist or feminist or otherwise, that also participate in defining the modern era. Major aspects of modernity that I will discuss in relation to Stead’s novel include the emergence of the fragmented, individual consciousness; widespread feelings of alienation and ennui, particularly in urban contexts; and the notion of a temporal rupture or break from

⁴² Michael Ackland, ““What a history is that? What an enigma ...?” Imagination, destiny and socialist imperatives in Christina Stead’s *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*”, *Southerly* 68, no.3 (2008).

⁴³ Susan Sheridan qtd. in *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Nicholas Birns, *Contemporary Australian Literature: A World Not Yet Dead*. (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2015), 28.

⁴⁵ Bookman, “Fine Novel of Sydney Streets”, *Courier Mail* Brisbane, (30th November 1934).

⁴⁶ Marshal Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, (Penguin Books, 1982), 15.

⁴⁷ Anderson, “Modernity and Revolution”, 98.

previous historical epochs. In short, I use the term modernism to mean a set of representational strategies responsive to and constituted by the developments of modernity.

Insofar as these terms relate to Stead, this chapter argues that Stead's novel derives much of its power and interest from its ability to capture, from a socialist perspective, Australian society in the grip of modernity, the way it registers a pervasive, modern individualism in which collective bonds, based on familiarity or solidarity, are being torn asunder. Stead enlists some strategies of modernist aesthetic practice in order to achieve this but rejects many others. At the same time, Stead participates in a long tradition of realist writing even as she innovates it, her innovation being particularly notable in the context of the twentieth-century Australian novel.

I. 'Red Stead' in modernist Australia

While the recognition of 'modernism' in Australian prose fiction often does not register in popular and scholarly accounts until the arrival of Patrick White's fiction in the latter half of the twentieth century, there is no doubt that during the 1920s Australian culture was experiencing something known as 'modernity', and the word 'modernism' was already being used to discuss various artforms. An advertisement in 1929 in the journal *Art in Australia* proclaimed that,

MODERNISM has reached AUSTRALIA. The wave of modernism which has flooded the intellectual centres of civilised countries has penetrated Australia. It is already perceptible in its art, its music, its architecture, its household furniture and decoration, its photography and its landscape gardening.⁴⁸

Modernism in many facets of life—although note the absence of literature or prose from the list in the above quotation—was a perceptible enough influence for the *Vision* journal, founded by Norman Lindsay in 1923, to be staunchly against it. Australia, as a British settler colony only twenty years on from Federation, was at this time experiencing a constellation of features of a social development that is commonly given the name modernity: profound changes in people's experiences of daily life brought about by technological change and advanced urbanisation, increased innovations in the ability to capture

⁴⁸ Tanya Dalziel, "Belated Arrivals—Gender, Colonialism, and Modernism in Australia", *A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages - Modernism Vol. 2*, edited by Eysteinnsson, Astradur, Liska, Vivian. (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 773.

and reproduce images and sound, and an increasing sense of a globalized world wrought by the experiences of war and internationalising tendencies of capitalism. The revolution of the moving image had also occurred by the time of Stead writing the novel; in 1927 there were already 1250 cinemas in Australia. Sydney's population had grown to one million by 1922, and the 1920s in Sydney saw a growth of residential construction, spreading suburbs, and increasingly sophisticated water and waste disposal systems.⁴⁹

The 1920s was not only a decade of bourgeois consumption but also of socialist agitation, agitation that was brutally repressed. The Crimes Act of 1920 contained a clause "declaring any person who advocated the overthrow of the existing government of the Commonwealth by violence to be guilty of a crime punishable by imprisonment",⁵⁰ no doubt a reaction against the founding of the CPA in Sydney in that very same year. The central event that serves as the backdrop of Stead's novel is the Seamen's strike that took place in Sydney in 1925. The 1925 election was fought predominately on the issue of anti-communism as the CPA had requested affiliation with the Labor Party. Stead's novel is located in this modern Sydney of striking dock workers and socialist militants as much as it is located in the Sydney of cinemas, advertising, and capitalist consumption.

The seven poor men of the novel's title are a group of workers at a printing press in the rapidly urbanising metropolis of Sydney in the 1920s. The characters move in and out of social and political circles, attend workers' meetings and lectures, and struggle with isolation and insanity. The workers' movement is in many ways the novel's central character, but some of the most astute and influential readings of the novel, such as Dorothy Green's 1968 essay, fail to mention in any detail the role that socialism plays in the work. T. Inglis Moore's reading, in his work *Social Patterns in Australian Literature* (1971), is another example of a response to the novel that seems intent on failing to notice its political dimensions. He expounds the idea that Stead is a precursor to Patrick White, writing of how the latter:

had been anticipated earlier in the thirties by Christina Stead with her *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, with its concentration on the emotions and ideas of her suffering characters, merging of reality

⁴⁹ Stuart MacIntyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 175.

⁵⁰ Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, (Penguin, 2006), 101-2.

and illusion, imaginative creation of Sydney, the exuberant richness of its poetic style, and the brilliance of its imagery.⁵¹

“Suffering”, “illusion”, “imagination”, “poetic style”, “brilliant imagery”: all of this indeed exists in Stead’s novel, but one would have to be a particularly stubborn or ideological reader to fail to also see the socialism, the strikes, the capitalist exploitation, the quotations from Marx and Lenin, the monologues on revolution.

Against this tendency of liberal revisionist scholarship, Ackland argues that socialism was a central force behind Stead’s intellectual and artistic life, drawing extensively on biographical details to change our understanding of Stead.⁵² This is a welcome approach within a scholarly field that largely underplays Stead’s preoccupation with socialism. As part of his argument, Ackland reads *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* as a novel with a loosely Marxist orientation; it is “not explicitly concerned with a workers’ insurrection, but with what must precede it: growing self-awareness and awakening to the true state of labour’s oppression”.⁵³ Ackland illuminates the novel’s connections to local political machinations between the fledgling Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and a Labor Party practising its own variety of radicalism. Such a reading is certainly apposite, for many of the characters who populated Stead’s vision of the communist politics of 1925 Sydney were based on real individuals; Guido Baracchi appears as in the novel as Fulke Folliot and Jack Kavanagh appears as Whiteway.⁵⁴ Carole Ferrier has also offered a reading of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* that traces its connections to a local leftist milieu, and Brigid Rooney has revealed the connections between Stead and Popular Front left-wing politics of the 1930s.⁵⁵ These studies argue that Stead’s politics was central rather than peripheral to her literary activity. I seek to extend these insights by arguing that Stead’s novel also has something to say about a broader historical moment beyond immediate local communist politics. That is, where existing scholarly work has connected Stead’s output to parties and conferences associated with the CPA and Soviet communism, concentrating on the milieu of the 1920s in Australia and the 1930s abroad, I argue that

⁵¹ T. Inglis Moore, *Social patterns in Australian literature*, (Angus and Robertson, 1971), 141.

⁵² Ackland, *Christina Stead and the Socialist Heritage*.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 75.

⁵⁴ Stuart MacIntyre, *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality*, (Crowns Nest: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 98, 110.

⁵⁵ Carole Ferrier, “Christina Stead’s *Seven Poor Women of Sydney*, Travelling into our Times”, *JASAL* 15, no.3 (2015); Brigid Rooney, ‘Loving the Revolutionary: Re-reading Christina Stead’s Encounter with Men, Marxism, and the Popular Front in 1930s Paris’, *Southerly* 58, no.4 (1988-99).

Stead is also fruitfully read as responding to a similar set of aesthetic and political concerns as theorists in the intellectual tendency of Western Marxism. Perry Anderson locates the roots of Western Marxism in the interwar period, arguing that it is an intellectual tradition characterized, amongst other things, by a turn towards philosophy and aesthetics in the face of diminishing hopes for the proletarian revolution to spread beyond the Soviet Union.⁵⁶ Figures associated with the school include Gramsci, Lukács, Benjamin, Adorno, and, amongst contemporary theorists, Frederic Jameson. Reading Stead alongside some of these figures provides a way to appreciate both Stead's historical grounding in a socialist milieu as well as her nourishment by international intellectual currents.

Zhdanov's pronouncements at the 1934 Soviet Writers Congress would not have reached Stead in time to influence the writing of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, but in any case, there is no evidence from her later work that Stead was ever as receptive to Soviet doctrine about aesthetics as she was sympathetic to Stalinist politics. The thinkers of Western Marxism similarly rejected the socialist realism of the Soviet Union in favour of more complex theorising about the relationship between capitalism, socialism, and art. Whereas a later generation of socialist writers in Australia, the CPA-aligned Realist Writers' Movement, adhered to the orthodox socialist realist doctrine, Stead's novel is an example of an attempt to bring proletarian politics into dialogue with a cosmopolitan modernist sensibility.

The difficulties of this project, of synthesizing proletarian politics with creative practice, were not lost on Stead and emerge as a major concern of the novel. The tension between socialist politics and the cosmopolitan modernism is embodied by the characters of the Folliotics, middle-class intellectuals who also:

worked hard organising meetings, trying to organise the seamen, the poorest members of the Australian working classes, and the wharfingers. They carried high the rushlight of their metropolitan culture at the same time, talked Cezanne, Ganguin, Laforgue, T.S. Eliot, Freud, and Havelock Ellis. (57)

There is a more than subtle suggestion throughout the novel that these two realms—of the Australian proletariat and the cosmopolitan intellectual—are perhaps not necessarily, and certainly not naturally, compatible. Baruch, the socialist intellectual amongst the group of the seven poor men of the title, is

⁵⁶ Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, (London: New Left Books, 1976), 24.

chastised by a worker for his perceived bourgeois aspirations: “Yew’ll be a scholar and you’ll leave us behind. Yew would arise whatever yer conditions, and yew’ll believe their bloody propaganda before yer much older. I only believe in the workers, and in the Australian workers” (124). There is a touch of autobiographical anxiety about this passage, of Stead’s struggle between her own socialist commitment and the pull she felt towards an internationalist intellectual life. The words of Baruch’s critics, after all, were written by Stead in Paris.

II. Workers’ voices in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*

Justifications for reading *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* as a modernist work often draw on biographical details. While Stead had lived in Sydney throughout the 1920s, she was living in Paris and reading modernists like Joyce at the time of writing the novel, as Rowley’s biography recounts.⁵⁷ Simon During makes the claim that *Seven Poor Men*’s style, like that of the authors Stead was then reading, is an example of “non-mimetic prose lyricism” in which “language threatens to exceed and break down”.⁵⁸ The strongest piece of evidence for this claim, which is otherwise rather hyperbolic, is the first sentence of the novel. “The hideous low scarred yellow horny and barren headland lies curled like a scorpion in a blinding sea and sky,” are the first words delivered by Stead’s narrator (1). The lined-up row of six consecutive adjectives is indeed a bold, initial declaration of alliance with experimental rather than conventional literary modes. Compare this with the first sentences of *Coonardoo*, one of the other major Australian novels from the period, written by Stead’s socialist contemporary and prominent realist writer Katherine Susannah Prichard: “Coonardoo was singing. Sitting under dark bushes overhung with curdy white blossom, she clicked two small sticks together, singing...”⁵⁹ Both novels’ openings concern the natural world. Stead’s features irregular syntax, while Prichard’s is entirely conventional. Where Prichard pays close attention to the features of the native flora, the “curdy white blossom”, Stead’s adjectives “hideous” and “barren” betray a colonial European gaze, invoking the common tropes of an imagined Australian ugliness and emptiness. From the first sentence we can see Stead’s subtle attempts at

⁵⁷ Hazel Rowley, *Christina Stead: A Biography*, (MUP, 2007), 112-3.

⁵⁸ During, *Exit Capitalism*, 66.

⁵⁹ Katherine Susannah Prichard, *Coonardoo*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973), 1.

disaffiliation from the pseudo-organic, nationalist voice of settler-colonial realism that dominated Australian fiction at the time.

While the first sentence is striking for its deviation from conventional syntax, it is the beginning but also the zenith of Stead's linguistic experimentalism in the novel. The rest of *Seven Poor Men* proceeds with little evidence of stylistic mimicry of the high modernists to which some commentators wish to compare her, aside from the occasional incorporation of free indirect discourse. Helen Groth, for example, locates Stead's novel within European modernism and even the avant-garde, focussing on its experimentalism regarding sound and voices, even as she recognises that it "detaches the locus of modernist narrative from its familiar Anglo-American co-ordinates".⁶⁰ The emphasis on voices in the novel is a welcome and necessary critical development, evidencing an understanding that dialogue is a central vehicle through which Stead makes meaning—a point to which I will return shortly. However, Groth's positing of a necessary connection in the novel between voices and an experimental modernist aesthetic is not entirely convincing. As evidence, Groth states that "Stead makes her readers listen to the inner voice of one of the novel's central characters, Michael Baguenault". Yet the passage to which our attention is drawn features a third person narrative account of Michael's experience as a school student:

But at these times especially, he would fall back against his seat or lean on his elbow looking out of the window at the trees, and powerful visions would pass through his head; he laboured automatically to increase and perfect these visions, to make them logical, grandiose. (16)

At most, this is an instance of free indirect speech, but there is no unmediated access to Michael's "inner voice" here. Michael's "powerful visions" remain opaque to the reader; it is described to us that he has them, but the reader does not experience them as part of the fabric of the narrative voice itself. We are taken only so far into his consciousness.

The notion that Stead's novel is one of "multiple consciousnesses", not unlike *Ulysses*, is a claim repeated by Sam Matthews.⁶¹ However, if Stead's novel bears comparison to *Ulysses* and other modernist group novels like *The Waves*, it is mostly insofar as each of these works deals with the intersecting lives of characters in an urban setting. That is, the similarities are more prominent at the level of content rather

⁶⁰ Groth, "Modernist voices", 2.

⁶¹ Sam Matthews, "Christina Stead's "Devil's Kitchen": Seven Poor Men of Sydney as Narrative of Disillusionment", *Affirmations: of the modern* 4, no.1 (2016): 43.

than their strategies of representation. For Stead's interest is not primarily with consciousness or psychological interiority. Rather, it is articulated, social acts of communication that constitute the narrative building blocks of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. Tales, stories, "yarns" (79), *spoken* monologues, not stream of consciousnesses or interior monologue fill the novel's pages. This difference is important not just at the level of what representational strategies Stead employs, be they modernist or realist. The emphasis on spoken communication rather than internal monologues or the representation of psychological processes is in fact deeply important to Stead's novel and goes to the heart of the way she navigates the currents of modernity through the depiction of a group of interconnected proletarian lives. Stead's interest in speech and voices, in workers sharing their experiences and ideas with each other through the spoken word, constitutes an articulation of resistance to the fragmentary and individualising impacts of capitalist modernity. Orality and the spoken exchange of experience is shown by the novel as having a deep affinity with collective modes of life antithetical to the ascendant bourgeois individualism of the modern era.

Walter Benjamin famously explores the degradation of oral storytelling in his 1936 essay 'The Storyteller'. Benjamin claims that in the modern era "experience has fallen in value" and links this decline to the loss of the art of storytelling: "Experience which has been passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn".⁶² While Benjamin does not see the phenomenon as being specifically modernist, claiming instead it is a result of the "secular productive forces of history",⁶³ the social changes which he sees as undergirding the fall in the value of experience all have a particular relevance to the conditions of modernity and Stead's novel. Benjamin mentions that at the end of the First World War "men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience",⁶⁴ which tracks the experience of the novel's central character, Michael, who has also returned from the First World War. The temporal coordinates of Benjamin's argument also match Stead's novel, a moment defined by what Lukács has identified as the "philosophical pessimism which was so deeply rooted in the social conditions of the period between the two world wars".⁶⁵

⁶² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (Suffolk: Fontana, 2015), 83-4.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 87.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 84.

⁶⁵ György Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), 1.

Benjamin sees the ascendancy of information, represented by the newspaper, as ringing the death knell for storytelling. One is reminded of Stead's passage that mentions "grimy hands, sweat, *unfolded papers relating the latest murder*, wrinkles, hands with swollen veins, and eyes thick with the circular lucubrations of the dulled mind trying to escape" (141, emphasis added). This picture of degraded modern life is most obviously a critique of the conditions of industrial labour, but interestingly includes the newspaper in the remit of its critique. The fact that the novel centres around a printing press, the very epicentre of the modern process that is the mechanical reproduction of information, is consistent with Benjamin's focus on the processes of production as against the traditional focus of aesthetic theory, the consumption of the art-object. By focusing on the physical process of production of the printed word and the labourers who do this, *Seven Poor Men* explores the material, rather than linguistic, conditions of its own possibility as a novel.⁶⁶

Stead's novel registers the sense of loss that accompanied modern industrial life, the alienation afflicting the modern subject that has been perceived by commentators from the Frankfurt School critics to Max Weber and Charlie Chaplin. But in its focus on speech and workers talking about their lives with each other, the novel redeems the feature of social life, oral storytelling, that Benjamin identifies as being *the* residing place of valuable experience. The novel is filled with dialogue, much of it storytelling. Withers spends a night talking to homeless people in the Domain and recalls the "tales they told me, enough to make a monkey bite its mother. They're a lot of philosophers" (79). Discoursing about one's life, conditions, and thoughts is not seen as the remit only of educated individuals but of people from every social stratum, from workers at the printing press to the homeless philosophers Withers encounters. Dialogue, in contrast to inner monologue, is a necessarily social action, requiring more than one party for it to occur. Stead shows us the affinity between speech and the act of discoursing and the coming to consciousness of the working-class subject. When Joseph, at the end of the novel, arrives at self-knowledge it is not through the modernist epiphany but as a result of discussion with his fellow workers. "Through listening to you and Winter I know where I stand", he tells Baruch (315), having realized that

⁶⁶ It should be acknowledged that Benjamin sees the novel itself as a product of the individual consciousness, rather than a locus for resistance against the primacy of this individualism. Such an emphasis is not entirely consistent with Stead's or our own here. He sees storytelling as having roots "primarily in the milieu of craftsmen" (101), but the printers of *Seven Poor Men* resemble itinerant proletarians more than they do artisans. Nevertheless, Benjamin's emphasis on the connection between the decline of orality and a degraded experience of social life is immensely relevant to our reading of Stead's text.

he is “not an intellectual” nor a “straw in the wind like Michael”, but is “a letter of ordinary script” (315-316).

An example of the opposite of this process of emergent consciousness is provided by Joseph’s mother. Joseph’s mother lacks self-knowledge due to an inability to actualise herself through speech. Listening to his mother speak, Joseph realises that she is inarticulate, her “tongue clung to the palate and the throat whirred” (65). Stead makes a direct link between this inarticulacy and the economic conditions of her life: “Sixty years of poverty had extinguished that fountain of life which lives in infant flesh and ejects experiment and improvisation out of the mouth” (65). The realm of communication and shared meanings requires for its existence a material basis of a decent wage, living conditions, and education; genuine communicability is threatened by capitalist immiseration.

Near the end of the novel a group of characters go and visit Joseph’s cousin Catherine where she is staying, in the “insane asylum at Forestville” (298). “We’ll all tell you tales”, says Fulke (299) and they sit together in the grounds and proceed to do so, taking turns to speak. After a few rounds, and some discussion, Kol Blount presents his memoriam speech for Catherine’s brother, Michael, who died by suicide. The dense and enigmatic speech articulates many of the themes explored in the novel up to that point, and provides a kind of *précis* of the colonisation of Australia leading up to their present historical circumstance:

the blackfellow destroyed, the plains bore flocks, the desert of spinifex spouted gold, the new world began. And after all this notable pioneer table of starvation, sorrow, escapades, mutiny, death, labour in common, broad wheatlands, fat sheep, broad cattle-barons, raw male youth and his wedding to the land, in the over-populated metropolis the sad-eyed youth sits glumly in a hare-brained band, and speculates upon the suicide of youth, the despair of the heirs of yellow heavy-headed acres. (308)

The outcome of the process that Blount describes, which is essentially the process of the colonisation of the Australian continent, is the production of a settler-coloniser subject alienated from their surroundings in a growing colonial metropolis. If the climax of *Ulysses* is Molly Bloom’s soliloquy, in *Seven Poor Men*, it is Blount’s ‘In Memoriam’ speech. Significantly, Blount’s speech, unlike Molly’s soliloquy, has an audience and is orated, is externalised rather than internalised; it is a social act of communication with fellow human beings. Stead emphasises the bonds of connection and solidarity between individuals. If

this is an example of modernism, it is the modernism of what Williams calls the “alternative tradition taken from the neglected works in the wide margin of the century”, a modernism which is addressed “to a modern future in which community may be imagined again”, rather than a modernism of isolated individuals and fractured consciousnesses.⁶⁷

III. *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* as Lukácsian critical realism

To explore the changes wrought by capitalist modernity on both inner life and collective social life, Stead draws diverse character portraits as examples of the differing available reactions to a changing social order. I have discussed how Benjamin and other contemporaneous Marxists perceived the quality of experience of modern social life as being degraded. Possible responses to this degraded version of experience that are canvassed by Stead include visionary individualism (Michael), a mental breakdown (Catherine), socialist intellectualising (Baruch), commitment to party doctrine (Winter), or a conformity to it through retreat into suburban normality (Joseph).

György Lukács, I venture, is an important writer for understanding this novel, both as a prolific albeit controversial critic of modernism and proponent of realism, and as a writer engaged with understanding the nature of capitalist modernity. Lukács saw the prevailing philosophical idiom of modernist culture as being one of pessimism, fragmentation, and individualism, and vociferously criticized this tendency from a Marxist perspective. His debates with fellow Marxist thinkers Brecht, Bloch, and Benjamin are critical documents of twentieth-century aesthetics, and he emerges as perhaps the century’s most infamous yet philosophically respectable defender of literary realism. Various scholars of Stead have connected her work with the ideas of Lukács, but often in no more than an off-hand manner. For example, Diana Brydon argues that “Stead’s fiction belongs to the great tradition of European realism analyzed by Lukács rather than to the great tradition of the English novel identified by Leavis”.⁶⁸ Susan Sheridan provides the useful biographical detail that “Stead certainly read Lukács, in German” and adds as commentary that the “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”.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Raymond Williams, ‘When Was Modernism?’, *New Left Review* 175, (1989): 52.

⁶⁸ Diana Brydon, *Christina Stead*, (Houndsmills: Macmillan Education, 1987), 159.

⁶⁹ Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988), 33-34.

Michael Ackland's work features a more detailed engagement between Lukács and Stead, utilising the former's concept of the historical novel and arguing that a Marxist conception of history appears in the latter's work.⁷⁰ I wish to extend these insights and engage at a greater length with Lukács by examining how his criticisms of modernism might apply to *Seven Poor Men*. My claim here is not that Lukács' writings necessarily had a direct and immediate influence on Stead's novel, for his writings about literature and modernism that are quoted at length in this chapter were published after *Seven Poor Men*. Rather, I am suggesting that the two writers shared intellectual concerns and a common theoretical milieu. It is possible, given it was his most famous work, that the Lukács text Stead would have read is *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), the earliest major work of Western Marxism which more or less inaugurated the tradition.

Lukács was concerned with theorising the different kinds of available responses to the degradation of social experience under capitalist modernity. His early works such as *Soul and Form* (1908) and *Theory of the Novel* (written 1914-15) were essentially Romantic responses to the alienating qualities of modern life, and it was not until his later works in his decidedly Marxist phase that his critique of alienation took the form of an economic critique of exploitation under capitalism. He came to be a severe critic of what he calls "Romantic anti-capitalism", the main tendencies of which he describes as follows:

aristocratism, rejection of the principle of human equality, contempt for the masses, scorn for economic and political or social motives as lowly and base, the cult of irrationalism and myth, emphasis on the worthlessness of life, turning away from the world, inward, and so on.⁷¹

For Lukács, Romantic anti-capitalism is a mistaken reaction against the conditions of alienation that arose in concomitance with modernity. The shape of this reaction approximates the worldview of Stead's character, Michael Bagenault. That Michael's alienation from the world has a characteristically Romantic quality to it is recognized early in the novel by his father, who comments that he is living through an "age of storm and stress" (32), referring to the *Sturm un Drang* movement of early German Romanticism. Michael also shares the Romantic fantasy, expressed for example in the classic of German Romanticism,

⁷⁰ Michael Ackland, "'Hedging on Destiny': History and its Marxist dimension in the early fiction of Christina Stead," *ARIEL* 41, no.1 (2010).

⁷¹ György Lukács, "Literature and Democracy", in *The Culture of People's Democracy: Hungarian Essays on Literature, Art, and Democratic Transition 1945-1948*, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 7.

Hölderlin's *Hyperion*, that "man and nature will unite in one all-embracing divinity".⁷² Michael's dad articulates this trope of recovering a mythical, lost unity, telling his son that "You can be absorbed in Nature, as—as in the sea, as if you melted into the sea and were diffused through the oceans of the earth" (32). This statement foreshadows Michael's death, in which he actualises the Romantic fantasy of returning back to the earth; he falls off a cliff and into the ocean, smashing his head on a rock, causing "his brains flow out among the hungry sea-anemones and muscles" (250). Michael's death is an ultimate confirmation of his estrangement from his fellow humans. The cause of his death, drowning, is directly attributed to his alienation from society, as he becomes a part of "the sea, in whose heart he had always found more repose than in any human heart" (249). As he falls off the cliffs and into the ocean the narrator tells us that he "is already no longer a man but part of the night" (250).

The Romantic critique of modern life and its alienating nature, though, is one that Lukács comes to reject, trading it in for a Marxist understanding that capitalist social relations rather than modernity as such are responsible for our disharmonious experience of social life. Stead's novel can be read as making a similar point. The sea is an image that acts as a vector for both the realist and the Romantic, quasi-mystical concerns of the novel. On one level the sea functions as the primary source of mystical imagery throughout the novel, it is the nature with which Michael merges, and is tied to his fate as a disillusioned Romantic soul. At the same time, though, even at the moment of Michael's death and return to the mythical unity of the natural world, the sea is historicized, its "foreign ports" and "turbines ploughing its waves" mentioned in the very same sentence (249). The reader is reminded of the changes wrought by a new age of technological development and of the sea as the enabling medium of an international capitalism based on maritime trade and imperial conquest. The Romantic and the Marxist critiques of capitalist modernity sit alongside each other. While Stead incorporates elements of various discourses into the novel—of, for example, mysticism, or modernism, or socialist theory—she ultimately maintains a distance from them, never entirely giving the novel over to a particular worldview or vantage point but accommodating multiple ones instead.

In his later literary criticism, it is the early-twentieth-century modernist novel specifically that Lukács attacks as acceding to the alienated, anomic view of humankind. In his essay 'The Ideology of

⁷² Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, (London: Penguin, 2009), 121.

Modernism' Lukács discusses the "ontological view governing the image of man in the work of leading modernist writers"; these writers understand "man" as "by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings".⁷³ Stead's character Michael can be productively read in relation to this notion of Lukács', for Michael is a quintessential individualist, entertaining the fantasies that "I have no class" and "I am a man alone" (198). He understands that "desolatingly stupid dull acts" he performs for work "alienate the spirit" (220) but makes no attempt to connect this recognition to a broader social or economic critique. Unlike other characters in the novel, he shows no interest in joining the socialist movement in which these "desolatingly stupid dull acts" are explained as part of a system of increasingly mechanized exploitation of workers, and a method for abolishing them is devised. Instead, Michael is preoccupied with his "immense visions" (220) and clings to a vague notion of his fundamental separateness from the rest of the social world. His depression, as well as that of his sister Catherine's, is adequately described by what Lukács calls "*angst*, this basic modern experience [that] has its emotional origin in the experience of a disintegrating society".⁷⁴

Lukács makes the important distinction between works of art that feature this condition of isolation as "a fragment, a phase, a climax or anti-climax, in the life of the community as a whole", what he calls critical realism, and works that present solitariness as "a universal condition humaine", what he sees as characteristic of modernism.⁷⁵ It is clear that of these two categories, Stead's work belongs to the former. Michael is indeed the quintessential representation of modern solitariness, an alienated urban dweller unable to form genuine relationships with other humans. But he is an individual character, and his condition of ennui is not presented as a general fact of social existence but rather as one specific response to modern social conditions. To include elements of social disintegration in a work is to write effective realism, is to "portray the contemporary world more exactly", according to Lukács; what he criticises is that "in modernist literature the disintegration of the world of man—and consequently the disintegration of personality—coincides with the ideological intention".⁷⁶ Through the giving up of

⁷³György Lukács, 'The Ideology of Modernism', in *Marxist Literary Theory: a reader*, eds. Milne, Drew, Eagleton, Terry, (New Jersey: Blackwell, 1996), 20.

⁷⁴Ibid, 39-40.

⁷⁵Ibid, 20.

⁷⁶Ibid, 39.

perspective the experience of disintegration comes to fill the entire field of vision of the modernist work, so as not to constitute merely an aspect of a degraded social reality but the condition of that reality itself.

Stead refuses this modernist impulse to hypostasize the condition of isolation as *the* defining experience of social reality. In creating an array of characters occupying different social strata and espousing a different ideological reaction to their conditions, Stead's technique is consistent with what Lukács sees as an essential component of literary realism, "the creation of types".⁷⁷ To create a type is to "seek out the lasting features in people, in their relations with each other and in the situations in which they have to act [and] focus on those elements which endure over long periods and which constitute the objective human tendencies of society and indeed of mankind as a whole".⁷⁸ Lukács saw Balzac as the exemplary model of this kind of realism, and Stead's own fiction—particularly *Seven Poor Men*, as Sam Matthews has convincingly demonstrated—is deeply influenced by the work of Balzac.⁷⁹ Reading Stead's novel as an exercise in creating types within a specific milieu is a useful way to think about her use of the characters' contrastive qualities to make a comment about the social conditions against which this differentiation occurs. Michael's individualist tendency is historicized and de-naturalized to reveal it as a *type* of social response that has its own geographical, temporal, and political coordinates. This idea of the character type being used to mount social critique is consistent with Stead's own pronouncements about her writerly strategy, for instance in her essay 'Uses of the Many Charactered Novel'. In that essay Stead connects the many-character novel with urbanity, "sidelong critique", and "hugely stratifying social organisms of man, the democratic urges, international sympathies and populist appeals of all colours".⁸⁰

Other characters in the novel bring Michael's individualism into sharp relief by presenting differing types of subjectivity produced by the same social conditions. Michael's foil is Baruch, the socialist intellectual who articulates the exact opposite philosophical position to Michael's individualism. Claiming that "our whole life is bound up with a million others" (193), Baruch is a mouthpiece for socialist ideas in the novel, at times giving long speeches in which he mounts an explicitly economic critique of capitalism:

⁷⁷ György Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', *Aesthetics and Politics*, (London: Verso, 2006), 47.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Matthews, "Christina Stead's 'Devil's Kitchen'" 43.

⁸⁰ Christina Stead. "Uses of the Many Charactered Novel", in *Christina Stead: Selected Fiction and Non-Fiction* edited by R.G Geering, A Segerberg, (St Lucia: UQP, 1994), 198.

you see an institution that conducts prosperous businesses, has printing-presses of its own, ships at sea, casinos and expensive schools, that has laws enacted to protect its interests, that pays no taxes and levies an irregular toll on millions of people, mostly ignorant and wretched. (88)

These consciousness-raising monologues feature regularly throughout the novel, but Stead resists the didacticism of socialist realism; Baruch's eventual fate is not glorious or heroic, but ambiguous, possibly even defeatist.

Joseph is a character who sits at neither Baruch nor Michael's end of the ideological spectrum. While not a socialist himself, he is still shown to suffer under the effects of capitalism as a worker, such as in the scene in the workshop where he stands beside the window, looking out over the ferry moving across the harbour, contemplating "the disorder and his misery" about life (82). Stead's narrator presents the reader with a classic image of alienated modern labour: "while he worked with his hands, back at the machine" Joseph dreams of becoming a stow-away on a ship back to the "old countries". He dreams of avoiding the monotony of his future of work, a "procession of days, laying down line after line of clear print" in "this miserable workshop" (83). The perception of this alienation does not lead itself to militant party activism like it does for Winter, for example, nor does it lead to isolated despair as it does for Michael. Joseph is an 'everyman' character who does not articulate strong passions and drifts between people and jobs, until he has a realisation about himself and his social role at the end of the novel. Joseph's fate is to resign himself to his status as a commoner who knows there are "hierarchies over me economically and intellectually" (316). He accommodates himself to the bourgeois social order.

It is this fact that has led some scholars, such as Meg Brayshaw, to argue that the novel "negates any possibility of progress".⁸¹ Brayshaw reads in the ending of the novel a note of pessimism, arguing that that as "the novel draws to a close, hopes for a revolutionary cultural life fade and the city's socio-political ills are re-affirmed".⁸² However, to identify Joseph's position at the novel's conclusion with an overall affirmation of alienated social life is to misread a part of the novel for its whole vision. Brayshaw's reading of Joseph's role in the schema of the novel in fact raises the critical question of how the reader should account for the disparate subjectivities presented by Stead. In the absence of socialist

⁸¹ Meg Brayshaw, "The Tank Stream Press: Urban Modernity and Cultural Life in Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*", *Australian Literary Studies* 31, no.6 (2016): 9.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 8.

realism's didacticism, but with a lingering socialist politics nonetheless, does the novel offer an underlying unity with which the reader can make sense of these variously defeated and optimistic fates we are presented with? Arguably it is the metaphor of the web that provides the reader with a way to discern the relationships between various elements of the novel. From the beginning, the image of a "tangled web" appears as a form of structuration which holds characters in relationship to each other (2). The web is a useful topographical image with which to think about any novel, for as Benjamin reminds us "the Latin word *textum* means 'web'".⁸³ Teresa Bindella goes as far to claim that the web is a "formal correlative" to the narrative as a whole, writing that "the disconnected events of the narrative, the rambling experience of the protagonists, and even the loose strands of imagery are actually intertwined so as to become the threads of one single mesh stretching over the broken surface of the entire novel".⁸⁴ Diana Brydon also comments on the web metaphor, saying that its function is "providing an illusory structure for an inherent disorder - as does a novel".⁸⁵ Common to both views is that the web provides a semblance of totality, whether illusory or not.

Frederic Jameson's view of the web image in *Middlemarch* is also that it metaphorizes "the social totality".⁸⁶ Jameson makes the salient point that such an image "emphasizes relationality over substance: the 'individual lots', the individual human lives or destinies, are meaningful only in terms of their interrelations, which make up a totality, however local".⁸⁷ Joseph's opting for resignation instead of struggle bears a relationship to Michael's suicide, and to Winter's communism, insofar as each are reactions to the same hegemonic social system. Jameson criticises, however, the fact that the "omnipresent collectivity persisting beneath the appearance of fragmentation and disintegration in concrete social life no doubt constitutes a deeper ideological excuse for the abstention from overt and intentional projects of change on the political level".⁸⁸ This comment is taking aim at the liberal politics of *Middlemarch* and nineteenth-century realism more broadly. But unlike his other comments on the web, this criticism cannot be extrapolated to *Seven Poor Men*; Stead does not abstain from depicting an

⁸³ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 204.

⁸⁴ Maria Teresa Bindella, "Searchlights and the Search for History in Christina Stead's 'Seven Poor Men of Sydney'", *Australian Literary Studies* 15, no. 2 (1991): 96, 99.

⁸⁵ Brydon, *Christina Stead*, 37.

⁸⁶ Frederic Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism*, (London: Verso, 2013), 131.

⁸⁷ Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism*, 141.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

‘intentional project of change’, for the communist movement is the focus of her novel. The web narratively unites the workers irrespective of whether they have consciously adopted the posture of solidarity which would actually, rather than metaphorically, unite them with each other. The web is a key metaphor of realist unity in contrast to what Aijaz Ahmad has called modernism’s “ontological primacy of the fragment”.⁸⁹

At the end of the novel, though, is a passage in which “the web trembles, now the threads are free and they swing out into space, feeling their way in universal shade and bearing their own light like the rayed bottom-fishes” (318). The dispersal of the threads of the web reflects the disintegration of the micro-community that had been the focus of the novel. The dissolution of the web might thus be read as giving credence to a pessimistic view of social progress, like the one advanced by Brayshaw quoted above. The apparently cyclical nature of the novel is also given as evidence for this view, as the novel’s final line is an apparent reversion: “And thus he begins: ‘We were seven friends, at that time...’” (319). However, differences between this ending and the beginning of the novel should be noted: the narrative is now in the first-person plural and is in reported speech, rather than the third-person narration with which it began. Stead’s emphasis throughout the novel on the communicability and sociality of experience features again here, as Joseph has incorporated his experiences into an understanding of the world and is now ready to articulate them as a storyteller. Just before Joseph begins his story, which is the novel’s end, the reader is told by the narrator that “they cannot have a sequel, the creatures of our youth”, an idea that undermines the notion of cyclicity or repetition-without-difference. The reader is also told that “Joseph had got a temporary job cutting sandwiches in a lunch room” (316), the key word here being “temporary”, telling us that the story of Joseph’s life continues. History as the succession of chronological time has not ceased; the narrative adopts a vantage point from which the historical development of Joseph’s life can be seen.

IV. Modernism and socialism in the antipodes

My situation of Stead’s novel within a discourse on modernity has drawn upon Marxist thinkers, which is appropriate given Stead’s own affiliation with this intellectual school and the proletarian subject

⁸⁹ Ahmad, *In Theory*, 138.

matter of her novel. Nevertheless, the reader's attention is repeatedly drawn to the antipodean location of the novel, the settler-colony of Australia, as a feature that throws into question the relevance of what characters in the text call 'Old World' categories of thought. Stead's investigation of modernity is inflected by a subtle but unmistakable awareness of colonialism and geography.

The notion that modernism is not an imported phenomenon to Australia but has distinctive local characteristics, if not autochthonous beginnings, is an idea that has been receiving increasing attention in Australian literary scholarship. Anouk Lang, for instance, argues that "for modernist experimentation to become a viable mode of literary expression in [Australian] contexts... it needed to find ways to articulate itself through the vocabulary and preoccupations of cultural nationalism".⁹⁰ Stead's novel runs counter to this narrative. Unlike contemporaneous local writing, *Seven Poor Men* demonstrates no obvious enthusiasm to enlist itself in service of cultural nationalism. While a generation of Australian realists, some of whom I will examine in the following chapter, were unabashedly proud of convict agitators and settler radicals and appropriated these mythologies for their contemporary political purposes, Stead's relationship to nationalism is far more ambivalent. She gives the left-wing nationalist position a voice through the character of Winter, who declares that the working men of 1920s Sydney are descendant from "rebellious men, all the martyrs of the nineteenth century Trades Union England, all the men who stole bread rather than see their wives and children starve" (170). But as with Michael's despondency, such an attitude is not characteristic of the overall outlook of the novel and is undermined by the attitudes of the other characters.

Stead problematises Australia's status as a 'New World' country. In Blount's speech at the end of the novel he presents an abridged history of the Australian continent, but the iconography mentioned is entirely different to that of the triumphalist nationalist narrative. Blount takes the reader on a tour from the prehistoric "ante-glacial world" in which dinosaurs roamed a continent in the Timor Sea (305) to the "over-populated metropolis" (308) in which the characters presently find themselves. The speech is significant, not least because it situates the Australian continent within Asia rather than within Europe, talking of the "Moluccas with fruits and China bells" and the "Kanakas [who] perished in the cane" (308). This emphasis on Australia's historical Asian-ness occurs throughout the novel, such as when the

⁹⁰Anouk Lang, "Modernity in practice: a comparative view of the cultural dynamics of modernist literary production in Australia and Canada", *Canadian Literature* 209, (2011).

Sydney workers are compared with “the darkies growin’ opium and rice and rubber in the F.M.S. who can’t even pay for one meal a day” (170), that is, inhabitants of another, nearby British colony, the Federated Malay States.⁹¹ To situate Australia alongside Asia both geographically and politically as a subject of British colonialism undermines the narrative of Sydney as another modernist, cosmopolitan hub not unlike Paris or London. Stead, writing from these locations, thus creates a conceptual distance between her own novel and the literary products of her Australian contemporaries.

The ‘temporal rupture’, the notion of the uniqueness of the contemporary experience of time constituting a self-conscious break with other epochs, is a common feature in the thematics of modernism. Stead’s emphasis on remembering repressed history, and on the continuities between this history and the present, acts here as an anti-modernist device. As well as its problematisation of the narrative of Australia-in-modernity, the novel’s invocation of a history beyond living memory is a strategy to counter the colonial amnesia from which Australia suffers:

‘It is this new country,’ sighed the schoolmaster. ‘You have no notion of history; you began yesterday and you all think you are the first men. Doctrine, constitution, order, duty, religion, you have to find them out by long and drougthy explorations in the spirit. (17)

Even a character like Joseph makes the mistake of believing that only Europe has a history worth speaking of, such as when he:

thought of sailing outside the heads and going to the old countries, where the morning sun gilded domes, palaces, royal parks, and hives of cities, bigger ports, and where men had a history that looked through millenniums. (82-3)

A caricature is thus built of the modern Australian colonial subject who has no idea of his origins and is effectively a geographically displaced European. In doing so, in evoking the *Unheimlich* experience of the white settler in a foreign land, Stead enlists an abiding trope of settler-colonial Australian literature from Henry Lawson till today. But Australia also has a “history that looked through millenniums” of which the reader is continually reminded by Stead. For instance, the narrator recalls pre-colonial contact between Indigenous Australians and South-East Asians, telling us that “bold Malays cast on the broken shores and among the perpendicular cliffs found their way into the enamel waters of the Great Barrier

⁹¹ The Federated Malay States was a colonial federation established by the British Government, existing from 1896-1946, comprised of four states of present-day Malaysia.

Reef” (305). Stead’s contextualising serves as a corrective to not just the arrogance of the colonial psyche but the history-erasing nature of modernity itself, with its emphasis on newness.

Discussion of the “new world” and the “old country” (310), the world of the colonies and the coloniser respectively, features throughout the novel. However, these terms both take on additional meanings: pre-colonial Australia and Asia, the reader is reminded, are just as old as Europe; the new world refers not just to that of the colonies but could also be the “future state” of socialism that Baruch intends to join (310). Stead’s relationship to old world ideas in a new world context is a necessarily complex one, for the socialism of Marx has its provenance in the same Enlightenment tradition as the colonialist triumphalism that she criticises. The socialist new world can only come about through a negation of the old world, but using the tools—reason, autonomy, the productive capacities—provided by this old world. This is the ironic double bind of modernity. When the character Catherine states that “your new world is too sane for me” (311), the reader is unsure if she is talking about the project of colonialism or socialism. Newness, which can be read more or less as a synonym for modernity itself, has its own underside of regressive barbarism. The character Fulke’s statement that “this struggle will never cease—it will go on generation after generation” (135) could be read as either utterly pessimistic or optimistic.

V. Chapter conclusion: an alternative modernism

In his lecture ‘When Was Modernism?’, Raymond Williams sees one of the enabling conditions of cosmopolitan modernism as being the international mobility of a cadre of artists. This mobility, Williams argues, brings with it a concomitant ideology, a “singular narrative of unsettlement, homelessness, solitude, and impoverished independence” that produces “estranged images of alienation and loss”.⁹² This kind of modernism “arose in the new metropolitan cities, the centres of the also new imperialism, which offered themselves as transnational capitals of an art without frontiers”.⁹³ Stead is certainly a participant in this phenomenon, even if her novel itself is not set in one of these European capitals and its Australian location actively resists identification with this tendency. Reading Stead’s work vis-à-vis Benjamin and Lukács, it is clear that she is critical of these modernist tendencies even as

⁹² Williams, ‘When Was Modernism?’, 50, 51.

⁹³ Ibid, 50.

she participates in them. *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is, to be sure, a novel of homelessness and solitude, but it is not singularly so.

Like Lukács and Stead, Williams' judgement of this rootless cosmopolitanism is negative. Unlike Lukács though, Williams refuses to identify this kind of modernism with modernism as a whole, criticising the "highly selective version of the modern which then offers to appropriate the whole of modernity".⁹⁴ For Williams there is another modernism, "an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works in the wide margin of the century" that I have already postulated Stead could be described as belonging to.⁹⁵ This alternative modernist tradition could perhaps be called, in an appropriation of Lukács, critical realism. Either way, this alternative formation is both a product of and a reaction against modernity, resistant to certain dominant currents of modernist aesthetic practice and political thought, nourished nonetheless by the unmistakably modern intellectual current of socialism.

The renowned Australian New Left historian Humphrey McQueen says that a reader will "better understand the life of that city [Sydney]... if we also read Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934). The more Australian fiction I read, and the more I learn about our society, the less happy I am with any one-dimensional judgement about either".⁹⁶ One can indeed learn a lot about Sydney at that time from Stead's novel, but it is more than a rarefied historical document. It is a complex reckoning with Australian society in the twentieth century, with the legacy of colonialism and the spectre of political struggle. It is a product of a clash between realist and modernist modes, and in its enigmatic, chaotic unwieldiness, it bears the mark of this tension.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 52.

⁹⁶ Humphrey McQueen, *Temper Democratic: How Exceptional is Australia?*, (Mile End: Wakefield Press, 1998), 188.

Chapter Two: Socialist Realism with Australian Characteristics

Having examined Stead's complex reckoning with socialism and modernity in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934), I will now turn to an example of a relationship between the far left and literary production in Australia that understood the connection between political commitment and creative practice quite differently.

In William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935) he tells the reader that it "is hard for an Englishman to talk definitely about proletarian art, because in England it has never been a genre with settled principles, and such as there is of it, that I have seen, is bad."⁹⁷ Much literary critical opinion has more or less settled on this conclusion that socialist realism, what Empson here has called proletarian art, "is bad". My purpose in this chapter on socialist realism in the Australian context is not to defend specific literary works or the tendency in general against this prevailing opinion, despite how spurious it might be. The very nature of socialist literary production in fact challenges the received literary-critical categories through which texts have traditionally been understood by, for example, the New Criticism with which Empson is associated. One alternative, materialist way of thinking about literature rejects the notion that texts should be received as reified, isolated works of individual creative endeavour to be judged according to transhistorical aesthetic criterion. Socialist realist works were written with the explicit aim of reflecting specific social conditions and instrumentalised for the development of specific forms of consciousness at a given historical juncture. This is not to say that one could not decide to subject a work of socialist realism to a conventional, formalist evaluation—critics have done so and still do. But for this chapter I aim to produce something different to, and hopefully more interesting than, either an agreement with Empson's position or a rebuttal of it. I aim to bring a cultural materialist analysis to the phenomenon of socialist realism as it emerged and existed in the Australian context.

I argue in this chapter for an understanding of socialist realism in Australia not only as one kind of literary writing amongst others, but as a component of a broader historical movement to create a sphere of socialist cultural production in Australia. The creation of working-class literary institutions and the production, distribution, and reception of texts within this milieu was a significant and unique

⁹⁷ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, (Middlesex: Penguin Book, 1966), 11.

moment in Australian literary history. While I accede to the general view that their aesthetic positions were unsophisticated, I argue this is actually due to an insufficiently thorough reading of Marx's ideas about literature rather than an overdetermined political commitment to socialism. In this chapter I wish to correct another misconception about the movement, and that is the vague and often imprecise association between the mid-century cultural left and a regressive Australian nationalism. While the socialist realists in Australia did see themselves as belonging to a lineage of Australian workerism, the movement is better thought of as a participant in a transnational Cold War ideological contest, rather than as nativist or xenophobic.

Raymond Williams' cultural materialism, which has been discussed in my introduction, is a useful framework for my argument. Williams was not a proponent of socialist realism in either his creative practice or scholarship. But his theory of cultural materialism is an original and significant attempt to think through what a materialist view of culture, art, and society might look like. He argues that "the central use of cultural theory" should not be the "discovery of a method... through which particular works of art can be understood and described".⁹⁸ That is to say, he wants not to adjudicate between competing theories about how to best read a text, but to move away from the focus on the consumption of art and towards a theory of its production. For Williams, "the true crisis in cultural theory, in our own time, is between this view of the work of art as object and the alternative view of art as a practice".⁹⁹ This chapter is thus an exercise in looking at the Realists' attempt to create a socialist literary sphere in Australia not with an exclusive focus on individual texts, but from the perspective of the entire cultural milieu in which those texts were produced and received. The chapter does not seek to be an exhaustive historical overview; my interest is in how this group contributed to and is also a product of a broader aesthetic and political tensions, for instance between realism and modernism, that dominated mid-century Australian writing.

I. The emergence of communist literary institutions in Australia

⁹⁸ Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory", in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*, (London: Verso, 1980), 45.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 47.

The Realist Writers' Movement, active from 1944 until its dissolution in the early 1970s, was a cultural formation aligned to the Communist Party of Australia (CPA).¹⁰⁰ The Movement produced various literary journals, including *Realist Writer* and the early *Overland*, had a publishing arm called the Australasian Book Society, ran literary prizes, and hosted local working-class writers' groups in various cities around Australia. The capitalised term 'Realist Writers' strictly refers to local writers groups based in various cities, beginning with a group in Melbourne in 1944. Throughout this chapter, however, I will use the label in a more expansive sense to refer to the larger cultural movement committed to socialist realism involving various aforementioned institutions, not all of which were officially CPA organs, but all of which were at least communist-adjacent in their politics.¹⁰¹ In one of the few studies of the group, John McLaren describes the Realist Writers' Movement's goal as aiming to "build a network of readers and writers whose books and journals would provide the sinews of a working-class culture which would develop revolutionary zeal among workers".¹⁰² The Realist Writers' Movement counted amongst its members many of Australia's most recognisable mid-century writers, including Dorothy Hewett, Katherine Susannah Prichard, John Morrison, Alan Marshall, Frank Hardy, Judah Waten, Ralph de Boissière, Jack Beasley, and Mena Calthorpe.

The literary products of this movement include some of the most well-known novels of mid-century Australian fiction and deal with a range of themes. For example, issues of labour and unionism feature in Katherine Susannah Prichard's *Goldfields* trilogy (1949-50), Dorothy Hewett's *Bobbin Up* (1959), a novel about the plight of female factory workers in a Sydney suburb, and *Power Without Glory* (1950), Frank Hardy's scandalous narrative of corruption in the Labor party. Australian migrant literature has a forefather in Judah Waten's *Alien Son* (1952), a series of interconnected short stories about post-World War Jewish migration to Australia. The first book published by the communist-run Australasian Book Society was Ralph de Boissière's *Crown Jewel* (1952), which was based on the author's encounter with the labour movement in Trinidad before he migrated to Australia to work in car manufacturing.

¹⁰⁰ In scholarship on the movement, sometimes "Writers" is followed by an apostrophe and sometimes it is not. In this thesis I have opted to include the apostrophe, following the movement's own usage.

¹⁰¹ Where the word 'Realists' is capitalised, I am referring specifically Australian Realist Writers' Movement, but throughout the thesis continue to use 'realist' or 'realism' without capitalisation to denote the general aesthetic tendency.

¹⁰² John McLaren, *Writing in Hope and Fear: Literature as Politics in Postwar Australia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 33.

All these prominent works of Australian fiction have their basis in a shared politico-aesthetic vision, and an institutional and ideological home in the Realist Writers' Movement. Yet, despite the movement's relevance to the developments of twentieth-century Australian literature, studies of the group itself are few. A chapter on the group exists in Susan Lever's *A Question of Commitment: Australian literature in the twenty years after the war* (1989) and in John McLaren's *Writing in Hope and Fear: Literature as Politics in Postwar Australia* (1996). Lever uses the notion of 'commitment' to explore literary politics of the period and McLaren's is a historical study from the perspective of a person who himself was a participant in the literary politics of the time. There is also a small number of articles, mainly published in the journal *Australian Literary Studies*, that take a mostly historical approach to the subject.¹⁰³ An overview of the post-war cultural activism of the far left in Australia has been recently published by Lisa Milner, evidencing perhaps a renaissance of interest in the period.¹⁰⁴ Each of these studies, written years or decades apart, reads as if having the intention to recover to memory the importance of the movement and establish the historical facts of its existence. This is an important task given the neglect of the movement in Australian literary history. But one consequence of the historical emphasis in the existing scholarship is that our understanding of socialist realism in the Australian context has not progressed much further than a discussion of the details of its existence. The theoretical significance and nuances of its positions remain vastly under-explored.

By and large, individual members of the group have received more critical attention than the movement as a whole. David Carter has written a study of Waten, *A Career in Writing: Judah Waten and the Cultural Politics of a Literary Career* (1997), Carole Ferrier of Devanny, *Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary* (1999), and Paul Adams and Christopher Lee an edited volume on Frank Hardy entitled *Frank Hardy and the Literature of Commitment* (2003). The writer Ralph de Boissière was the subject of a 1994 PhD thesis and thereafter multiple articles by Allan Gardiner, while Katherine Susannah Prichard and Dorothy Hewett are the subjects of biographies currently being written by Nathan Hobby and Nicole Moore, respectively. These studies of individual writers are useful for a researcher, and are certainly

¹⁰³ Nathan Hollier, "Racism, the Realist Writers' Movement and the Katharine Susannah Prichard Award", *Australian Literary Studies* 19, no.2 (1999); Ian Syson, "Out from the Shadows: The Realist Writers' Movement, 1944-1970, and Communist Cultural Discourse", *Australian Literary Studies* 15, no.4 (1992).

¹⁰⁴ Lisa Milner, "The Cultural Front: Left Cultural Activism in the Post-War Era", *The Far Left in Australia Since 1945*, edited by Jon Piccini, Evan Smith, Matthew Worley, 267-282, (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2018).

invaluable for maintaining an appreciation of the contribution of individual figures to Australian literary culture. However, biographical material cannot tell us everything about the collective ambitions of the proletarian model of literary production that the Realist Writers' Movement was pursuing. To comprehend the nature and significance of this historical attempt to create what was in effect a counter-public sphere – an alternative socialist culture to rival that of Menzies-era bourgeois Australia – something more along the lines of a cultural materialist framework is required. It is notable that of the works mentioned above, most were published during a fifteen-year period around the end of last century. But if anything, questions concerning the relationship between art and emancipatory politics have become more central to cultural discourse today than previously. For this reason, it seems timely that this group of communist writers from mid- twentieth century Australia, who saw books and writing as a central part of their struggle against capitalism, is once again investigated by scholarship.

It was not until after the Second World War that the CPA adopted an official policy towards art.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, there were various antecedent institutions that can be seen to have paved the way for artistic and cultural concerns to attain such prominence amongst the Party's activities. Communists were active in the Fellowship of Australian Writers from its inception in 1928 and pushed the Fellowship to take a pro-Soviet position. Left-wing writers, including Jean Devanny, started a Sydney Workers Art Club in 1932.¹⁰⁶ Katherine Susannah Prichard had long been both a communist and a writer and was a central figure in coalescing these two categories into what is known as socialist realism in Australia, a founding event of which was Prichard's visit to the Soviet Union in 1933 where she came into contact with the newly formed Writers Union and brought socialist realist ideas back to Australia.¹⁰⁷ Prichard edited the short-lived magazine *Australian New Writing* from 1943-46 which was another early forum for socialist realist ideas. In 1944, the first Realist Writers' club began in Melbourne and shortly after clubs began in other cities. The prominence of these two women writers in the founding of the Movement is significant, and it should furthermore be acknowledged that women were involved in the Movement in a variety of roles, not just as writers but as organisers, secretaries, editors, typists, and reviewers.

¹⁰⁵ Jack Beasley, *Red Letter Days: Notes from Inside an Era* (Sydney: Australasian Book Society, 1979), 173.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ This anecdote is corroborated for instance in Cath Ellis, 'Socialist Realism in the Australian Literary Context: with specific reference to the writing of Katherine Susannah Prichard', *Journal of Australian Studies* 21, (1997).

It would not be until 1952 that the Melbourne Realist Writers' Group founded the journal *Realist Writer*, but throughout the 1940s and 1950s many articles advocating for a socialist position on art were published in the *Communist Review*. Prominent Realist Writer Jack Beasley wrote in his memoir that he believes Zhdanovism—the official Soviet policy on socialist realism introduced at the Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934—arrived in Australia in 1952, the same year that J.D. Blake exhorted writers to “portray our Australian reality, our working people and the ideas of Communism in realistic, artistic imagery” and to “build a mass movement of cultural workers”.¹⁰⁸

An important moment in the development of the Realist Writers' Movement was the establishment of their own publishing house, the Australasian Book Society (ABS), in 1952. Officially, the ABS was not CPA-aligned, but in fact it was run by communists. Beasley recounts that those in attendance at the ABS's inaugural meeting included a trade union secretary, a union organiser, a secretary of the Realist Writers' group, a journalist, and a bookshop employee.¹⁰⁹ One impetus for founding the ABS was the libel controversy over Frank Hardy's novel *Power Without Glory*. This incident brought about a realisation of the need for a socialist publishing house that would support similarly controversial works. Unlike a conventional publishing house, the ABS ran according to a model of worker subscriptions, and membership peaked at 3,000 individuals ten years after its establishment.¹¹⁰ As mentioned previously, the first novel published by the ABS was Ralph de Boissière's *Crown Jewel*. Boissière describes the way he went about promoting the novel:

Together we'd hold meetings in homes, at pit-heads, at factory gates, on ships. [...] I remember the first I attended was at a meatworks and I was terrified. I'd never spoken before in my life but I had to get up on a table and who am I seeing? Italian and Maltese migrants and some Australian faces, and they are playing cards and talking, and I have to stand up and talk about a book!¹¹¹

This anecdote conveys the extent to which the production and reception of literary texts were centred upon working-class institutions. It is doubtful that the capitalist book industry of the time could have

¹⁰⁸ Beasley, *Red Letter Days*, 181.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 134.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 141.

¹¹¹ Allan Gardiner, 'Comrades in Words: An Interview with Ralph de Boissiere', *Kunapipi* 15, no. 1 (1993): 40. *Crown Jewel*, today largely forgotten in Australia, was favourably reviewed by Salman Rushdie, "Exemplary Lives." *Times Literary Supplement* (August 7, 1981).

supported the publication of Boissière's novel about black workers' labour struggles in colonial Trinidad. As the example of this collective, non-profit publishing house demonstrates, socialist realism for the Realists did not exist merely at the level of textuality but informed the very nature of literary production itself.

II. 'Between Two Worlds': Modernism as constitutive other

The extra-literary dimensions of the Realists' project notwithstanding, style was certainly one of the main battlegrounds in their crusade to develop a mode of socialist literary production in Australia. In 1962, novelist and communist Judah Waten wrote an article in the journal *Realist Writer* summarising the main trends in Australian literature, and the basis of the distinction between trends was a formal one. Waten saw Australian literary history as separable into two distinct traditions: what he called the democratic realist tradition, and the "anti-realist metaphysical" tradition.¹¹² In his article, Waten unequivocally aligns himself with the former and appropriates much of the Australian literary canon for this tradition; nineteenth-century writers Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy, and Mary Gilmore are included, as are many of the most recognisable early and mid-twentieth century Australian writers, such as Henry Handel Richardson, Eleanor Dark, Xavier Herbert, and John Morrison. Notably absent from this list is Christina Stead, a remarkable absence given the fact that engagement with Marxist thought was more substantial than that of any other writer on the aforementioned list. The reasons for this omission we can only assume to be Stead's unwillingness to identify with the nationalist tradition, her remoteness from Australia during the period, and perhaps the fact that her own marriage of socialist politics and literary writing was unorthodox yet ultimately more sophisticated than what Waten and his contemporaries produced, as discussed at length in the previous chapter.

Waten's article is both a celebration of democratic realism and a polemic against the anti-realist metaphysical tradition, which he sees as being represented primarily by Australia's most celebrated writer, Patrick White. According to Waten,

¹¹² Judah Waten, "Australian Literature in 1962", *Realist Writer* 12 (1963): 26.

from the days of Lawson the democratic-realist trend has been closely bound up with socialist ideas. That has been the reality, a further proof that all literature has an ideological-political trend, that in one way or another it expresses and upholds the interests of definite classes and social groups. The democratic-realist trend has always upheld the interests of the mass of people.¹¹³

Waten's vision here is of literature as a component of class struggle. Literary 'trends' are conceptualised as terrain for political contestation. Waten's aesthetic and political adversaries, those of the anti-realist-metaphysical trend, "manifest the present-day epidemic of chaos and gibberish, intellectual paucity, excessive inwardness, sexual fantasies, anti-Communism and the abandonment of reason"; their writing is "psychological" and associated with "reactionary 19th century European thought", "French symbolists", T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.¹¹⁴ Patrick White's early novels *The Tree of Man* (1955) and *Voss* (1957) were the primary subjects of this ire in the Australian context. Readers will notice in these epithets obvious echoes of a set of debates within Marxist aesthetics about realism versus modernism, including those between theorists such as Lukács and Brecht, and the attacks made by Soviet socialist realists against contemporaneous European modernists. The constitutive 'other' against which the Australian socialist realists contrasted their own aesthetic practice was not always termed 'modernism', even if it represented what we would now recognise as such. Indeed, Waten does not use the term in his article quoted above; articles in the *Communist Review* refer to 'Surrealism' and 'Formalism' rather than modernism, and Katherine Susannah Prichard's commentary on the Ern Malley modernist hoax speaks of modernism only as 'anarchistic individualism' and 'decadent aestheticism'.¹¹⁵ But the basic, caricatured philosophical debate is the same as it was in other roughly contemporaneous contexts: Freud and Nietzsche on one side, Marx and Lenin on the other; the individual versus the collective. This binary opposition structured the Realists' discourse, providing ostensible relevance and urgency to their literary work. They imagined the 'native' Australian realist tradition to be imperilled by an emerging, foreign, bourgeois modernism, which was at times even conflated with the spectre of fascism.¹¹⁶ We have previously established that in

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 26-27.

¹¹⁵ D. Diamond, "Art and the Struggle", *Communist Review* (November 1943); Katherine Susannah Prichard, "Hoax Renders Service to Literature", *Communist Review* (March 1945).

¹¹⁶ For example, in the foreword to the first edition of the communist journal *Australian New Writing* (1943), edited by Katherine Susannah Prichard.

fact modernism was a term circulating in the Australian cultural vocabulary since the 1920s; the mythology pedalled by the Realists is not being defended here as true, but we can nevertheless recognise its powerful rhetorical effects as a political call-to-arms in defence of so-called democratic Australian culture.

In his study of Waten, David Carter coins the phrase the “two traditions argument”¹¹⁷ to describe the tensions identified by Waten and the Realists between their own mode of democratic (i.e. socialist) realism, and anti-realist metaphysical writing (i.e. modernism). One important aspect of the two traditions argument is the question of nationalism, as the Realists postulated a convenient binary of progressive Australian nationalism allied to realism on the one side, and a regressive, because individualist, foreign modernism on the other. Both literary scholarship about the Realists and their image of themselves emphasizes the ‘native’ Australian aspects of their tradition, locating their roots within a cluster of writers around the end of the nineteenth century in Australia. Scholar T. Inglis Moore, for example, discusses the “undeniable dominance of realism” in late nineteenth century Australia which he sees as having come about due to the “British origin, the convict system, and the relative importance of the working class” (122-3). He claims that Australia’s realism, “with the exception of [Henry Handel] Richardson, the expatriate influence by European naturalism” (134), is an “indigenous” development. Katherine Susannah Prichard’s account of realism’s history is that Henry Lawson “laid the foundation of an Australian literature that was to be based on realism”.¹¹⁸ We will shortly return to the question of nationalism, but the salient point here is that the Realists traced an ideological line from their own literary practice back to the colonial period.

This rather self-aggrandised vision of the Realists would have us believe that Australian literature was dominated by socialist ideas and an accompanying socialist aesthetic beginning at the end of the nineteenth century and continuing throughout most of the twentieth. That a genuine ideological consistency existed between the Realists’ own Soviet-inspired variant of socialist realism and the nationalist fiction of the 1890s is dubious; even the trade unionist and labour intellectual Lloyd Ross

¹¹⁷ David Carter, *Judah Waten and the Cultural Politics of a Literary Career*. (Toowoomba: Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1997), 17.

¹¹⁸ Katherine Susannah Prichard, “The Anti-Capitalist Core of Australian Literature”, *Communist Review* (August 1943): 107.

argued that Lawson and his contemporaries “owed nothing to a knowledge of Marxian theory: often they owed no allegiance to a party. They wrote about popular causes with freedom from the disciplines of a political creed or organisation”.¹¹⁹

Nevertheless, the broader contours of the Realists’ own version of the history, that democratic, nationalist realism dominated Australian literature until it was threatened in the latter half of the 20th Century by a psychological, metaphysical anti-realism (which we would now call modernism), is in broad outlines similar to much canonical history of Australian literature provided by mainstream scholarship, even when those histories do not include the Realist Writers’ Movement itself. T. Inglis Moore’s influential study *Social Patterns in Australian Literature* (1971) argued that realism “has been dominant in fiction until challenged by Patrick White”.¹²⁰ In 2000, Kerry Goldsworthy argued in the *Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* that realism dominated Australian fiction “from the 1930s till the end of the 1950s” until it was forced to compete with “so-called ‘metaphysical’ fictions”,¹²¹ clearly adopting the Realists’ language although, again, not mentioning them or their politics. Michael Wilding’s ‘The Politics of Modernism’ (1997) also characterises the emergence of modernism in Australia as a reaction against socialist realism that he similarly attributes to Patrick White. “Confronting socialist realism with its focus on the representatively human, on the socially progressive, on the readily intelligible, modernism”, Wilding writes, “chose to privilege the alienated, the outsider, the decadent, the deviant”.¹²² White himself famously assented to a version of this narrative, agreeing that realism was the dominant mode until he came along.¹²³ He, of course, derided this fact rather than celebrated it. Susan Lever’s history of Australian fiction since 1950 also more or less single-handedly credits Patrick White with bringing modernism to Australia and elevating the status of the novel to art, observing that before White came along “Australian fiction was dominated by a group of left-leaning nationalists [... with] the local novel generally offer[ing] social-realist depictions of the struggling poor”.¹²⁴ It is not clear whether

¹¹⁹ Lloyd Ross, “Writers and Social Progress”, *The Australian Observer* (July 26 1947): 111.

¹²⁰ T Inglis Moore, *Social Patterns in Australian Literature*, 133.

¹²¹ Kerry Goldsworthy, “Fiction from 1900 to 1970”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, edited by Elizabeth Webby, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 121.

¹²² Michael Wilding, “Patrick White: The Politics of Modernism”, *Sydney Studies in English* 16, (1997): 224.

¹²³ I am referring of course to the famous ‘dreary dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism’ quote found in Patrick White, “The Prodigal Son”, in *Patrick White Speaks* (Primavera Press: 1989).

¹²⁴ Susan Lever, “The Challenge of the Novel: Australian Fiction Since 1950”, in *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, edited by Peter Pierce, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 501.

the “left-leaning nationalists” to which Lever refers are the Realists or the *Meanjin* circle, which included the likes of the poet Nettie Palmer and her husband, Vance.

The Realist Writers’ Movement, as we have just seen, is often not mentioned in these accounts; the familiar narrative is one of contestation between cultural nationalists, like the Jindyworobak movement of the 1930s and 1940s or the journal *Meanjin*, and institutions more receptive to overseas modernist influences like surrealism, such as the *Angry Penguins* journal. Rarely is the distinction made between the liberal and the communist left, or the contribution of the latter in the form of organised, CPA-aligned cultural groups like the Realists, taken into account. The distinction is important, because the groups represent distinct literary heritages even as they both claim the late nineteenth and early twentieth century nationalists as forebears. To take one example, while Nettie Palmer and Katherine Susannah Prichard were both involved in the establishment of the Fellowship of Australian Writers in the late 1920s, Palmer saw Prichard as being too involved in communist politics, to the extent that it was having a deleterious effect on her writing.¹²⁵ The distinction in later years can be conveniently summarised by looking at the journals *Meanjin* (first published 1940) and early *Overland* (first published 1957). The *Meanjin* circle, involving critics such as Clem Christensen and the Palmers, was less socialist in its politics and closer to the political and artistic establishment of the time. On the other hand, the main writers of the early *Overland*, which included many from the Realists, were almost all communists and their working-class politics were centrally relevant to their artistic work. Nevertheless, there was a degree of social and aesthetic overlap between the groups, with figures such as Judah Waten, for example, frequently publishing in *Meanjin* throughout the 1950s.

Waten’s broad outline of Australia’s literary history is, as we can see, corroborated by orthodox Australian literary-historical narratives. However, scholars are continuing to add nuance and clarifications to the picture we have of the development of literature in Australia throughout the twentieth century, recognising that modernism was not single-handedly introduced to Australia by Patrick White, and that many of Waten’s attempts to appropriate writers for his own tradition of ‘democratic realism’

¹²⁵ Dixon, “Australian fiction”, 242.

were dubious.¹²⁶ That the literary history proposed by the Realists is not strictly accurate is not especially important; what is necessary to grasp is that the sense of confrontation between two literary traditions and their respective values provided the Realists with political animus and activated their sense of being engaged in a cultural struggle.

David Carter is one scholar who has gone some way towards putting forward a more complex account of Australian modernism and its intersections with socialist realism during the period. Carter argues that “a wide range of Australian writing can be read significantly in terms of its conceptual-ideological responses to modernism”, whether this response is one of “adaptation, antagonism, or counterproduction”.¹²⁷ ‘Modernist’ is not something a text simply is or is not, but rather modernism was a cultural and political presence to which a work can interact in various ways (uptake, reaction, or repression, for example). Carter’s understanding of mid-century realism through this prism, as an ideological response to modernism, is more nuanced than the traditional narrative which saw each tendency as only antagonistic to the other. In fact, Carter argues that realism itself “might be considered a modernism” in the Australian context, and that in socialist realism, “radical modernity and a many-sided conservatism are intertwined at every point”.¹²⁸

Carter’s recognition of the complexity of socialist realism’s manifestation in the Australian context is welcomed. Yet according to most plausible understandings of modernism, the claim that Australian socialist realism is itself a modernism must be considered an exaggeration. Carter justifies his assertion by pointing out realism’s “radical, contemporary, oppositional aesthetic” in this post-war period, arguing it is “not to be considered simply as an extension of naivety or nostalgia”.¹²⁹ To use Williams’ schematisation, the Realists *were* properly oppositional to the dominant culture even as they integrated some aspects of residual culture—e.g., through their appropriation of colonial myths—into their opposition.¹³⁰ But oppositionality does not alone constitute modernism. At a stylistic level, the

¹²⁶ See, for instance, Melinda J Cooper, “Adjusted Vision: Interwar Settler Modernism in Eleanor Dark’s *Return to Coolamī*”, *Australian Literary Studies* 33, no.2 (July 2018), in which it is argued that Eleanor Dark disrupts the distinction between interwar modernism and realism.

¹²⁷ David Carter, “Modernism and Australian Literature”, *World Literature Written in English* 24, no.1 (1984): 159.

¹²⁸ Carter, “Modernism and Australian Literature”, 161-2.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ This schematisation is from Raymond Williams’ section ‘Dominant, Residual, Emerging’ in *Marxism and Literature*.

writings of Realists— like Waten and Prichard for instance—display little affinity with the avant-garde, experimental works of modernism. A conscious rejection of the style of writers like Joyce was central to the socialist realist aesthetic. In terms of influential thinkers or movements that nourished modernist art, such as Nietzsche, Freud, and surrealism, these influences were consistently objects of disdain in the eyes of communist writers during this period.¹³¹ Furthermore, the notion of a temporal rupture between epochs is common to the aesthetics and thematics of modernism, but it did not feature as a component of the Realists’ thinking. Even as the Realists were advocating for a break with bourgeois society and the establishment of socialism, this development was seen as continuous with the working-class traditions of Australian life rather than constituting a break from them. Jack Beasley adopts a specifically anti-modern mindset when he talks about the need to “defend” the “traditions” of democratic realism in Australia in an article in *Realist Writer*.¹³² The notion of tradition here fits with Williams’ understanding of tradition as “predisposed continuity”, the selection of past events to ratify particular aspects of present experience.¹³³

At a material level, the Realists’ network of working-class writing institutions was a world away from the international institutional arrangements that patronised and brought into popular awareness famous modernist works. The publisher Ben Huebsch, for instance, pioneered the publication of not only Lawrence and Joyce but was also an early nurturer of Patrick White’s work. We can agree that the Realists were “radical, contemporary, oppositional” without subsuming these qualities under the category of ‘modernism’, which can then be reserved for a more specific set of meanings. We can recognise the binary logic as exaggeratedly adversarial while rejecting the idea that there was a fundamental unity underlying the two ostensibly polar opposites. This is an important recognition, for appreciating the real differences in literary politics and style that existed, and the role that an anxiety about modernism played in the Realists’ vision, is crucial to understanding the cultural politics of the period.

Manning Clark gave a sense of the ideological clash dominating mid-century Australian writing when he wrote of how artists and writers in the period between 1941 and 1969:

¹³¹ Many examples could be given here, including Diamond, “Art and the Struggle”, 151-153.

¹³² Jack Beasley, “The Great Hatred: Patrick White as Novelist”, *Realist Writer* 9 (1962): 11-14.

¹³³ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 116.

turned to those questions on the nature of man and his destiny that have been posed by all civilizations in their time of flower. They probed the origin of evil and the causes of human suffering. They asked whether God or man is responsible for human pain; they asked, too, whether human beings ever could communicate with each other; they wrote of the tenderness and compassion that flower in people who have the courage to face the horror and tragedy of human life. Others argued that this preoccupation with evil and the counselling of resignation symbolized the spiritual sickness of bourgeois civilization. For them, only the destruction of bourgeois society could liberate the creative gifts of the people and restore to their literature and their art the hope and confidence of men who knew the way forward for humanity. So once again in its history Australia stood between two worlds.¹³⁴

The work from which this quotation of Clark's is taken is a general rather than literary history, and the above statement is the only one he would make in this work about the arts or writing of the period. It is therefore significant that he mentions the socialist ideas of the Realists. In tracing various accounts of the clashes between the Realists and their opponents in these few decades of Australian literary history I have shown that the idea of "two traditions", or "two worlds" in Clark's parlance, achieved popularity in a context beyond the Realists' own. What Clark captures, although without explicitly saying so, is that the debate between the realists and anti-realists is a proxy for a much deeper set of concerns than purely formal ones.

III. The influence of Soviet ideas about art in the Australian context

What precisely is the basis for the Realists' division of Australia literary history into two opposing camps and their preference for one over the other? I have demonstrated that modernist writing is criticised by Waten because it "manifest[ed] the present-day epidemic of chaos and gibberish". Equally revealing are the terms in which Waten praises the novel *Amid the Plenty* (1962) by the now largely forgotten writer, Gavin Casey:

¹³⁴ Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, 244.

[The novel] gives a picture of contemporary unemployment which has become a feature of Australian society for the first time since the end of the war. Unemployment is now of course a permanent aspect of life in most capitalist countries, but not so long ago it was said by the press, capitalist politicians and theoreticians of all kinds, to have been abolished. [...] This is the problem which Gavin Casey depicts with insight and feeling.¹³⁵

Notable in this passage is the crudely instrumental function of literature that Waten assumes. The primary aesthetic criterion Waten is using to evaluate the text is the extent to which it provides the reader with knowledge of historical, economic, and social realities. Similar judgements are to be found all throughout Waten's literary criticism. In an early *Overland* issue, he reviewed Alan Marshall's *I Can Jump Puddles* (1955) and wrote that "the class realities are well understood by the author".¹³⁶ Vance Palmer's novel *Seedtime* (1957) was criticised because it did not "depict the whole of Queensland's labour movement" and lacks "a rank-and-file Laborite" character.¹³⁷ The appropriate subject of literature assumed by Waten is none of the things popularly associated with literary writing, such as affairs of the human heart or the inner workings of consciousness. Rather, the phenomena which literature takes as its subject should be, on his view, as historically and economically concrete as contemporary unemployment.

The basis of Waten's literary judgement, in other words, is an epistemological one. Casey's novel delivers knowledge about society, whereas Patrick White's, for example, "does not offer the people any clarity but contributes to confusion".¹³⁸ The assumption that literature should convey social knowledge is in fact so ubiquitous throughout the Realists' discourse that it constitutes something of an axiom, as evident when Katherine Susannah Prichard describes the foundation of the realist tradition as a "knowledge of our own people and country".¹³⁹ Waten repeats a similar refrain when he claims that socialist realism provides the people with "an authentic picture of Australian life".¹⁴⁰ This emphasis was not, of course, the invention of Australian socialist realism but was a central component of realism *tout court*, as discussed in the introduction.

¹³⁵ Waten, "Australian Literature in 1962", 28.

¹³⁶ Qtd in Carter, *Judah Waten: A Career in Writing*, 21.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹³⁸ Waten, "Australian Literature in 1962", 28.

¹³⁹ Prichard, "The Anti-Capitalist Core of Australian Literature", 107.

¹⁴⁰ Waten, "Australian Literature in 1962", 28.

The Realists took an active interest in historical communist positions on aesthetics, as evidenced for example by their reproduction of Engels' writings on realism in a 1965 edition of *Realist Writer* under the title 'On Some Aspects of Realism'.¹⁴¹ Despite their insistence on belonging to a tradition of decades-long Australian 'democratic realism', the most profound influence on the Realists' thinking about aesthetics was undoubtedly the Soviet doctrine of socialist realism. Waten's criticisms of White were made in terms almost identical to Soviet cultural theorist Karl Radek's criticism of James Joyce, both criticising their respective writers for their subjectivist focus on modernity's "chaos".¹⁴²

The influence of the Soviet Writers' Congress on the Realist Writers' Movement is significant. The local Realist Writers' groups were often organs of the Soviet-aligned CPA and were thus ultimately guided by Soviet cultural policy. Zhdanov's speech at the 1934 Congress that became a Politburo order would thereafter have filtered down to local CPA branches. Prominent Realists like Katherine Susannah Prichard, Judah Waten, Frank Hardy, and Dorothy Hewett (amongst others) were all committed and passionate CPA activists during the 1950s, many of them having visited the Soviet Union. Indeed, Prichard was one of the CPA's co-founders in the early 1920s.

The socialist realist emphasis on art's role in providing knowledge of society can be seen as an aesthetic position emergent from the particular way the communists at the time understood Marx's theory of historical materialism. There is a *prima facie* inconsistency between the centrality accorded to art by the CPA and their materialist theory of society that saw aesthetic forms as superstructural and mere epiphenomena of a determining base. In the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* Marx famously calls the relations of production in a society the "real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness", commonly known as the 'base'; in the same passage he refers to "legal, political, religious, *aesthetic*, or philosophic" forms as "in short, ideological forms", commonly known as the 'superstructure'.¹⁴³ If aesthetic forms are just ideology, which is just a product of the "real foundation" of society, the relations of production, then why did both the Soviets and following them the Australian socialist realists accord such importance to art? Can we explain the centrality of art to the Australian socialists' programme as

¹⁴¹ Syson, "Out from the Shadows", 345.

¹⁴² Radek, "Contemporary World Literature".

¹⁴³ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, online at *Marxists Internet Archives*.

anything other than a kind of compensatory reaction-formation against mechanical materialism that logically accords art little importance at all? The way the socialist realists resolved this conundrum was to emphasize a particular aspect of their inheritance from earlier realist traditions: the instrumentalising of art based on its epistemological qualities, and its capacity to provide social, political, and historical knowledge about society.

By proclaiming that art can and should deliver social or political knowledge that conforms to an existing analysis of the social structure, the socialist realist manages to circumvent the idealist pitfall of claiming that artist themselves *create* a certain kind of consciousness. This move can be recognised in Zhdanov's revision of Stalin's well-known statement that writers are the engineers of human souls. Stalin's proclamation has overtly idealist, arch-Romantic implications. The way Zhdanov resolves the tension is worth quoting:

Comrade Stalin has called our writers engineers of human souls. What does this mean? What duties does the title confer upon you?

In the first place, it means *knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art*, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as 'objective reality', but to depict reality in its revolutionary development.¹⁴⁴

Here, the immediate retreat to the familiar terrain of epistemology is revealing. What is striking is the inconsistency between Stalin's statement and Zhdanov's interpretation of it; the movement from creating souls to knowing life is a rather imaginative stretch. Amongst the socialist intelligentsia, a commitment to literature was frequently chronologically prior to a socialist one.¹⁴⁵ The emphasis on art and culture was likely then to be retroactively justified according to a socialist framework rather than emerge organically from the first principles of socialism. The insistence on providing knowledge as the foremost function of the literary text is a convenient way to render this emphasis consistent. In the final section of this chapter,

¹⁴⁴ Zhdanov, "Soviet Literature", emphasis added.

¹⁴⁵ Such a statement is true of Marx and Engels, as it is for Party theoreticians such as Gorky. It is true of later communists like literary critic György Lukács, as it is of figures within the Australian context such as Dorothy Hewett.

we will discuss the inadequacy of this position and how it stems from a misreading of Marx rather than a supposed excess of political commitment.

A substantial difference between the Soviet and Australian positions on realism, and one which explains the frequent replacement of the prefix ‘socialist’ with ‘democratic’ in the latter’s formulation of the concept, is that socialist realism was seen as being compatible only with a socialist society. Zhdanov claims that “there cannot be in bourgeois countries a literature which consistently smashes every kind of obscurantism, every kind of mysticism, priesthood and superstition, as our literature is doing”. For the Soviet writer, the task of the artistic work is to “conform to the victories that socialism has won” by helping to “remould the mentality of the people in the spirit of socialism”.¹⁴⁶ This is obviously impossible in a society where socialism is not yet dominant. Cath Ellis notes the debates that occurred amongst communists in the early 50s on how to implement socialist realism in Australia, in light of Gorky’s claim that it is only possible in a socialist society.¹⁴⁷ Thus in one crucial sense what I have been referring to as ‘Australian socialist realism’ is not socialist realism at all. However, the changes made to render the Soviet theory relevant to Australia’s capitalist society were largely predictable, emphasizing the writer’s role in the *progress towards* socialism rather than the fact of its attainment. For instance, Katherine Susannah Prichard declares that writers, “as sensitive instruments for human progress, must spend all our energy of body and brain to direct the anti-capitalist passion of the Australian people towards organisation for socialism”.¹⁴⁸ The novel thereby becomes a tool in this broader political struggle.

IV. Cold War Culture

As much as it is necessary to understand the influence of Soviet socialist realism on Australian literary forms, the Realist Writers’ Movement was a product of the specific historical context of mid-century Australia, including the broader left’s prevailing nationalism of the time. Susan Lever reminds us of the Realists’ nationalism but points out that until the late 1960s, nationalism “implied a set of egalitarian, human values” because the Cold War had “allied nationalism to the left”.¹⁴⁹ Historian Stuart

¹⁴⁶ Zhdanov, “Soviet literature”, online.

¹⁴⁷ Ellis, “Socialist realism”, 43.

¹⁴⁸ Prichard, “Anti-Capitalist Core of Australian Literature”, 106.

¹⁴⁹ Lever, *A Question of Commitment*, 5, 13.

MacIntyre, on the other hand, is critical of the extent to which the cultural left in the mid-century “retreated into a nostalgic idealisation of national traditions”: the left’s “writers, artists, and historians turned from the stultifying conformity of the suburban wilderness to the memories of an older Australia that was less affluent and more generous”.¹⁵⁰ It is necessary to remind ourselves of the distinction here between the left-liberal cultural nationalism of the *Meanjin* group, and the stridently communist Realist Writers’ Movement. MacIntyre’s criticism is arguably more applicable to the former, for the Marxist notion of progressivist history kept the Realists firmly focussed on constructing a socialist future even as they took inspiration from colonial mythology.

In general, criticisms of the nationalism of the communists at this time are insufficiently precise. While it is true that the Realists were largely hostile to Anglo-American cultural influences, with a writer like Patrick White being seen as a conduit thereof, they were nevertheless transnational in their affiliation with the Soviet Union and other socialist movements from around the world. Indeed, the journal *Realist Writer* openly proclaimed its dedication to “working-class internationalism” in 1960.¹⁵¹ Migrant communist writers such as Judah Waten, a Russian-Jew from Odessa, and Ralph de Boissière, from Trinidad, wrote about migration and overseas struggles. In the 1920s and 1930s Boissière was a member of an anti-colonial Marxist group in Trinidad centred around the journal *The Beacon*, alongside intellectuals such as the prominent Marxist historian C.L.R. James. Boissière’s anti-colonial politics persisted throughout his time in the CPA, and he stated that he did not leave the party after the 1956 Khrushchev denunciations because he was “too much aware of all that the world, especially the colonial world, owed to the Soviet people for their defeat of German fascism”.¹⁵² While *Communist Review* editorials from Katherine Susannah Prichard discussed bushrangers and frequently included nebulous phrases referring to the “truly Australian quality” of the people,¹⁵³ they also reiterated the internationalist outlook that “Australian communists are guided by the same principles as have guided Russian and Chinese communists and will continue to guide the communists of the world”.¹⁵⁴ Elsewhere Prichard praises the “reason and valour in the struggle for humane objectives” displayed by the communist

¹⁵⁰ MacIntyre, *Concise History of Australia*, 223.

¹⁵¹ qtd in Syson, “Out from the Shadows”, 335.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 33.

¹⁵³ Prichard, “The Anti-Capitalist Core of Australian Literature”.

¹⁵⁴ Prichard, “Hoax Renders Service to Literature”.

movements in China and Indonesia.¹⁵⁵ It is therefore more accurate to say that the Realists, far from being parochial in their nationalism, were hostile to certain liberal international tendencies (like modernism), while at the same time equally open to socialist influences from abroad. Their positions followed the logic of a communist transnationalism rather than a modernist, cosmopolitan internationalism. The nationalist/internationalist framework is thus a less valuable framework through which to understand the Realists than a Cold War one.

Unlike the socialist realism of the Soviet Union, Australia's democratic realism was an island of socialist cultural production amidst a liberal, capitalist sea. The Realists' primary years of activity came at a time of great difficulty for the CPA, at the height of the Cold War. In 1944 the CPA's membership was around 23,000, it was in control of some unions, and they had a senator elected to the Queensland Parliament. By 1965, their membership had dropped to 5,300;¹⁵⁶ a decade of the anti-communist propaganda, a 1951 referendum on their legality, and multiple elections won by the Liberals on the basis of the 'red scare' had taken their toll. Working-class consciousness in the 1950s was on the wane as the threat of communism featured as a popular idea in public discourse. The prospect of joining a growing middle class looked more appealing to many than adopting a radical position vis-à-vis the social system that was producing that possibility. As the former communist Jack Beasley recalls of the post-war years, "the most widespread feeling was that after all the lost years of depression and war, men and women wanted to feel secure, with steady work and homes and schools for their children".¹⁵⁷

The left was engaged in battle with the right not only in the political but also the cultural realm. The journal *Quadrant* was founded in 1956 and was published by the Association for Cultural Freedom, the Australian arm of the U.S.'s Congress for Cultural Freedom, an anti-communist group established and funded by the CIA. What was desperately needed by the communist movement was a strategy to reinvigorate working-class consciousness by educating workers about their history and social conditions. It is a significant and rather fascinating fact that literary works were enlisted by the Realists in this programme. Communist newspapers, the traditional tool for spreading revolution, were facing

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 11.

¹⁵⁶ A Ashbolt, R Cahill, "‘And the lives are many’: the print culture of Australian communism", *Twentieth Century Communism* 12, (2017): 2,3.

¹⁵⁷ Beasley, *Red Letter Days*, 132.

increasingly strict censorship laws so much so that in 1940 the Minister of Information in the Menzies government banned nine of them.¹⁵⁸ The use of literary writings in the socialist struggle was a concrete way to connect with the past, allowing the Realists to claim generations of writers stretching back to the decade before Federation as part of their own heritage, as I discussed earlier.

Precisely why the novel was seen as a legitimate candidate for building class consciousness might be explained by looking into the history of realism as a mode. The attempt to forge an alliance between the socialist realist novel and working-class consciousness was not without precedent; a similar alliance, albeit with a different class character, had already been effected over one hundred years earlier between the realist novel and the European bourgeoisie. Much has been written about the use of literature as an ideological tool to transmit the values of the ruling class and of the Empire.¹⁵⁹ The realist novel is specifically seen as an ally to the rising bourgeoisie and the formation of class consciousness in Britain and France beginning in the late eighteenth, and continuing throughout the nineteenth, century, aided by the expansion of middle-class consumerism and rapidly increasing literacy amongst the populace. Frederic Jameson, for example, notes how “the realist mode is closely associated with the bourgeoisie and the coming into being of bourgeois daily life” and participates in the “construction of bourgeois subjectivity”.¹⁶⁰ In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson elaborates on this view by discussing how:

the novel plays a significant role in what can be called a properly bourgeois cultural revolution—that immense process of transformation whereby populations whose life habits were formed by other, now archaic, modes of production are effectively reprogrammed for life and work in the new world of market capitalism.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ “Bars Communist Papers: Australia Moves to Wide Out the Subversive Press” in *Political Censorship*, edited by Robert Justin Goldstein, (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2001), 152.

¹⁵⁹ Matthew Arnold’s *Culture & Anarchy* is probably the most famous text to perform such an ideological role, as has been commented upon by scholars such as Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* and Terry Eagleton in ‘The Rise of English’ in *Literary Theory*.

¹⁶⁰ Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism*, 5, 4. Jameson does not wholly endorse these statements in the way that the Eagleton of *The Radical Aesthetic* might, who Terry Eagleton remarks that it is the category of the aesthetic itself, with the realist novel being the main textual vehicle for this concept, that “provides the middle class with the ideological model of subjectivity it requires for its material operations” (9). but notes their status as constructions.

¹⁶¹ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 138.

György Lukács agrees, explaining succinctly: “the novel is the predominant art form of modern *bourgeois* culture”.¹⁶²

Australia’s socialist and democratic realism can be seen as an attempt at appropriating the realist novel for class struggle once again, albeit this time for the proletariat. The Realist Writers’ Movement instrumentalised the novel for use as a central component within a broader cultural and political struggle to foment class consciousness of the proletariat, instead of that of the novel’s traditional class ally, the bourgeoisie. The perceived affinity between literary writing and ‘subjectivity’ or ‘consciousness’ afforded the novel a particular effectiveness in this task. If the 19th century novel was thought to have “reprogrammed” subjects for the “new world of market capitalism”, as Jameson claims, the proletarian novel was tasked with reprogramming subjects for the thought-to-be-emerging classless society. But for realism to be made to work for the proletariat, in accordance with Soviet ideas about knowledge, the epistemological basis of the realist mode had to be modified; bourgeois positivism was cast aside and replaced with Soviet doctrine. The notion, though, of using literature for the development of a certain kind of subjectivity remained the same.

Unfortunately for the Realist Writers’ Movement, the nineteenth century that hosted the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie in Europe was significantly different to the deeply consumerist society of Australia in the late 1950s. For one, the cultural prominence of the novel had been undermined by a range of new media forms, one of which was high-quality magazines targeted at a specific readership. *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, for instance, had a circulation of almost one million by 1963; this far exceeds the sales of Frank Hardy’s *Power Without Glory* (1950), the best-selling novel associated with the Realist Writers’ Movement, whose 8,000 sales within the first month of publication caused it to be considered a sensation.¹⁶³ As the character Prowse remarks of his wife in Patrick White’s *The Twyborn Affair*, “Kath thought reading novels a waste of time—they weren’t real. She was for magazines.”¹⁶⁴ The novel, which was already occupying a residual position vis-à-vis the dominant culture, would in the

¹⁶² Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 2. See also Franco Moretti’s book *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* which stands out as a study of this relationship between the bourgeoisie and the novel.

¹⁶³ Women’s Weekly statistic from Barbara Lemon, “The Australian Women’s Weekly (1933-)”, *The Australian Women’s Register*; Frank Hardy statistic from Nicole Moore, Christina Spittel, *Australian Literature in the German Democratic Republic: Reading through the Iron Curtain* (Anthem Press: 2019), 104.

¹⁶⁴ Patrick White, *The Twyborn Affair*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), 201.

1960s be further marginalised in its capacity to generate oppositional consciousness on the scale hoped for by the Realists by the arrival of television as mass entertainment. These cultural changes resulting from the primacy of new popular media, alongside the decidedly anti-Communist milieu of Australian society at the time, explain why the novel could not, in the end, fulfil the role of generating proletarian subjectivity amongst the workers to the extent envisioned by the Realists.

V. Chapter conclusion: the fate of the movement

Failure to achieve their aims and aesthetic narrowness are two judgements now commonly directed at the Realist Writers' Movement; it is telling that McLaren's chapter about the movement is entitled 'Literary Conflicts and Failed Visions'. As with socialist realism globally, the limitations of the Realists are often put down to their adherence to the strictures of Soviet doctrine. However, it is important to note that while socialist realism was certainly received as dogma, the body of writing produced by Australian communist authors of the time is diverse. Writers of the time actively grappled with, rather than passively imitated, socialist realist doctrine and this doctrine interacted with their individual styles to produce variegated results. One example of this is the dramatization of the character André de Coudray's internal conflict in Ralph de Boissière's *Crown Jewel*:

Le Maitre asked André abruptly: 'On what is your art based?' He poured himself his fourth glass of sauterne.

'What does he or can he know about this?' thought André, piqued. 'Based? On life, of course,' he replied.

'On whose life?'

'Life in general.

'The tiller of the fields and the proletariat are life in general. Art should be about them.

'The artist has to deal with the life he knows'

'And is it so hard for you to study their lives? Do you look down on them?'¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Ralph de Boissière, *Crown Jewel*, (Melbourne: Australasian Book Society, 1952), 159.

This discussion between two of the main characters of the novel reflects Boissière's active grappling with Soviet doctrine by attempting to balance it alongside his own creative impulse and artistic practice. Boissière, like Hewett and Hardy and others, would eventually leave the Realist Writers' Movement, announcing his departure in a short, reflective piece entitled 'Leaving the Realist Writers to Themselves', published in a 1999 issue of *Overland*. In the article he confesses to the internal conflict he was confronting at the time:

My artist self, deep down, kept reminding me that [...] the emergence of my character's true self, his particular inner world, was more important than the politics I accepted and could not escape.¹⁶⁶

This deep commitment to both socialism and art, and uneasiness of their relationship, can be detected in other writings contemporaneous with Boissière's work. For example, in the story 'The Theatre', from Waten's *Alien Son* (1952), the reader witnesses the author working through the dilemma of art's political commitment. The narrator, a young boy, is taken by his family to a theatre production. The family are Russian Jewish migrants to Australia, and the play is being put on by a migrant community group. In the play, which appears to be a realist portrait of pre-Bolshevik Russia, "the daughter of the old couple was to be banished to Siberia for her revolutionary activities".¹⁶⁷ The father was overwhelmed by the play, but the mother and son were critical of it. On the way home from the performance, the father announces that "there was something missing. A little pepper and salt. If you had a bit of singing now, a bit of dancing [...] it would have been as good as in Moscow".¹⁶⁸ In an understated fashion, due to the naivety of the perspective of the young narrator who delivers us the story, Waten explores the role of art as didacticism versus art as entertainment in a working-class migrant community.

For those writers in the CPA and active in the Realist Writers' Movement, failure to observe the tenets of socialist realism in their work could have earned them sanctions from the Communist-aligned institutions to which they belonged, a case in point being the criticisms directed at Hewett's *Bobbin Up* from within the Realists for the novel's allegedly excessive focus on the lumpenproletariat and sexuality.

¹⁶⁶ Ralph de Boissière, "Leaving the Realist Writers to Themselves", *Overland* 156, (1999): 33.

¹⁶⁷ Judah Waten, *Alien Son*. (North Ryde: Imprint Classics, 1990), 33.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 34.

The oppositional culture of the Realist Writers' Movement had its orthodoxies, but even these could not capture the diversity of its members' artistic expressions, as evident in the directions taken by them after their official involvement with the Movement had ended. As Williams reminds us, no one mode of production is exhaustive of human practice and creativity.¹⁶⁹ In the case of writers such as Stephen Murray-Smith, Ralph de Boissière, and notably Dorothy Hewett, their disinvolvement from the movement would precipitate the release of their creative energy and allow an exploration with other literary forms.

A negative emphasis on the strictures of socialist realism is present even amongst contemporary Marxist commentators like Frederic Jameson, who refers to the tendency, albeit not in relation to the Australian context, as “untheoretical” and “destined more for use in the night school than in the graduate seminar”.¹⁷⁰ Such a claim is interesting, for it goes to the heart of one of the most distinctive features of the Realist Writers' Movement: that it did not have its intellectual, financial, or human roots in universities but in workers groups. Unlike most left-wing literary production today, emerging from a university context with few ties to broader socialist organising, the Realist Writers' Movement was deeply embedded in communist institutions and had no origin within the academy. From the 1950s to the 1980s, Australian society underwent a process whereby left-wing literary production actually moved *from* the “night school” to the “graduate seminar”, as it became professionalised, dislocated from an institutional basis in the Communist Party and found a new institutional home in the academy. Andrew Milner argues that this transition, occurring around the late 1960s, was precisely the point when radicalism entered academic life in Australia, and along with it came criticisms of the old left for its “complicity with both racism and nationalism” by, for instance, New Left scholar-activist Humphrey McQueen.¹⁷¹ Cultural magazines, like *Meanjin* and *Overland*, were compelled to affiliate to university departments for funding and human resources. This history will be explored in greater depth in the following chapter.

¹⁶⁹ A point made at various points in the Williams' essay “Base and Superstructure”.

¹⁷⁰ Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), xi.

¹⁷¹ Andrew Milner, “Radical Intellectuals: an unacknowledged legislature?”, in *Constructing a culture: A people's history of Australia since 1788*, edited by Verity Burgmann, Jenny Lee, (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble/ Penguin Books, 1988), 275.

It is not an exaggeration to see the Realist Writers' Movement as the zenith of the relationship between artistic production and political commitment in Australia, a closeness that we have not seen since, despite many individual left-wing writers still working today. But as has been mentioned, many of the major socialist realists of the period, such as Hardy, Boissière, and Hewett, were to end up leaving the party and the broader movement. The ultimate outcome of the history of socialist realism in Australia is that the Realist Writers' Movement has since indeed become an "intellectual and historical curiosity", to quote Jameson's phrase, rather than a collective with any current cultural purchase or influence. The debate between realism and modernism is a thing of the past in Australia and the ambition to create a literary and culture sphere that is democratically run and organised along socialist principles has long receded into the distance.

Contra the orthodoxy that socialist realism suffered aesthetically because of its attachment to communism, I instead suggest that the Australian socialist realists did not read *enough* Marx, for if they had done so, they would have realised that the ideas about literature of Marx and his interpreters were far more expansive and nuanced than the Realists' understanding of them. As already quoted in this thesis, in 1958, contemporaneous with the Realists, Raymond Williams was writing, from within the Marxist tradition, about how the base/superstructure model gives rise to a "mechanical materialism" model and that it relegates the arts to a position where they are "passively dependent on social reality", i.e. mere epiphenomenal outcomes of a determining material base. Williams was explicitly reacting against a previous generation of British Marxist critics, the most famous of which is Christopher Caudwell, whose understandings of art were, not unlike the Australian socialist realists, influenced by the Soviet position.

The Realists in Australia occupy a curious position in this constellation of various currents of Marxist thought because they were active decades after the 'vulgar' positions had already been espoused and challenged, for example, in Britain. Yet there is not much evidence to suggest that the Realists were particularly *au fait* with contemporary Marxist cultural theory. Ralph de Boissière, for example, humorously recalls how "the assembled Realist Writers' Group members studied a denunciation of Lukács by Revai and dutifully agreed that Lukács had fallen pray [sic] to bourgeois errors; although this was the first any of us had heard of Georg Lukács".¹⁷² The Realists' views approximate those of

¹⁷² Gardiner, "Comrades in Words", 40.

Plekhanov more than they do of those of, say, Williams, or especially someone like Adorno, despite the latter two being far more contemporary with the Realists. To criticise the poverty of the socialist realists' view of literature, that they saw novels only as kinds of embellished historical documents and proscribed a limited range of acceptable techniques, one need not abandon a Marxist perspective. The lack of influence from more heterodox Marxist thinkers, despite the availability of some of their writings, can largely be explained by the Stalinist orientation of the CPA leadership.

For Marx himself (and also Engels), the novelist's conscious political affiliation was unimportant; Marx's favourite writer, as we have seen in the introduction, was Balzac, a right-wing Legitimist who was nevertheless, according to Marx, "distinguished by his profound grasp of real conditions".¹⁷³ Balzac's perceptiveness about bourgeois capitalism and the decline of the aristocracy was achieved by his skill as a writer rather than his political leanings, which Marx fervently disagreed with. Raymond Williams notes that Marx and Engels were against 'tendency literature', their commitment being to "social reality" as such rather than a particularly coloured portrayal of this reality.¹⁷⁴

There are passages in Marx's writing that directly contradict the mechanical materialist model with which he has come to be associated and that influenced the socialist realist position. One such passage comes at the end of the introduction to the *Grundrisse*. Here Marx is examining a specific conundrum faced by the historical materialist who notices "uneven development of material production relative to e.g. artistic development".¹⁷⁵ As examples of this phenomenon, he cites the Greeks and Shakespeare, two examples that he believes demonstrate a "flowering" of artistic production that is "out of all proportion to the general development of society, hence also to the material foundation". This admission of a disjunction between "the material foundation" and the "artistic development" of a period, is noteworthy. He resolves this dilemma by arguing that the "foundation" of art, or "the womb" from which it emerges, is not actually the economic base at all, but something more expansive:

¹⁷³ Karl Marx, *Capital; Vol 3*, translated by David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1991), 130.

¹⁷⁴ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 201.

¹⁷⁵ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Martin Nicolaus, (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 42. All subsequent quotations from the *Grundrisse* are from the same page and as such will not be separately cited.

Greek art presupposes Greek mythology, i.e. nature and the social forms already reworked in an unconsciously artistic way by the popular imagination. This is its material.

In other words, it is not the case that art is an immediate reflection of a determining economic base, but rather that it is a product of something called “mythology”, which includes *both* nature and the social. It is this “mythology” that is ineluctably historical: the “the view of nature and of social relations” on which Greek mythology is based necessarily cannot include “railways and locomotives and electrical telegraphs”, for these developments belong to other periods. This is in effect similar to Williams’ claim that art must be related not just to the economic base, but to the whole way of life (that is in turn related to the economic base). The implications of this distinction are radically liberating for art because the appropriate subject matter then becomes anything, rather than just unemployment and unions, as Waten would have it. Marx’s passage goes on to focus on the “artistic pleasure” afforded by works, and the possibilities of the trans-historical affective resonance of certain works of art—hardly the typical concerns of a sober epistemological realist. All of which is to say that the complexity and depth of Marx’s writings on literature exceed the subsequent dogmatic interpretations of them. The narrowness of Australian socialist realism, we can thus venture to suggest, has more to do with the stifling influence of Soviet politics of a particular era than it does the ideas of Marx and subsequent developments in Marxist cultural theory. It is to the detriment of the Realists’ legacy, and perhaps the quality of their fiction, that they were unable to make room for a more expansive understanding of the relationship between art and society.

This is not to suggest though that having better theories of art would have saved the Realists from their historical fate. That they didn’t overthrow capitalism in Australia means that they failed to fulfil their own lofty aims. McLaren rightly points out that in “examining the reasons that led to [the Realists’ failure] we should discover the factors that bedevil every attempt to challenge the dominant political and cultural systems of capitalist society”.¹⁷⁶ Jack Beasley also wishes to return our focus to material considerations when discussing why the movement failed:

¹⁷⁶ McLaren, *Writing in Hope*, 34.

The greatest dissuader to the arts in our country has never been lively discussion of aesthetics, even when combined with politics, but the economic impossibility of surviving in hostile terrain made more hostile by the crush of commercial importation.¹⁷⁷

But even more than immediate commercial pressures, the tide of world history was running against the Realist Writers' Movement. Across many parts of the West the old left suffered a similar fate, and the form of neoliberal capitalism that ascended into dominance in the 1980s produced an increasingly hostile environment for the exploration of alternative, anti-capitalist ways of organising cultural production.

The Realists have invariably been unfairly maligned in terms of their reception by Australian letters. They represent the single most significant threat in twentieth century Australian literary history to the *status quo* in their attempt to construct an alternative, oppositional sphere of literary production. More than just writing political novels, the Realists, for a time, gave us a glimpse of a cultural sphere where works are written, published, distributed, received, and reviewed for and by the working class through worker-run institutions. In my appraisal of the movement, I have attempted to separate the relative unsophistication of their aesthetic positions from their impressive efforts to organise a working-class sphere of literary production. These two parts of their vision are intertwined but not the same. In terms of left-wing involvement in the literary sphere, the importance of the Realists – whether as a political, cultural, aesthetic, or historical force— in Australian literary history cannot be overstated, and their attempt to realize an alternative, democratic culture is still yet to be fully appreciated.

¹⁷⁷ Beasley, *Red Letter Days*, 181.

Chapter Three: Elitism, Class, and the Debate over Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*

The two chapters thus far have each examined the interaction, at a different stage in its historical development, between the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and the arena of literary production. In the first chapter, I discussed Christina Stead's depiction of the proletarian milieu of 1920s, the milieu that saw the creation of the CPA, in her novel *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. The previous chapter described the halcyon days of the CPA's cultural activity: its attempt to create a socialist literary sphere through the Realist Writers' Movement in the post-war era. In this chapter, I turn to a more recent historical period, that of the decline of the organised communist left in Australia and the rise of a heterogenous New Left, occurring from the 1960s onwards. The literary case study I will examine in relationship to this historical period will be the debates—fiercely contested in both Australian academia and the public sphere—concerning the author Patrick White and his alleged elitism. I will look specifically at his novel *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) in some detail.

Patrick White is a polarising and much-discussed figure in Australian literary studies—indeed, he is quite certainly the most discussed figure in the field. In this chapter I approach White as a subject with specific purposes. I follow Brigid Rooney in understanding that debates about Patrick White and his alleged elitism can “be seen as a function of broader cultural debates about social relations and their reproduction” in Australia.¹⁷⁸ Because of White's specific status within Australian literature, examining the changing reception of White gives us access to a broader set of debates about class and its relationship to culture in Australia. In the first half of this chapter, I trace how the socialist realists' central charge against White—that he was an elitist—has ironically been taken up by the political right in recent years, while the main defences of White now typically come from a liberal, academic milieu. I argue that the factors responsible for these changes include the receding possibility of a socialist literary sphere, the institutionalisation of literary study in the university as opposed to working-class locations, and the dislocation of nationalism from the left and its uptake by the right. My chapter's survey of critical

¹⁷⁸ Rooney, *Literary Activists: Writers-Intellectuals and Australian Public Life*. (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2009), xv.

responses to White's work is by no means exhaustive, as I am making an argument about particular strands in White criticism rather than an overview of all or even the main strands.

The second half of this chapter will focus on *Riders in the Chariot* by revisiting some of the socialist realists' claims about the novel. I will argue, however, for a more sophisticated reading than the socialist realists provided, one informed more by Marxist literary criticism than Soviet doctrine. My reading departs from the socialist realists' notion that White was a representative of the ruling class and that his novels therefore were transmutations of ruling class ideology. Instead, I look at how White's novel was a response to the emergence of a set of values and experiences—a 'structure of feeling', to use Raymond Williams' term—associated with the increasing affluence of the suburbs in the phase of consumerist, advanced industrial capitalism in Australia.

Part One

I. The socialist reception of Patrick White

The work of Patrick White was a magnet for the ire of socialist realist critics in Australia during the 1960s. Each of White's early novels received negative reviews across the Realists' publications. As we have seen in Chapter One, antipathy towards Patrick White played a very specific, productive role in the realists' cultural struggle, because they conceptualised White as a bearer of foreign, modernist, bourgeois influences that threatened to overrun the Australian realist tradition. Judah Waten, for instance, begins one particularly negative appraisal of White by noting that he is "in official circles the most highly praised novelist in Australia".¹⁷⁹ Waten's foregrounding of White's adoration by "official circles" follows a distinct pattern whereby the Realists regarded White as the literary representative of the ruling class in Australia. To do so was to legitimise the Realists' own campaign against him, casting themselves as iconoclastic and politically relevant. The charge of elitism is frequently levelled at White in the pages of *Realist Writer* and the early *Overland*, for instance by Waten who argues that:

Patrick White's explicit belief in an elite and his anti-reason outweigh his criticism of philistinism and his satire. His mysticism, his concepts of instinct and intuition, are nothing but aspects of fin-de-siecle 20th century literary decadence. His total inability to imagine a rational

¹⁷⁹ Waten, "Australian Literature in 1962", 27.

solution of man's illness and his pessimistic belief that man remains unchanged in his soul which is born evil makes him the clearest example of a metaphysical-anti-realist, and hence acceptable to the ruling class in our time, regardless of his intentions.¹⁸⁰

Pessimism, irrationality, decadence; each is a familiar term in a vocabulary denigrating the supposedly corrupting influence of modernism, imported, as we have seen, almost wholesale from similar debates in Europe and the Soviet Union. Jack Beasley also begins his critique of White by referring to White's support from the ruling class, making the same point as Waten that White's outlook is "quite acceptable to our ruling class and to their overseas counterparts because it is *their* outlook", the principle features of this outlook being a "patrician contempt for ordinary people which extends to anti-humanism and an all-pervading pessimism regarding mankind's future".¹⁸¹ Prichard also criticises "negative attitude of White to people", implicating the university in her criticism of the elitism of literary culture: White's "play with words [...] please[s] academic critics removed from the everyday life of a vigorous and pragmatic people".¹⁸² In coining the phrase 'Patrick White Australia policy', Frank Hardy resoundingly sums up the prevailing mood within the socialist realists, and their feeling of cultural disenfranchisement by a conservative elite.

There is an abundance of textual examples the socialists could use to evidence their claim that White had an elitist disdain for Australians. In *The Twyborn Affair* (1979), for instance, the character Eudoxia refers to the "the Australian emptiness" upon hearing that the Australian characters Mr and Mrs Golson "hardly talk for days—unless about what there is for dinner—or whether we ought to get our boots mended".¹⁸³ Later in the book the character Marcia tells Eddie Twyborn that Australia "numbs thought, or pinches it out" and that Australians have "hardly [a thought] between us".¹⁸⁴ The "democratic spirit of Australia" is mocked in the novel as being only a "display of ugliness and appetite", referring to workers eating chops with their bosses.¹⁸⁵ In *Voss* (1957), Australia is described by the narrator as a land of "Unseeing people", and the protagonist Laura portrayed as a yearning for stimulation in a place

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Beasley, "The Great Hatred", 11-12.

¹⁸² Katherine Susannah Prichard, 'Some Thoughts on Australian Literature', *The Realist* 15, (1964): 11.

¹⁸³ Patrick White, *The Twyborn Affair*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), 63.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 220.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 197-8.

dominated by “the drab and the ordinary”.¹⁸⁶ I am not arguing that there are not more complex, sensitive ways of reading White’s relationship to ordinary Australians than fixating on these moments—indeed I attempt to undertake such a reading of *Riders in the Chariot* in the second half of the chapter. I am merely suggesting that for readers determined to find evidence of White’s elitism, such evidence was available to them.

The antipathy of the socialist realists towards White, as David Carter notes, must also be understood in the context of their intensifying cultural marginalisation.¹⁸⁷ The reverence White received from the dominant literary institutions in Australia, as evidenced by the many literary prizes he won, including the ALS Gold Medal in 1941, 1955, and 1965 and the Miles Franklin Award in 1957 and 1961, embittered the socialists. They saw White as a ruling-class individual who did no productive labour and lived off family profits stolen from workers of previous generations.¹⁸⁸ That he was from a wealthy grazier family who, since the early nineteenth century, owned vast tracts of pastoralist land in the Hunter region of New South Wales only compounded this perception. At the level of the social relations that allow writing to occur, White’s dominance in the field of Australian fiction was seen as a supplanting of the socialist, worker-run literary sphere by a wealthy cosmopolitan who had nothing but contempt for the working-class writing tradition in Australia. To the socialists, it seemed that an individual was literally replacing a collective.

However, the socialist realists’ criticisms found limited popularity outside their immediate context, save a few exceptions. There was a negative appraisal of White in the British *New Left Review*, although the idiom of the critique was conventionally literary-critical rather than socialist as such.¹⁸⁹ In a 1997 article, the scholar Michael Wilding criticised White’s modernism in terms reminiscent of earlier socialist critiques, arguing that “confronting socialist realism with its focus on the representatively human, on the socially progressive, on the readily intelligible, modernism chose to privilege the alienated, the outsider, the decadent, the deviant, celebrating human isolation and non-cooperation,

¹⁸⁶ Patrick White, *Voss*, (London: Vintage Classics, 1994), 21, 231.

¹⁸⁷ Carter, David. “Modernism in Australia”, 166.

¹⁸⁸ This characterisation is not particularly unfair; White’s biographer David Marr notes that due to the inheritance White received he “never had to undertake the literary chores that dominate the lives of most writers” (167).

¹⁸⁹ Margaret Walters, “Patrick White”, *New Left Review* 18, vol. 1 (1963).

expressing despair rather than hope”.¹⁹⁰ Wilding’s critique adopted many of the same assumptions as the socialist realists’, but was made within a scholarly milieu rather than a working-class one.

White was aware of the existing antipathy from sections of left-wing literary culture and duly reciprocated the animosity. He anticipated, for example, negative reviews of his work from those who “expect a novel to be a string of pedestrian facts”—¹⁹¹ clearly a jab at the cruder iterations of socialist realist doctrine. White went as far as to describe Australia, upon relocating from Europe after the war, as an “intellectual desert”.¹⁹² His antipathy was at times personal; his biographer David Marr tells us that White “could never bear” Frank Hardy.¹⁹³ As for the working-class literary culture that the realists were pioneering, White criticised its “dreadful atmosphere of Adult Education in which no art can flourish”—¹⁹⁴ a statement that no doubt failed to dampen the perception that he was a raging elitist.

White’s anxieties and frustrations about his negative reception in a literary culture preoccupied with realism made their way into his novels. The following passage from *Riders in the Chariot* describes the character Alf Dubbo’s artwork as being fundamentally misunderstood by his senior, Mrs Pask:

‘But what,’ she asked, still breathing hard, ‘whatever in the world, Alf, is this?’

Looking at his paper.

It was almost as if she had caught him at something shameful.

He sat with his knees together. His innermost being stood erect.

‘That is a tree,’ he said when he was able.

‘A most unnatural tree!’ She smiled kindly.

He touched it with vermilion, and it bled afresh.

‘What are these peculiar objects, or fruit—are they?—hanging on your tree?’

He did not say. The iron roof was cracking.

‘They must mean *something*,’ Mrs Pask insisted.

¹⁹⁰ Michael Wilding, “The Politics of Modernism”, 224.

¹⁹¹ White qtd in David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, (North Sydney: Random House, 1991), 320.

¹⁹² Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), 69.

¹⁹³ Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, 457.

¹⁹⁴ White qtd in Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, 383.

‘Those,’ he said, then, ‘are dreams.’

He was ashamed, though. (352-3)

Dubbo’s trees do not look like trees, and the fruits hanging on the tree do not straightforwardly signify anything but “are dreams”. In other words, his art is clearly not realist. The phallic nature of the tree and the repeated descriptions of shame give the passage a subtext that draws an equivalence between the exposure of White as a non-realist, and the exposure of his sexuality. At a straightforward biographical level, the reader is tempted to connect Dubbo’s marginalisation with White’s own feelings of having been maligned by a literary culture that failed to appreciate his artistic vision and that at the same time stigmatised his homosexuality.

In essence, the socialist realist criticisms of White were largely derivative of debates about realism already discussed in this thesis. White’s own positions are also vulnerable to the criticism of being recycled *l’art pour l’art* aestheticism. What is of interest though is the way that the cultural and political coordinates of this debate about White and his alleged elitism have so utterly changed in the decades since they began. Two examples can be used to illustrate this. The first example comes in the form of a particular image: White, on the 18th of June 1972—not ten years after the articles were published criticising him as a ruling class hack— was speaking to a political rally from the back of a truck, standing next to the communist unionist Jack Munday, criticising the rapacious greed of property developers. Indeed, the later years of White’s public life were marked by an active engagement in a variety of political causes, from public support for Whitlam, to opposition to uranium mining, and untrammelled corporate development in Sydney. How to square this fact with the socialist criticisms of White?

The second example of a drastic change in the orientation of the debate is that the criticisms of White as an anti-working-class elitist were largely abandoned by the left and were taken up by the right. Right-wing commentator and editor of *Quadrant* Keith Windschuttle has argued that “more than any other single work, Patrick White’s 1961 novel *Riders in the Chariot* defined best the values [of the] emerging social class”, a ‘class’ made up of “tertiary-educated middle-class professionals”, or more

simply, “the cultural elite”.¹⁹⁵ This ‘class’ has nothing but contempt for “the old white working class”, according to Windschuttle.¹⁹⁶ These two examples show that the debate since the early 1960s, in which the socialists criticised White for being anti-worker, has now been turned on its head. In short, two interrelated phenomena need to be explained: how White himself moved from being a Menzies-supporting patrician to someone who, in his own words, was “labelled a Communist” by his former class compatriots;¹⁹⁷ and how the critique of White as an elitist thus migrated from an argument espoused by the left to one espoused by the right.

II. ‘Elites’ and the literary sphere

These changes in the way White was received have a lot to do with the decline of an attempt to create a socialist literary sphere in Australia and with the particular characteristics of the sphere of literary production that has dominated since. The Realist Writers’ Movement had all but dissolved by the time of Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam’s ascendancy in 1972. Many prominent former members no longer professed communist politics, and the journals and groups that had facilitated the Movement’s literary activities were either no longer active or in decline. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, left-wing cultural radicalism had by this time largely relocated to the university.¹⁹⁸ The decline of the old left is a complex topic, which for reasons of space cannot be fully discussed here, but has a lot to do with the CPA’s changing relationship with the Soviet Union in the wake of events such as Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin in 1956 and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The consequence for literary production was a loss of connection to working-class institutions.

What replaced the attempt to create a socialist literary sphere? We should be clear that the socialist model of literary production was never dominant but always oppositional. Its disappearance did not so much countenance the *rise* of another sphere so much as ensure there was no existing alternative to it. David Carter traces the beginnings of the contemporary Australian literary sphere to the late 1950s, at

¹⁹⁵ Keith Windschuttle, “Vilifying Australia: the perverse ideology of our adversary culture”, *Quadrant* 49, no. 9, (September 2005): online, <http://sievx.com/articles/mentions/2005/200509xxQuadrant.html>.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ Whit qtd in Peter Ferguson, “Patrick White, green bans, and the rise of the Australian new left”, *Melbourne Historical Journal* 37, (2009): 84.

¹⁹⁸ Milner, “Radical Intellectuals”, 273.

which time both local Australian publishing and the institutionalisation of Australian literature in universities dramatically increased.¹⁹⁹ There are a few defining features of this sphere, which I will call the liberal sphere of literary production. For one, it can be described as bourgeois or capitalist, in the sense that, unlike the worker-run Australasian Book Society, the publishing houses and book trade of the liberal sphere are run according to the logic of the market. The label ‘capitalist’ is merely descriptive here, an understanding of the nature of production in any market within a capitalist society. It should be acknowledged, though, that especially after Whitlam’s establishment of the Literature Board of the Australia Council in 1973, government patronage for the arts acted to insulate the sphere from market logic to a certain, yet by no means total, degree.

Secondly, this literary sphere largely comprises members of what has been called the ‘Professional-Managerial Class’ rather than the unionised workers that constituted the Realist Writers’ Movement. In 1977 Barbara and John Ehrenreich argued that around the 1960s “advanced capitalist society” generated a new class “consisting of salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production” but nevertheless “whose major function in the social division of labour may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture”.²⁰⁰ Academics, writers, teachers, and those in the publishing industry were included in this group.

Thirdly, literary production in this sphere is significantly concentrated around the university. In 1962 the first Chair of Australian Literature was established, at the University of Sydney; and it is around the late 1970s that we see the first creative writing program in Australia introduced at the Western Australian Institute of Technology. As mentioned in Chapter One, over the latter half of the twentieth century literary magazines like *Overland* were compelled to affiliate themselves with university departments for funding. These changes contributed to the university-centric nature of not just literary scholarship, but also literary criticism, reviewing, and creative writing.

¹⁹⁹ David Carter, “Publishing, patronage, and cultural politics: institutional changes in the field of Australian literature from 1950”, in *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, edited by Peter Pierce, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 362.

²⁰⁰ John & Barbara Ehrenreich ‘The New left: A Case Study in Professional-Managerial Class Radicalism’, *Radical America* 11, no. 3 (May-June 1977): 7. There is a debate to be had about whether this formation can properly be described as a class, in the sense of having antagonistic interests to other classes including the working class. Recent events in the Australian higher education sector would likely disabuse us of the notion that university workers have contrasting interests to other Australian workers. For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Peter Meikins, “Beyond the Boundary Question” in the *New Left Review* 157, (May/June 1986).

The liberal mode of literary production, one largely subordinated to the capitalist marketplace and drawing financial, intellectual, and human resources from the professional-managerial sphere, including the university, is now so dominant so as to more or less constitute literary production itself. When Windschuttle criticises the “cultural intelligentsia”, to use Rooney’s description of his argument,²⁰¹ it is this milieu we can understand him to be criticising. Crucially, Patrick White is seen by Windschuttle as being the literary vanguard of this intelligentsia—even though White himself was not based in a university milieu. Of course, there still exist isolated ventures in collectivism, for instance the working-class writer P. O and his cooperative publishing house Collective Effort Press, but these do not constitute a concerted, interconnected nation-wide infrastructure pioneering working-class literary production like the socialist realists attempted.

To understand the politics of this liberal literary sphere, the politics of Patrick White himself, and the marginalisation of the politics of the Realist Writers’ Movement, one must appreciate the transition from the ‘old left’, i.e., the organised communist left, to the New Left. Peter Ferguson defines the New Left as “all those progressive social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that challenged the ‘old left’ critique of capitalism and class, the Australian Establishment, and many tenets of traditional Australian culture and received national history”.²⁰² The New Left was far more heterogenous than the old left, encompassing a range of different social movements, and was not centred upon a single mass party.

With his involvement in such campaigns as the green bans and nuclear disarmament,²⁰³ Patrick White belongs to firmly to the New Left. White became a class traitor as he switched allegiance from the Liberal Prime Minister Robert Menzies, whom he had followed his parents in supporting for decades, to Labor’s Whitlam. However, White’s initial involvement in the green ban campaigns could be described as middle-class and ‘NIMBY’;²⁰⁴ he was opposed to the construction of a sports complex that would destroy gardens and buildings in and around Centennial Park in Sydney. The campaign was a classic example of an alliance between middle-class urbanites and workers for which the early environmentalist

²⁰¹ Rooney, *Literary Activists*, xvi.

²⁰² Ferguson, “Patrick White, green bans”, 74.

²⁰³ The green bans were a series of strike actions run by the Builders Labourers Federation during the 1970s that stopped construction on projects deemed environmentally irresponsible.

²⁰⁴ The acronym ‘NIMBY’ stands for ‘not in my backyard’, describing a kind of opposition to urban development projects that is less about political principles and more about defending of the comfort of one’s personal surroundings.

movements are famous. In general, this was a historical moment in which organised working-class politics was waning. The increasing involvement of middle and upper-middle class individuals, such as White himself, with New Left social movements would help to generate the conditions for the association between cultural activism and elitism that was to play such an important role in the culture wars during the Howard era.

Raymond Williams makes the crucial point that the New Left assumed “the potential of the industrial working class for changing society had, in western capitalist societies at least, been exhausted”.²⁰⁵ Following this is what Alan Sinfield calls the centrality to the New Left of middle-class dissidence rather than working-class organisation, a phenomenon that is clearly observable in White’s involvement therewith.²⁰⁶ Elements of the New Left in Australia also no longer saw the industrial working class as the only historical actor with the power to create a more egalitarian society. The ‘*Arena* thesis’, for instance, espoused by ex-CPA members clustered around the Australian journal *Arena*, held that “students and intellectuals now had the privileged position from which to critique capitalist society which Marx had ascribed to the industrial proletariat”.²⁰⁷ Another left-wing magazine from this time, *Dissent* (1961-1978), started by students at the University of Melbourne, was intended to be a home for socialist writing outside of organised socialist or communist parties.

Windschuttle’s own narrative about the emergence of the intelligentsia class during this period to a large extent approximates the history presented thus far. Windschuttle is wrong, however, to conceptualise the transition from the old left to the New Left in Australia as a definitive break. New priorities emerged as the women’s and gay liberation, land rights, anti-war, and environmental movements grew. But at the same time, Stalinist, Trotskyist, Maoist, and unaligned socialist organisations were centrally involved across the entire spectrum of New Left social movements, even if they were not their epicentre.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Raymond Williams, “You’re a Marxist, Aren’t You?”, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, (London: Verso, 1989), 74.

²⁰⁶ For a discussion of ‘middle class dissidence’ see the chapter “Intellectuals and Workers” in Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).

²⁰⁷ Henry Paternoster, *Reimagining Class in Australia: Marxism, Populism and Social Science*, (Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 77.

²⁰⁸ See for instance Russel Mark’s chapter “1968 in Australia: The Student Movement and the New Left”, in *The Far Left in Australia Since 1945*, edited by Jon Piccini, Evan Smith, Matthew Worley, 134-151. (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2018).

As Paternoster has argued, “the key distinguishing feature of New Left class analysis was its anti-nationalism”.²⁰⁹ While the socialist realists had characterised foreign, bourgeois, modernism as a hostile threat to a local Australian tradition, this discursive tactic was increasingly adopted by the right as the left abandoned nationalism. For example, in 2001 the conservative columnist Michael Duffy published an article entitled ‘Elite Con Australians Over Refugees’, in which he criticises a “trans-national elite” for their support of asylum seekers.²¹⁰ Duffy’s article is conservative hysteria yet nonetheless interesting for the way it illustrates a shift in the deployment of the rhetorical category of “trans-national elite”.

From the New Left onwards, bushrangers, convicts, and the workers of the Eureka stockade ceased to function as memories of egalitarianism and instead became symbols of colonialism. It is in the discipline of Australian history that this change in the political valence of nationalism is most widely registered. Historian Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend* (1958), for example, was a key text in proclaiming the relevance of the nationalist tradition to a contemporary left-wing imagination. Humphrey McQueen’s *A New Britannia* (1970), a reply to Ward, was the most influential text in demonising nationalism on the left and was a founding text of the New Left in Australia. McQueen summarises *A New Britannia*’s contribution as being to popularise the argument that the “legend of a once radical and nationalistic people was misleading because it misrepresented the substance of that radicalism and nationalism, which had been individualistic and racist”.²¹¹

In receiving White’s work in the 1960s, before the popularity of McQueen’s thesis, the socialist literary milieu of the Realists was unable to accept a portrait of Australian society that unflatteringly portrayed Australian workers and depicted them as agents of oppression. In the following years, as the New Left retreated from identification with the popular nationalist tradition, a space was opened for the right to emerge in defence of it. The result of this shift is the left becoming amenable to characterisation as fundamentally antagonistic to the ‘ordinary’ Australian individual, whom it made out to be the site of endemic racism, sexism, and homophobia within Australian society.

²⁰⁹ Paternoster, *Reimagining Class*, 70.

²¹⁰ Michael Duffy, “Elite Con Australians Over Refugees”, *Courier Mail* (8 September 2001): 28.

²¹¹ Humphrey McQueen, “Afterword”, *New Britannia*, (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1976), 254.

But while both the socialist realists and Windschuttle criticised White, and cosmopolitan elites in general, their criticisms should not be mistaken as being the same. Windschuttle's argument is only similar to the socialists' insofar as it represents a populist identification with the masses against the category of 'elites'. Who Windschuttle recognises as a member of the elite class and his explanation for the existence of this class is entirely different from the socialists, as are his ideas about what needs to happen to bring about a more egalitarian society. In the same article criticising White for elitism, Windschuttle claims that "economic rationalism [...] has done so much good" for working-class people in Australia, thereby situating him at odds with any left-wing analysis.²¹² By celebrating the economic system that produces financial elites and has seen consistent rises in wealth and income inequality since the mid-1980s,²¹³ Windschuttle reveals the essentially right-wing nature of his pseudo-identification with working people. His use of the term 'elite' to signify a group with common beliefs and cultural attributes, rather than to signify a class, deliberately obfuscates the actual location of power in society.

As a culture war tactic, shifting the meaning of 'elite' away from an economic ruling class and towards the educated liberal is by no means original or restricted to Australia. One of the architects of contemporary American conservatism, William F. Buckley, recognized in the post-war era that "conservatism could gain traction by positing a liberal elite – housed in academia, but also government bureaucracies and mass media – that was unaccountable to the whims of the American people".²¹⁴ Windschuttle's arguments are marshalled in service of a different context: Prime Minister John Howard's conservatism in the culture wars of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Right-wing anti-elitist discourse in Australia attracted academic study at the time.²¹⁵ Sean Scalmer noticed the phenomenon in *Overland* in 1999 and remarked that the changed deployment of the term 'elite' represented an "odd historical inversion for the Australian left".²¹⁶ It is ironic that the right, in their effort to portray themselves as champions of non-elite interests, adopted the word 'battler' to describe the working-class

²¹² Windschuttle, "Vilifying Australia", online.

²¹³ Productivity Commission, *Rising inequality? A stocktake of the evidence*, Commission Research Paper, 2018, Canberra.

²¹⁴ Julian Nemeth, "The Passion of William F. Buckley: Academic Freedom, Conspiratorial Conservatism, and the Rise of the Postwar Right", *Journal of American Studies* 52, no.2 (2020): 339.

²¹⁵ Barry Hindess and Marian Sawyer, *Us and Them: Anti-elitism in Australia*. (Perth: API Network, Australia Research Institute, Curtin University, 2004).

²¹⁶ Sean Scalmer, "The Battlers versus the Elites: The Australian Right's Language of Class", *Overland* 154, (1999): 12.

Australian individual. The term was in fact popularised in the Australian tradition by Kylie Tennant's novel *The Battlers* (1942)— as a left-wing realist writer, Tennant would no doubt be turning in her grave at the conservative appropriation of the term.

While it was in the Howard years that the debate over 'elites' occurred, it was "in the 1970s" that "an unrepresentative class came to power", as Rooney notes of Windschuttle's argument.²¹⁷ Interestingly, *Quadrant* had no antagonism towards White before the Howard years. A 1963 article in the journal praises White as being able to "make a clear claim to being a great writer",²¹⁸ with no accusation of elitism to be found. This is because such an accusation would not have made sense coming from the right in 1963; it was only made possible by the changing composition of the left, White's own political migration, and the intensification of the 'elites' debate during the Howard era.

III. The contemporary liberal reception of White

Literary scholarship on White over the past few decades has often defended him against the charge of elitism. While *Riders in the Chariot*, like White's work in general, previously attracted criticism for being unflattering in its depiction of suburban, everyday Australia, it has more recently been celebrated by scholars as an example of a text that espouses multicultural, progressive liberalism, as the following series of examples show:

In fact in 2015, if specifics have altered, White's conceptions seem as relevant as ever.

Himmelfarb might be an asylum seeker imprisoned on Manus Island, Alf Dubbo the subject of racialist laws under the Northern Territory Emergency Intervention Act, Mrs Godbold a benefit scrounger and Mrs Hare a madwoman turned extremist.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Rooney, *Literary Activists*, xiv.

²¹⁸ Harry Heseltine, "Patrick White's Style", *Quadrant* 7, no.3 (1963): 62.

²¹⁹ Ian Henderson, "Introduction", *Patrick White Beyond the Grave*, edited by Ian Handerson & Anouk Lang, (Anthem Press, 2015), 3.

Riders remains one of the most powerful examinations of Australian xenophobia in our literature. The novel was published in 1961 and is a distillation of the same suburban 1950s that John Howard used to invoke as the cradle of contemporary Australian identity.²²⁰

In choosing as his riders—his seers and seekers—a Jewish refugee, an Aboriginal artist and two women, White was anticipating three of the significant future challenges to old ideas of Australian identity and the Australian tradition: from multiculturalism, the women's movement and Aboriginal activism.²²¹

Patrick White's message of the need for loving-kindness in the face of difference, and fear of that difference, is as pertinent today in "multicultural" Australia as it was when *Riders in the Chariot* was published in 1961.²²²

Just as the Prichard-Beasley-Waten consensus on White's elitism was a reflection of the principles of the socialist literary sphere in the post-war decades, this perspective on White's relevance to a contemporary multiculturalism is symptomatic of the broader liberal, progressive politics dominating early twenty-first century literary culture. This literary-critical moment has inherited the New Left emphasis on the rights and dignity of racial and sexual minorities and sees White's novel as articulating a defence of these rights. The recent liberal appraisals of White are influenced by precisely the kinds of factors that I have discussed in relation to the decline of the socialist realists and the rise of the New Left: the decline of organised socialist politics in Australia, the decline of the left's martialling of nationalist sentiments, the erosion of unionism and especially the role of the union in non-industrial affairs, and the expansion of higher education. However, caution must be exercised not to generalise about the relationship between New Left politics and the liberal sphere, for these two things are not identical; for example, we shall see shortly how some aspects of the liberal sphere have appropriated cultural nationalist rhetoric, contra the theoretical predilections of the New Left, while others have not.

²²⁰ Ivor Indyk, "A paler shade of White", *Sydney Morning Herald* (June 21, 2003).

<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/a-paler-shade-of-white-20030621-gdgyqd.html>

²²¹ Elizabeth Webby, "Our invisible colossus", *The Australian* (2nd May 2007): 3.

²²² Bernadette Brennan, "Riders in the Chariot: A Tale for Our Times", *JASAL* 7, (2007): 32.

Let us turn to an example of a contemporary defence of White that brings discourse on elitism into dialogue with *Riders*. Bernadette Brennan's reading of *Riders*, a quotation from which is cited above, was published at the tail-end of the Howard years, during which, as we have discussed, a feature of the culture wars was labelling urban intellectual or creative workers as elite. Brennan laments that those who speak out in favour of a multicultural Australia are vilified as "elites", just as she laments the perception that "White was a snobbish intellectual".²²³ In this way, Brennan brings together two strands of cultural discourse: one about class in Australia under Howard and how intellectual or creative workers were cast as elites, and the other about the perception of Patrick White himself, representative of this group.

Brennan's strategy in this article is not to reject the false characterisation of a specific type of worker as 'elite'. Rather, it is to embrace the label and subvert its negative connotations, celebrating "the way it signifies excellence, expertise, experience," and claiming that "[w]e need to stop apologising for it".²²⁴ This manoeuvre is characteristic of the liberal politics of the professional-managerial class, especially in the way it focusses on individual virtues rather than structural inequalities. We witness in Brennan's article the willingness of liberal commentators to 'reclaim' the label of elite rather than identify with working-class interests against an actual elite. In doing so, Brennan departs entirely from a left-wing critique of the role elites play in social life to instead defend the category, not as a political or economic conception but one that revolves around individual competence.

In a similar vein, Anouk Lang has also argued against the perception that White is an elitist, re-reading White's ostensible "Anglophilic snobbery" as actually being a critique of Australian heteronormativity.²²⁵ For Lang, White's famous 'Prodigal Son' essay, in which he refers to a 'Great Australian Emptiness', is not elitist or dismissive of working-class traditions but is a "coded queer intervention into suburban stultification".²²⁶ Of course, it is worth being alert to the way that homophobia has coloured White's reception. In their fixation on White's portrayals of so-called sexual deviancy—"psychological perversities and fantasies" as Prichard calls them—²²⁷ the socialist realists were no doubt

²²³ Brennan, "*Riders in the Chariot*", 33, 34.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

²²⁵ Anouk Lang, "Queering Sarsaparilla: Patrick White's Deviant Modernism" *Patrick White Beyond the Grave*, (Anthem Press, 2015), 199.

²²⁶ Lang, "Queering Sarsaparilla", 199.

²²⁷ Prichard, "Some Thoughts on Australian Literature", 10.

at least unconsciously homophobic in their readings of White. It is worth noting though that White was openly hostile to gay liberation at the time, advising gays and lesbians to “get off the streets and to get on with their lives”.²²⁸

What is perhaps most interesting about Lang’s article, though, and where I think the real tension lies, is the chain of association she posits, connecting nationalism, realism, and Australian masculinity, with White standing outside this continuum as a representative of queer modernism.²²⁹ It is beyond the scope of this thesis to properly delve into the ways that recent scholarship on sexuality and gender has influenced our reading of White. Suffice to note here that this particular evolution in White criticism has occurred in a way that largely conforms to the pattern I have analysed previously in this thesis. Traditions of Australian nationalism that were previously appropriated by the left for their relevance to working-class politics are criticised by Lang, via White, for their “normative sexuality and masculinity”.²³⁰ On this view, attachment to nationalist traditions is seen as retrograde and needs to be cast aside in favour of a more cosmopolitan, experimental modernism. Lang’s defence of White’s antagonism towards working class people, using queer theory as its basis, conforms exactly to the rhetorical polarities of the culture wars. Lang is far from the only critic who has mounted a defence of White against the charges of elitism by using the mantle of modernist studies. On the whole, scholars using modernism as their interpretive framework (Gail Jones, Anouk Lang, Andrew McCann), have tended to find more of political value in White’s work than those who are hostile to modernism, who are in turn more likely to cast negative judgements on White’s politics (the socialists, Michael Wilding).²³¹

Despite the intensity of the socialist realists’ antipathy towards White, in subsequent literary debates the work that served as the face of the anti-White position was Simon During’s *Patrick White* (1996). During argued that White became a canonical national writer because of Australia’s location on its journey to becoming postcolonial; it had become necessary for the nation to “acquire cultural canons: to increase its cultural capital in competition with other national cultural heritages”.²³² The right body of

²²⁸ Qtd in Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, 526.

²²⁹ Lang, “Queering Sarsaparilla”, 200.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ This is not a tautological observation; many other scholarly contexts exist in which working-class modernisms, for example, might be an interpretive framework, but this remains under-explored in an Australian literary context.

²³² Simon During, *Patrick White*, (Oxford University Press, 1996), 12.

work to fulfil this role had to contain a rejection of the “old colonialist images of Australianness”, i.e. it could not simply be a return to the nationalist realism of mid-century fiction.²³³ Essentially, During argued that White was in the right place at the right time, antagonising those within the academy who insisted upon White’s literary merit.

During’s work caused public controversy at a level that is rare for a literary monograph. Defences of White against During were mounted by senior scholars of Australian literature. These defences served a double function in that they not only defended White against During’s charge but served to promote Australian literary studies itself. The interventions were at times launched from national newspapers rather than specialised academic journals; Ivor Indyk, for instance, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Elizabeth Webby in *The Australian*. These interventions doubled down on utilising White as part of a postcolonial nation-building project, wishing to save him from his alleged fate of cultural marginalisation. Webby claims that “White’s particular meaning lies in having a new vision of Australia as a country worth loving, worth preserving and worth writing about, a country that is certainly not second-rate, even if some of its inhabitants might be”.²³⁴ Here, the influence of a literary nationalism inspired for instance by the Palmers, about whom Webby wrote extensively, is more pronounced than the New Left antipathy to the nationalist heritage. There is irony in the way White has been marshalled into the service of what McCann calls “a fairly uninspiring cultural nationalism”.²³⁵ Such a project runs directly counter to the sentiments expressed by White himself in his novels and public statements. He was as fierce a critic as any of nationalism, using occasions such the ceremony at which he was awarded Australian of the Year in 1973 to praise those who were similarly hostile to patriotic sentiments. Another irony in the pronounced tendency by the academy to recuperate White for a nation-building project is that White exhibited a “set antagonism” towards the university as an institution.²³⁶

The attempt to situate White’s work within a framework of liberal values, using him for the promotion of postcolonialism or multiculturalism rather than for a politics centred on class, is a distinct

²³³ Ibid, 13.

²³⁴ Webby, “Our Invisible Colossus”. The mention of second-rate inhabitants is a reference to Donald Horne’s book *The Lucky Country* and in that context refers to second-rate leaders rather than the masses.

²³⁵ Andrew McCann, “Patrick White’s Late Style”, in *Patrick White Beyond the Grave*, edited by Ian Henderson and Anouk Lang, (Anthem Press, 2015), 127.

²³⁶ Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, 310.

phase in the academic reception of his work. But there is a concrete reason, internal to the project itself, why the attempt to recuperate White for a contemporary progressive politics has failed. The politics of postcolonialism caught up with White faster than academia could promote him, and a new generation of voices declared his work problematic according to the rubric of anti-colonialism. *Overland*, one of the journals that was initially critical of White's politics, is once again at the forefront of a new wave of criticism of White's work. In one recent editorial, White's "representation of Indigenous peoples", particularly the inclusion of cannibalism in *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), was criticised.²³⁷ The Wiradjuri writer and scholar Jeanine Leane, also in *Overland*, praises Larissa Behrendt's *Finding Eliza: Power and Colonial Storytelling* (2016) for:

interrogat[ing] Patrick White's literary reimagining of the Eliza Fraser story. She shows how White's representation of Aboriginal Australians reflects both his own values and the position of Aboriginal Australians in the colonial regime. Such colonial values have been validated through White's work and other literary representations, and this has contributed to the complex racial divide that exists in Australia.²³⁸

In the pages of *Overland*, the argument concerning White has come full circle, from denunciation to incorporation and back. It was in *Realist Writer*'s 1962 issue that White's portrayal of Indigenous people was first criticised as racist. Beasley wrote that:

[a]t the very moment of history when our native people are beginning to stand on their own feet, when from their ranks are emerging people of great natural ability, (Namatjira, Dooley, Saunders, Daisy Bindi, Nicholls, McGinnes), Patrick White's aboriginal is a degenerate.²³⁹

The same piece criticised White's portrayal of Himmelfarb as anti-Semitic. The point here is not that the socialist criticism of White is identical with contemporary anti-colonial criticism. Indeed, Leane's article also took Katherine Susannah Prichard to task for racist depictions of Indigenous people in *Coonardoo* (1929). Rather, the point is that criticism of White has changed along with the politics and composition of

²³⁷ Evelyn Araluen & Jonathan Dunk, "Blind judging and authenticity: an editorial statement" *Overland Onlie*, (November 2020): <https://overland.org.au/2020/11/blind-judging-and-authenticity-an-editorial-statement/>.

²³⁸ Jeanine Leane, "Other people's stories", *Overland* 225, (Summer 2016): <https://overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-225/feature-jeanine-lean/>

²³⁹ Beasley, "The Great Hatred", 11.

the sphere from which that criticism emerges, and in this chapter so far I have attempted to provide some analysis of these changes. In summary, I have discussed four strands of White criticism—by no means an exhaustive list. The first was a socialist perspective that criticised the elitism of his work. Secondly, I examined a conservative position, epitomised by Windschuttle, opposed to White’s alleged elitism but from a political position opposed to the socialists. At risk of being overly schematic, I identified a third strand in White criticism, one that has taken up the mantle of progressivism, defended White against charges of elitism, and attempted to use him to advocate for liberal positions such as a support of multiculturalism. The fourth strand, which for reasons of space I have only gestured towards, is a more recent anti-colonial criticism of White.

Part Two

I. Reading the category of class in *Riders in the Chariot*

At this point in my discussion, I will pivot towards the novel *Riders in the Chariot* itself. As Terry Eagleton has written, one of the “tasks of radical critique [...] is to salvage and redeem for left political uses whatever is still viable and valuable in the class legacies to which we are heirs”.²⁴⁰ In other words, we can have a more nuanced relationship with bourgeois literature than adopting only a censorious attitude of condemnation towards it. My assessment of how some recent White scholarship has been driven by liberal prerogatives should not be mistaken as a nostalgia for the socialists’ antipathy to him. The socialist realist criticism of White is hardly an exemplary model of what a materialist analysis of White’s work could look like, for the exigencies of the CPA’s stance on art were not conducive to a sophisticated and nuanced appraisal of White’s work. The rest of this chapter will therefore be an attempt to demonstrate a historicist, materialist reading of *Riders* that neither denounces it, nor incorporates White and his legacy into a project of cultural nationalism. In adding to the already long list of readings of White’s work, the point is not to try and trump the other ways of reading him, or to have an illusory final critical say. My interest here is in responding to the need for a socialist, materialist account of Australian literature that comes to terms with that literature’s most iconic figure.

²⁴⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, (New Jersey: Blackwell, 1991), 8.

The eponymous ‘riders’ in the novel are four individuals blessed with powers of great spiritual insight who find themselves drawn to one another in the fictional suburban town of Sarsaparilla. The four chosen protagonists come from various walks of life: Mary Hare is a wealthy individual living alone in her family’s decaying mansion, Xanadu; Mordecai Himmelfarb is a Jewish refugee to Australia who escaped the Holocaust; Alf Dubbo, a painter, is a member of the Aboriginal Stolen Generations who was raised by a white family in a children’s home; and Ruth Godbold is a housewife trapped in an abusive marriage. Structurally, the book can be defended against criticisms of elitism because its cognoscenti is drawn not just from the ruling class but from across all echelons of society. Yet, this pseudo-democratic impulse only reproduces ruling class logic as it does nothing to reject the fundamental division of society into a select few, and the rest. Of all of White’s novels, *Riders in the Chariot* was criticised the most severely for its denigration of ordinary Australians. The socialists in particular took umbrage at the implied comparison between Australian, working-class mateship and fascist violence. In a critical passage, the labourer Ernie Theobalds lays “the palm of his hand flat against his mate’s [the Jew Himmelfarb] back” and informs him that:

No man is better than another. It was still early days when Australians found that out. You may say we talk a lot about it, but you can’t expect us not to be proud of what we have invented, so to speak. Remember that... (464)

This passage seems like a standard expression of working-class Australian egalitarianism, but it is thrown into stark relief by the subsequent horrendous violence towards Himmelfarb, perpetrated by workers, that Ernie does nothing to prevent. White thus takes aim at the notion of ‘mateship’, one of the founding mythologies of Australian nationalism, and exposes it as allegedly fraudulent. It is easy to see why the socialist realists reacted to adversely to the novel, for in moments such as this it attacks one of their most sacred cows. Rather than seeing working-class Australian culture as being a possible template for a more equal, solidaristic society, White seems to imply it contains the seeds of fascism itself. Beasley criticises the fact that in this scene there “is nothing accidental in the choice of workers as the perpetrators of this outrage, the people who spit on Himmelfarb [...] it is White’s moment of truth, the ultimate in his literary transmutation of ideology”.²⁴¹ At many other points in the novel, associations between characters are

²⁴¹ Beasley, “The Great Hatred”, 12.

portrayed as necessarily conspiratorial rather than solidaristic, such as, for example, Mrs Pask's involvement in the "Mothers' Union and the Ladies' Guild" that is satirised as being a way for her to escape the knowledge that her brother, the priest Mr Calderon, sexually abused Alf Dubbo (372).

What exactly did the socialists mean when they dismissed White as the literary representative of the ruling class and *Riders* as transmuted ruling class ideology? I argue that their criticism is insufficiently precise; as Christos Tsiolkas notes, Patrick White held a "patrician disdain for the bourgeoisie".²⁴² There is another famous example, discussed by Marxist literary criticism, of a body of creative work that critiques entrepreneurial capitalism from a patrician perspective: that is the work of Balzac, which as we have seen previously, was *praised* by Marx and Engels and after them Lukács. Indeed, Marxist criticism has historically had a lot to say, much of it interesting, about the literary heritage of the ruling class. White, in fact, was not a proponent of the predominating, Menzies-era enthusiasm for capitalism in any straightforward sense. He was intensely critical of the philistine, entrepreneurial, money-driven ethos of mid-century liberalism—albeit not from a left-wing perspective. Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell describes the Menzies era during which White was writing as being characterised by "a conservative hegemony in politics and the completion of industrialisation under firm capitalist control", locating the period as the beginning of the phase known as "advanced industrial capitalism".²⁴³ I argue for a historicization of White's novel within this period, as a response to the emergence of certain kinds of values, experiences, and sensibilities—in Williams' phrasing, a structure of feeling—that accompanied the onset of this advanced-industrial, and consumerist phase of Australian capitalism.

Williams' term 'structure of feeling' is an enigmatic concept that has been adopted by different theorists for different purposes, but in at least one instance he uses it to mean "a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period".²⁴⁴ It is a more expansive concept than 'worldview' or 'ideology' because according to Williams "we must go beyond formally held and systematic beliefs, though of

²⁴² Christos Tsiolkas, *On Patrick White*, (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2018), 26.

²⁴³ Raewyn Connell, *Ruling Class, Ruling Culture: studies of conflict, power, and hegemony in Australian life*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 9, 10.

²⁴⁴ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 131.

course we have always to include them. It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt”.²⁴⁵ Structures of feeling have a particular, although not deterministic, relationship to class formations: “at times the emergence of a new structure of feeling is best related to the rise of a class [...] at other times to the contradiction, fracture, or mutation within a class”.²⁴⁶ Crucially, Williams sees literature as being a particularly sensitive instrument for recording these structures of feeling.

Williams described his early literary criticism’s project as analysing “literary conventions and the historical relations to which they were a response”.²⁴⁷ Literary texts, according to Williams, are not simply “records” of history, nor merely reflections of the social reality in which they were produced, but are “representations of history”.²⁴⁸ This formulation is still obviously historicist, but a “representation” differs from a “record” in that the former is necessarily a productive, creative re-working of the raw materials of a particular set of circumstances, rather than a passive reflection thereof. In reading *Riders in the Chariot* in this way I hope to avoid the pitfalls of a basic historicism against which Williams warns; it is, he recommends, to the “whole way of life” rather than “to the economic system alone” that “literature has to be related”.²⁴⁹ The characteristics of the structure of feeling that White’s novels articulate a response to are shallow materialism, instrumentalism, secularism, fetishism for commodities, and lack of spirituality—all of which White saw as defining a particular phase of post-war, suburban Australian life.

White’s opposition to the bourgeoisie was an aesthetic rather than economic opposition. In *Flaws in the Glass* (1981), he criticises the “ruling class in this philistine non-culture of money, wheels, and swimming pools”, continuing, “I still believe in the virtue of workers as I remember them in my childhood”.²⁵⁰ Given his upbringing, the workers he encountered in his childhood were most likely working *for* him in some kind of service role; his belief in the “virtue of workers” reveals itself here as nostalgia. The inclusion of swimming pools on the list of things to which he is opposed about the ruling class is noteworthy. Swimming pools are icons of suburban aspiration, a component of the Australian dream of home ownership that White saw as conformist and materialist. Examining White’s relationship

²⁴⁵ Ibid, 132.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 304.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Williams, *Culture and Society*, 300.

²⁵⁰ White, *Flaws in the Glass*, 227.

to homes in *Riders in the Chariot* can tellingly reveal his ideas about class during the post-war period. A tone of lament is perceptible in the way the Xanadu mansion is “shaved down to a bald, red, rudimentary hill” and replaced by mass housing as “they began to erect the fibro homes” (541). As we can see here, it is not home ownership as such that is being criticised in *Riders*; different kinds of homes garner different sympathies.

Homes and ideas about them were important to the politics of post-war Australia. Menzies was famously a proponent of home ownership, partly as an anti-communist bulwark, believing that people committed to a mortgage are less likely to be radicals. Home ownership rose consistently throughout the Menzies era, peaking in 1966 at 71.4%.²⁵¹ The aspiration to privately own property was folded into an ideology about the ‘Australian way of life’ and popularised amongst the masses. Donald Horne’s *The Lucky Country* is a clear expression of this, the first chapter articulating ‘The Australian Dream’ as more or less coextensive with suburban home ownership and its accompanying lifestyle.²⁵² “Homes—homes material, homes human, and homes spiritual” were central to Menzies’ 1942 ‘Forgotten People’ speech, which extolled the virtues of the middle class as the “backbone” of Australian society.²⁵³ In this speech the home figures as the bastion of individualism against the “organised masses”:

Your advanced socialist may rave against private property even while he acquires it; but one of the best instincts in us is that which induces us to have one little piece of earth with a house and a garden which is ours; to which we can withdraw, in which we can be among our friends, into which no stranger may come against our will.²⁵⁴

Menzies despised the “organised masses” because they threatened the individualism he describes here, but White despised them because he saw in them uniformity. Both were fearful of the person who, in Menzies’ words, “seeks moral and intellectual refuge in the emotions of a crowd”.²⁵⁵

²⁵¹ Alice Hall, ‘Trends in home ownership in Australia: a quick guide’, *Parliamentary library research papers*, (28 June 2017).

²⁵² Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*, (North Sydney: The Penguin Group, 2008).

²⁵³ Robert Menzies, “The Forgotten People”, speech given on 22nd May 1942, reproduced at <http://www.liberals.net/theforgottenpeople.htm>

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

White's vision differs from Menzies' in some important ways. *Riders* was published twenty years after the 'Forgotten People' speech, and White was far less enthusiastic about the 'Australian dream' than Menzies. Apparent in *Riders* is White's scepticism of the values of ascendant affluence, as the following passage near the beginning of the novel comparing the mansion, Xanadu, with brick houses demonstrates:

To Mr Hare, brick was plain ugly; it did not please him a little bit, and what was Xanadu to suggest, if not the materialization of beauty, and climax of his pleasure? *Pleasure* is a shocking word in societies where the most luxurious aspirations are disguised as humble, oral ones. It is doubtful whether any rich, landowning gentleman of the period would have admitted to his house's being more than *necessary* or *practical*. Material objects were valued for their *usefulness*; if they were also intended to *please*, not to say *glorify*, it was commonly kept a secret. Only Norbert Hare, notoriously rash, had been heard to confess that the word *useful* sounded to him less modest than humiliating. It was so intolerably grey and Australian. (16, original italics)

The reader would discover a few sentences later that "Norbert Hare inherited it all" (16). Here, a Lukácsian truth is delivered to the reader: inherited wealth is the basis of leisure. As Lukács argues, the "cultural basis of the old class-societies was that the ruling class did not perform any productive labour and thus commanded almost unlimited free time".²⁵⁶ In this passage the third-person narrator enlists Mr Hare as its point of focalisation so as to produce the effect of the narrator sounding like a class peer of Mr Hare's, at home in polite society rather than reporting on it from any distance. The same effect is not produced when reporting on the thoughts, speech, or actions of other characters; for example, free indirect discourse is rarely employed for Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack. A set of values espousing the importance of practicality and utility are contrasted with a decadent aristocratic sensibility that has enough wealth so as to consider a concern with something's utility as vulgar. The key terms of these two value systems are delivered to the reader plainly in White's italics. Donald Horne's study of mid-century Australian life, *The Lucky Country* (1964) describes an identical structure of feeling, one associated with

²⁵⁶ Lukács, "Literature and Democracy", 17.

new wealth and an attachment to commodities, as that which Mr Hare detests: “there is a strong materialist streak in Australians: they like things that are useful to them in their homes”.²⁵⁷

Mr Hare is responding to a set of values that threaten to overrun his own. Interestingly, he associates these values with Australianness more than he does with a particular class. But the reader need not follow his lead here. Horne is again useful at describing the process of how ruling class values were being threatened by mid-century Australian prosperity for a greater number of individuals: “the gentility is going [...] New generations are denying the old properties and stuffiness. The genteel have been vulgarized, the vulgar made more gentle”.²⁵⁸ The process described here of a replacement of one set of class values by another is captured by White’s novel. Insofar as there is a real economic basis for the ruling class fear of an ascendant vulgar materialism portrayed by White, it is to be found in the increased rates of home ownership and growth in prosperity: between 1945 and 1965, Australian average weekly earnings increased by more than 50%.²⁵⁹ As historian Judith Brett argues, “the old middle class did not experience the postwar housing boom as a welcome swelling of their own ranks so much as a general lowering of taste”.²⁶⁰

As well as voicing the ruling-class perspective, *Riders* also gives us access to the thoughts of the brick-home dwellers, although more often in reported dialogue than free indirect discourse. Mrs Jolley tells Mrs Flack that:

Nobody should ever be allowed to give way to madness, but of course they will never want to in the brick homes. It is in those big old houses that the thoughts of idle people still wander around loose. I remember when I would come downstairs to turn out the rooms. I can remember the loose thoughts and the fruit-peelings. And Them, laying upstairs, in Irish linen. Dreaming. (251)

The word “madness” here has an ironic effect here. Throughout the novel White seems to insist that the real “madness” is the suburban conformity that Mrs Jolley precisely exemplifies. To stand outside that world and to be called ‘mad’ is in fact celebrated by White. Against itself, the novel makes the point that

²⁵⁷ Horne, *The Lucky Country*, 50.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 53.

²⁵⁹ MacIntyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, 219.

²⁶⁰ Judith Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 125.

“Dreaming” is underwritten by material prosperity that frees one from the exigencies of practical living. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator tells us that “the wafer-walls of the new homes would rub together at night, and sleepers might have been encouraged to enter into one another’s dreams, if these had not been similar” (542). This is once more a criticism of the uniformity of an increasingly affluent suburbia. But it is at the same time a thinly disguised fear of the masses, a fear that people might be having the same thoughts as each other and that these thoughts might revolve around their material interests.

II. The spiritual vision of *Riders in the Chariot*

The kind of materialist analysis presented so far goes against the grain of White’s focus, one shared by much scholarship, on the metaphysical and the transcendent —his fiction’s enduring themes, especially in *Riders*. McCann even argues that “the attempt to fuse postcolonialism and religion” is the “dominant strain in recent Australian literary criticism”.²⁶¹ Here I suggest that White’s criticism of Australian society’s lack of spiritual depth can be seen as part of his reaction to the hegemony of consumerist capitalism over Australian life.

Riders is structured around an opposition between inner and outer life. The novel is filled with references to the “inner self” (8), the “inward path” (148), the “concealed truth” (22), and the “secret, actual nature” (8) of an individual. This interiority is opposed to an exterior “outer man” (212), also at times called the “rational self” (148). This view of reality abides by the logic of a binary between the outer (appearance) and the inner (essence). White’s predilection for the inner life is not divorced from the question of his attitude in the novel towards the masses—in fact, it is central to it. *Riders* juxtaposes a cognoscenti, those individuals who are blessed with dense inner lives, with the greater mass who do not experience life as deeply.

The primary metaphor through which this vision of humanity is developed is that of visibility and perception. In contrast to Miss Hare, the narrator describes how “Other people would drive along a bush road looking out of the windows of a car, but their minds embraced almost nothing of what their

²⁶¹ McCann, “Patrick White’s Late Style”, 117.

flickering eyes saw” (8). The basis of the marginalisation of Miss Hare is the fact that “she looked deeper than was commonly considered decent” (24). It is said of Himmelfarb that “his eyes entered deeper than those of his superior” (199-200)—what exactly is being looked deeper *into* is left unsaid. When the reader is first introduced to Dubbo, the narrator comments that “the women lowered their eyes as he passed” (219). Mrs Jolley is criticised because, in Miss Hare’s words, “I do not think Mrs Jolley sees beyond texture—brick and plastic” (334). White makes a distinction between those who are willing and able to see deeply, beyond the material surface, and those who are not. Seeing things deeply, according to the novel, is offensive to a society obsessed with material surfaces. The punishment for seeing deeply is ostracism and potentially worse: “they will torture almost to death someone who has seen into them” (338).

The existence of a select few individuals endowed with powers of deep perception is akin to the concept in Jewish thought of the *zaddikim* that is mentioned in the novel, explained by Himmelfarb as “holy men who go secretly about the world, healing, interpreting, doing their good deeds” (169). Individuals who are not blessed with these powers of insight are mercilessly, even misanthropically, represented, with the examples of Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack being two of the most famous amongst White’s oeuvre. When Himmelfarb “caught the bus for Barranugli” he was “soon rocked upon his way, amongst the *goyim*, on a sea of conversation dealing exclusively with the weather” (239). The word *goyim* here signifies not just the non-Jewish population but also those who are not blessed with the same abilities of insight as Himmelfarb; they are preoccupied only with material reality, discussing “the weather”. Such satire of ordinary people’s concerns as shallow and unimportant is partly where the critique of White’s elitism stems from.

Through the appearance/essence binary, White critiques those whom he sees as investing excessively into the material world, an act which he associates with spiritual shallowness. Indeed, this was the basis of his hostility to the realists of Australian fiction: their inability to penetrate to the depths of experiences, their dwelling in the realm of “pedestrian facts”.²⁶² The nun and scholar Veronica Brady concurs, praising White for his critique of secular society’s “one-dimensional sense of reality” that was

²⁶² Qtd in Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, 320.

allegedly widespread in Australia at that particular historical juncture.²⁶³ But an association between realism (or left-wing approaches to art more broadly) and the surface-level of reality is by no means a necessary one. In fact, Lukács, perhaps the most famous proponent of the realist tradition, has explicitly rejected this notion:

If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface.²⁶⁴

Both Lukács and White actually agree that the task of the novel is to see beneath the surface of perceptible reality. Only, their idea of what constitutes the ‘essence’ that lies beneath this appearance is different. For Lukács, the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ layers of reality both correspond to various levels of knowledge about society. He calls the “underlying essence” the “real factors that relate their experiences to the hidden social forces that produce them”.²⁶⁵ White’s ‘essence’ is far more spiritually charged. For White, the essence that art can help us to access is beyond rationality itself; as Brady argues across her work, White’s ‘essence’ is located in the realm of theology.²⁶⁶

Given White’s reaction against the lack of spiritual depth in Australian society, one might think that there was a real decline in religiosity at the time of the novel’s writing. But this is not the case; in fact, the “proportion of all Australians stating an affiliation to some type of religion remained relatively stable from 1933 until 1971, at slightly less than 90%”.²⁶⁷ Admittedly, this statistic measures professed religious affiliation rather than the more nebulous concept of ‘spirituality’. Nevertheless, we can venture to suggest that White’s response was to changing material realities as much as it was to spiritual ones. That is to say, we can read White’s critique of the spiritual emptiness of suburban Australian life in materialist terms as a critique of a phase of affluent consumerism. White does in fact fixate on the materiality of Australian suburban life and points out how it dominates peoples mental conceptions; post-

²⁶³ Brady, A *Crucible of Prophets: Australians and the Question of God*, (Sydney: Theological Explorations, 1981), 76.

²⁶⁴ Lukács, “Realism in the Balance”, 33.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 37.

²⁶⁶ Brady, A *Crucible of Prophets*; “God, History, and Patrick White”, *Antipodes* 19, no. 2 (December 2005): 172-176.

²⁶⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘Religious affiliation and activity’. *Australian social trends*, 2004. <<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/94713ad445ff1425ca25682000192af2/fa58e975c470b73cca256e9e00296645!OpenDocument>>

war Australia to which White returned is characterised by “money, wheels, and swimming pools” as mentioned in *Flaws in the Glass*, and “brick homes and washing-machines” (448) and “rotary clothes-lines” (542) appear throughout *Riders*. The characters the Rosetrees, Jews who have assimilated into white Australia and deny their religiosity, are contrasted with Himmelfarb for their attachment to “the texture-brick home, the streamlined, glass car, the advanced shrubs, the grandfather clock with the Westminster chimes, the walnut-veneer radiogram, the washing-machine, and the mix-master” (227). Their commodities do not provide them with spiritual satisfaction; Harry Rosetree commits suicide at the novel’s end. The “one-dimensional sense of the world” that Brady articulates as being the subject of White’s scorn can be understood not as secularism *per se* but as a structure of feeling dominated by the proliferation of commodities, the pursuit of wealth, and the hegemony of capitalist values.

Indeed, Brady’s very phrase “one-dimensional sense of the world” is strikingly similar to the Marxist Herbert Marcuse’s concept of a one-dimensional society, an idea he articulated just three years after the publication of *Riders*. Marcuse characterises “advanced industrial society” in terms of the hegemony of capitalist values over social life, producing citizens characterised by consumption and social conformity.²⁶⁸ The fact that Marcuse was a Marxist, and White adamantly was not, is unimportant; there is a real historical process to which they were both were responding. A fundamental insight of Marxist criticism is that texts can articulate truths that contradict the class perspective of their writers and that this process occurs beneath conscious intention—that is to say, I am not suggesting that White was secretly a Marxist. Lukács argues that Balzac’s novel articulated how “the rise of capitalism to the undisputed economic domination of society carries the human and moral degradation and debasement of men into the innermost depths of their hearts”.²⁶⁹ White is similarly involved in capturing how the encroachment of capitalist values into the Australian masses’ experience of social life, and the spiritual debasement that occurs when one cannot see “beyond texture—brick and plastic”.

There is a precedent in scholarship on *Riders* to read the novel outside of its Australian context. This is partly, I suggest, to diffuse the bitterness generated by White’s attacks on Australian suburbia.

²⁶⁸ Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*, (Oxfordshire: Routledge Classics, 2002), 9.

²⁶⁹ Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 80.

Brady argues that “White’s attack is part of a spiritual rather than a social condition”,²⁷⁰ thus transposing the dimensions of White’s critique from a local intervention into a debate about Australian social life to a broader philosophical intervention into secular culture. The spiritual degeneracy that White identifies should not be understood, Brady argues, as being locally specific, but is best read “in the context of the sense of spiritual crisis expressed by many European thinkers in the aftermath of World War II”.²⁷¹ McCann also wants to avoid reading the novel in “straightforward referential terms” as being about the Australian suburbs and instead wants to see it “as part of a textual topography used to communicate a particular kind of ethicality”.²⁷² Indyk argues that “the frontier of suburban development is *Riders in the Chariot*” is “largely metaphorical”.²⁷³ In support of this approach, one could point to the ways oppressive material surroundings appear in the text as a feature of life in general; this point is made through Himmelfarb’s memory, from before his immigration to Australia, of how only “in certain dark medieval streets [...] did his mother seem to escape from the oppression of her material surroundings” (107).

However, I have demonstrated the ways that the criticism of materialism in the novel *does* have particularly Australian characteristics. White’s references, for example, to mateship, swimming pools, the rotary clothes-line, and the dream of home ownership are more than incidental; the very material out of which White fashions his critique of the “spiritual crisis” is the iconography of Australian suburban life in the Menzies era. Changes in the nature of post-war, advanced industrial capitalism are obviously not restricted to Australia, but one of the ways these changes are experienced is through the idiom of nationality. This is not to suggest that we need to restrict ourselves to a “straightforward referential” reading of the novel. But if we are to follow Williams’ injunction to pay attention to “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” then it is through specific, contextual details—details that are at times inflected with nationality and the specificity of place—that we can do this.

III. Conclusion to discussion of *Riders in the Chariot*: both ‘expression of’ and ‘protest against’

²⁷⁰ Brady, “God, History, and Patrick White”, 172.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² McCann, “The Ethics of Abjection: Patrick White’s *Riders in the Chariot*”. *Australian Literary Studies* 18, no. 2 (1997): 145.

²⁷³ Indyk, “A paler shade of White”.

In his famous essay ‘The Prodigal Son’, White records that, in writing *The Tree of Man*, he “wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and poetry which alone could make bearable the lives” of people like the characters in his novel. We could read this sentiment, following Brady’s line of argument, as evidence of White’s positive embrace of spirituality rather than demeaning view of humankind. Like *The Tree of Man*, *Riders* is an active intervention into the crisis of spirituality that White diagnosed, rather than a mere passive record of it. He enacts, through literature, what he laments the lack of in society: a kind of deep looking, a visitation to the essential depths of post-war Australian suburbia. It is interesting to stand the above quotation from White’s ‘The Prodigal Son’ alongside a quotation from a very different thinker about a similar topic. Marx famously wrote that:

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.²⁷⁴

Both writers make the point that religion/spirituality helps people to endure their lives, lives full of suffering that may just be intolerable without the balm of religion/spirituality (or poetry, conceived by White effectively as an extension of the former). But the crucial difference between the two perspectives lies in a single word in White’s sentence: “alone”. For Marx, the point is that religion is a false, secondary consolation for the suffering individual; the primary antidote would be a transformation of the social conditions that produce the suffering in the first place. But White, through the word “alone”, does not admit the possibility of society being organised differently at a material level, of ordinary life being emancipated from its drudgery. Instead of alleviating the suffering of ordinary life, White’s only proposed solution is to “discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary” to make life “bearable”.

This word “alone” transforms White’s sentiment from an awareness that “poetry”—like religion—is a moral protest against inhumane social conditions, into an ideological injunction that “poetry”—like religion—can be effectively used as an opium to accommodate people to an acceptance of their supposedly immutable lot in life. It casts the creative writer in a particularly lofty role, as someone who is responsible for healing the wounds caused by an alienating society. In disagreement with this

²⁷⁴ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. Translated by O’Malley, Joseph. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970: accessed online through Marxist Internet Archives.

perspective, we can turn to Lukács who argued that “literature is not capable of substituting or setting right the objective shortcomings of life with creative forms”.²⁷⁵ Lukács was reacting against a strain in German Romanticism, personified by Schiller, that saw poetry as the way to heal the split soul. But to reject that literature can do this is not to deny the other capacities of literature, for Lukács acknowledges that texts can:

expose the wounds and sicknesses of life; can intone in captivating elegies [one’s] pain at the distortion and disfiguration of life; can announce with impatient pathos the necessity of the cure; can, indeed, with prophetic insight, demonstrate into what sort of whirlpool the mechanism of real social forces sweeps humanity—yet that which does not exist from social necessity cannot be conjured into existence by any sort of poetry.²⁷⁶

Literature’s capacities as recognised by Lukács are capacious and real. Only he stops short at claiming that there can be an ideal substitute for material change. Perhaps the later White who celebrated the communist Jack Munday would agree here, contradicting the White who wrote ‘The Prodigal Son’. Lukács’ description of literature’s ability to, “with prophetic insight, demonstrate into what sort of whirlpool the mechanism of real social forces sweeps humanity” serves as a fitting description of *Riders in the Chariot* as I have discussed it in this chapter.

²⁷⁵ Lukács, “Literature and Democracy”, 73.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 74.

Conclusion

I went to a lecture on realism. A lot of detached, ironic descriptions were offered, in a tone that seemed to assume that realism is historically discredited now and rather dull. I don't know if I'm a realist or not. I don't think it's a good idea to sit around in a university trying to categorise myself. The lecturer said twice that words signify reality but don't represent it. I'd quite like to find out what this means, but I'm not breaking my neck.

– Helen Garner diary entry from 1983.²⁷⁷

This quotation humorously captures the writer Helen Garner's irreverence toward academic debates about literary style. Garner's diary entry is contemporaneous with the beginning of poststructuralism's ascendancy in the Australian academy, an intellectual development that saw realism pronounced as philosophically naïve, and as Garner recalls from the lecture, "historically discredited". But, as Garner may in fact suspect, her own writing was understood as belonging to one of realism's creative afterlives: 'dirty realism', 'kitchen-sink realism', and 'grunge lit' are terms that have been bandied about in discussions of Garner's fiction, especially *Monkey Grip* (1977).

In Garner's work, and that of her equally popular and critically acclaimed contemporary Tim Winton, we see a kind of resolution to the tensions identified in this thesis: between White and the socialists, the real and the sacred, the ordinary and the extraordinary. Rather than representing the triumph of one half of the binary over the other, the fiction of Garner and Winton, it could be argued, harmonizes the tensions identified above. Both writers focus on quotidian life and working-class characters, but their works are also infused with theological significance. While doctrinal political commitment is anathema to them, neither are they otherworldly aesthetes.

White's spiritually-infused, modernist-inspired prose does have progeny in subsequent Australian fiction though: the works of David Malouf, Randolph Stow, and to a lesser extent Shirley Hazzard are major examples. The socialist realists cannot boast of such an enduring stylistic influence on twentieth-century Australian literature. To say this, though, is not at all to suggest that left-wing writers were not major contributors to Australian fiction. Indeed, twentieth century Australian literary history is veritably

²⁷⁷ Helen Garner, *The Yellow Notebook Diaries Volume I 1978-1987*, (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2019), 73.

dominated by writers who belong firmly to the far left of politics. From Lesbia Harford, member of the Industrial Workers of the World who wrote poetry and prose throughout the 1920s, to Christos Tsiolkas and his own idiosyncratic, anarchic anti-capitalism, writers have found ways to marry left-wing politics to creative practice outside the institutional framework of the communist party, and outside the doctrine of socialist realism.

As I argued in my first chapter, one outstanding writer whose socialist politics infuse her creative practice in a non-doctrinaire way is Christina Stead. Of the writers I have discussed in this thesis, Stead arguably achieves the most complex literary engagement with the themes of political commitment and nationalism. Unattached to an organisation that dictated the politics of her writing, Stead was able to bring to bear the theoretical resources of Marxism, a familiarity with the nineteenth century realist tradition, and an interest in contemporary European modernist works, to the Australian proletarian milieu in which she moved, producing a highly enigmatic depiction of a section of the far left in Australia at that time. In the most recent chapter, I looked at a novel, Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*, that is related to the far left only by virtue of reciprocated antipathies. Yet I argued that as a creative representation of suburban life in Menzies Australia, *Riders* can be productively read according to a Marxist framework that sees it as a response to capitalist consumerism's degradation of social life.

Politically engaged writers emerging in the 1970s, such as Thomas Keneally, Peter Carey, and Frank Moorhouse would deal with left-wing themes in a non-doctrinaire way, not being stylistically constrained by an institution like the Realist Writers' Movement. Keneally tackled the injustices faced by Indigenous Australians in *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1972), Carey the hubris of settler colonialism in *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and Moorhouse, having worked as a union organiser in his youth, addressed labour politics and Australian communism in, for example, *The Electrical Experience* (1974). Amanda Lohrey in *The Morality of Gentlemen* (1984) and David Ireland in *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* (1971) also depicted working-class milieus in their respective novels. Particularly in the case of Garner, Carey, Moorhouse, and Tsiolkas, an aesthetic of counter-cultural bohemianism dominates their writing rather than a thorough or committed left-wing programme.

What did not exist for these individual left-wing writers was an institutional arrangement to organise them into a literary movement that aspired to challenge the hegemonic bourgeois culture rather

than just occupy a position within it. Such an institutional arrangement *did* exist for a time in Australia, as my second chapter has demonstrated. The most profound aspect of the Realist Writers' Movement's legacy has turned out not to be the socialist realism doctrine it promoted, but its extra-textual attempts to create a mode of literary production, run by and for workers themselves, organised along principles that run counter to the hegemony of capitalism. This framework for the working-class production of literature is one of the major ways, I have argued, that the far left was involved in literary production throughout the twentieth century.

I. Reading *Overland* as a synecdoche for the fate of the cultural left

Overland is the only institution of the Realist Writers' Movement, of all the journals, writers' groups, and the publishing house, that still exists today. In the remainder of this concluding chapter, I examine the political and aesthetic trajectory of *Overland*, as a way of bringing together the concerns I have examined throughout the thesis. The journal's trajectory can be seen as synecdoche for the fate of the broader cultural left as it transitioned away from Stalinist communism, through the heterogenous New Left, and into our present moment. *Overland's* story is one of disaffiliation from the rigidities of socialist realism, but not one in which the politics of the left are entirely abandoned.

The first edition of *Overland* was published in 1954 and contained the subtitle '*Incorporating the Realist Writer*'. The relationship between the two journals and the forces of the left they represented was to be fractious over the next decade. At the time of its inception, *Overland* was overseen by Stephen Murray-Smith as Editor, which was a role he would occupy for the next thirty-four years of the journal's existence. He was a CPA member who later became disillusioned with the party and quit when his comrade Ian Turner was expelled for opposing Stalin's 1956 invasion of Hungary. This fracture was the cause of *Overland's* split from the Realist Writers' Movement. The journal remained in the hands of Stephen Murray-Smith because he managed to secure a copy of the list of subscribers amidst his dramatic departure from the party. On both the political and aesthetic fronts, the split from the CPA had consequences for *Overland*. Allan Gardiner argues that "few literary historians today seriously doubt the

middle-class element in the revolt of *Overland* from the CPA”.²⁷⁸ At the time, the communist activist Vic Williams did indeed criticise the new *Overland* editorial board as middle class, as did Frank Hardy who called Murray-Smith and his ilk “latter day saints and ex-Communists looking for a place in the capitalist sun” and “bourgeois intellectuals”.²⁷⁹ From Stead’s novel (through its characters the Folliotics), to the White debates in the Howard years, this phenomenon of middle-class dissidence and the suspicion with which it is treated by both conservatives and the working class has been a recurrent theme throughout this thesis.

Insofar as eligibility for state literary funding can be seen as an indirect index of radicalism, that *Overland* began to receive the Commonwealth Literary Fund (CLF) in 1963 was undoubtedly a significant development. This is especially true given the CLF’s historically fractious relationship with left-wing writers. A case in point was the furore caused by Waten’s securing of the fund in 1952, an event that caused such a controversy because of Waten’s communism that he was named in parliament, with Menzies declaring that from that moment on writers who were considered for funding by the CLF first had to be investigated by security agencies. By 1967, *Overland* was publishing articles such as Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s ‘A Letter to the Union of Soviet Writers’.²⁸⁰ This was a clear statement that *Overland* had broken ties with the communist left. That same year also saw the publication of Dorothy Hewett’s poem ‘The Hidden Journey’, announcing the end of her belief in the politics of the Soviet Union, marking a watershed moment for her as a writer and for the broader left-wing literary formation of which she was a part. Two years later, Hewett would write a controversial, because critical, obituary for Katherine Susannah Prichard in *Overland*. The treasured heritage of socialist politics in Australia was now open to scrutiny and criticism—criticism that was coming from *Overland* itself. When Stephen Murray-Smith died in 1988, Barret Reid was appointed his successor as editor of the journal. Reid, who had no historical affiliation with the political left, was a leader in the Victorian public library bureaucracy, a board member of the literature board of the Australia Council, and had ties to the modernist poet Max Harris, rather than to any of the left’s writers.

²⁷⁸ Allan Gardiner, “Rediscovering a constituency: *Overland* beyond the liberal sphere.” *Overland* 150, (March 1998): 52.

²⁷⁹ McLaren, *Writing in Hope*, 49.

²⁸⁰ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “A Letter to the Union of Soviet Writers”, *Overland* 37, (October 1967): 14-16.

It was not just socialist politics but socialist realism that was abandoned by the journal. To take but one example, an early Peter Carey story, ‘Crabs’, was published in *Overland* in 1972, and significantly departs from the realist mode. As a consequence of the political and stylistic shifts, the journal’s relationship with Patrick White, once the archenemy of the socialist left, was to transform completely. After the split from the CPA, but still during Murray-Smith’s editorship, White established “cordial relations” with the journal.²⁸¹ By 1988, *Overland* was publishing laudatory reviews of White’s work.²⁸² It is not the case that *Overland* cast its lot with modernism, rather that the stylistic debates that characterised the cultural politics of previous generations did not retain their political expediency in the liberal literary sphere of the last decades of the twentieth century. This is the eventual outcome of the tensions between modernism and realism that I have followed throughout this thesis. The fiercely contested debates about the political possibilities of literature shifted from a concern about stylistic modes (i.e., realism or modernism) to a concern, for example, with the cultural authenticity of textual representations.

The political and aesthetic changes undergone by *Overland* are indicative of a more general change befalling the left in this period: a dislocation of left-wing literary production from the CPA and a working-class milieu, and instead the drawing of intellectual nourishment from the heterogeneity of the New Left. These changes have not gone uncriticised. John McLaren, writing in the pages of *Overland* itself, argues that the journal abandoned the theoretical resources that would allow it to “confront the neoliberalism emerging from the United States”.²⁸³ Allan Gardiner, also writing in *Overland*, laments what he sees as the embourgeoisement of the journal. He criticised the magazine for acquiescing to the “progressive middle class” and abandoning its “original constituency” of “politically advanced workers”; he urged *Overland* to move out of the “liberal sphere” and cease courting the “professional and managerial classes” whom he sees as being *Meanjin*’s proper readership.²⁸⁴

But precisely what re-orienting towards a working-class readership would have meant for the journal is unclear. The forces shaping *Overland*’s trajectory in the latter quarter of the twentieth century

²⁸¹ Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, 348.

²⁸² See for instance Ninette Dutton, “A little optimism—three uneasy pieces by Patrick White: book review.” *Overland* 111, (June 1988): 17-18.

²⁸³ John McLaren, “Bias Australian?”, *Overland* 217, (Summer 2014): online.

²⁸⁴ Gardiner, “Rediscovering a constituency”, 53.

were greater than any explicit political intention of whoever was at the journal's editorial helm at the time. The conditions that created a politically advanced, working-class reading public that Gardiner wishes *Overland* would address were being eroded throughout capitalist democracies in the West, not just in the Australian literary scene. The ability for unions to be the institutional backbone of a working-class cultural movement, as they once were for the Realists, have been undermined by sharp and consistent decreases in union density that began in the Hawke-Keating era. *Overland's* challenge was to survive in a literary culture that was largely under the aegis of liberal progressivism, while at the same time both remaining loyal to its left-wing foundation and appealing to a broad and popular readership. A comparison with the UK's *New Left Review* (est. 1960) is instructive here. The *NLR*, as the name suggests, was, like the post-split *Overland*, founded in the context of a movement away from mass party communist politics. Its differences to *Overland* lie in its stronger and more consistent commitment to Marxism, and also the academic rigour and theoretical sophistication it pursued editorially; the *NLR* is now one of the leading socialist theory publications in the world. These attributes are at least partly a result of the journal having a larger potential readership than *Overland* does, hence greater possibility for finding an audience for specialist academic content. While *Overland* cannot claim to play such a central role in a global intellectual milieu, its importance to the Australian left-wing literary ecology is evidenced by the fact that each of the interventions into the political trajectory of *Overland* that I have discussed—even the highly critical ones—have been published in *Overland* itself.

As a final example of how *Overland's* trajectory can help us to conclude the themes I have discussed in the previous chapters, I will look at an article published in the journal in 2020 about the novel I examined in the first chapter of this thesis: Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. Immediately apparent to the reader of Liam Diviney's 'In triumph over the spirit lost: revisiting *Seven Poor Men Sydney*'—an article that is less literary criticism than personal essay—is the extent to which it is reflective of the mores of a contemporary literary sphere: it is confessional, assertively progressive, and steeped in the identity politics of contemporary liberalism. The main contribution made by the article is to read Stead's novel as a work about mental illness. In this way it reflects an emerging trend in recent Stead

criticism, joining, for example, Fiona Wright, who reads Stead's *For Love Alone* as being a novel concerned with anorexia.²⁸⁵

As with many of the critical responses I examined in the first chapter, in Diviney's reading the beating socialist heart of the novel is subordinated to a focus on the individual Romantic quest of Michael. Socialism is only mentioned as a reason why Michael has a bad relationship with his parents (because he is friends with too many socialists). Ordinarily, one would not read so much into this lack of emphasis in such a short article but given *Overland's* founding as a socialist journal it is difficult not to notice. At the most basic level, Diviney's emphasis evidences a straightforward historicist point that has been made throughout this thesis: that a text's critical reception will necessarily be shaped by the political prerogatives of the given critical milieu in which it is received.

"You get the feeling", writes Diviney, "that Christina Stead sat through a lot of male intellectuals very slowly explaining their sophistication at her".²⁸⁶ It is in "modernist narratives" that Diviney locates the masculinism to which Stead is reacting, but I proffer instead that Stead is actually critiquing a patriarchal attitude that runs throughout the left across the period we have examined. As evidence we can point to Stead's depiction of the tyranny of the un-self-aware socialist male in the character of Sam Pollitt in *The Man Who Loved Children*. A similar criticism is also made by former Realist Writer Dorothy Hewett, who after leaving the CPA was to comment on its sexist attitudes to women:

one of the jobs I was given was to organize women, so I thought, oh well, the obvious people to start with are the wives of the Communist Party activists, so I started calling on them all. And their husbands were furious, absolutely furious! How dare she come and interrupt our peaceful, domestic lives where the wife does everything and I go out to my meetings.²⁸⁷

Such a quote should serve as a reminder that we should be careful to avoid nostalgia for the old left even as we lament the decline of working-class cultural production.

²⁸⁵ Fiona Wright, "For Love and Hunger", *Sydney Review of Books*, (June 14, 2013): online. <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essay/for-love-and-hunger/>.

²⁸⁶ Liam Diviney, "In triumph over the spirit lost: revisiting Seven Poor Men of Sydney." *Overland* 241, (Summer 2020): online. <https://overland.org.au/2020/06/in-triumph-over-the-spirit-lost-revisiting-seven-poor-men-of-sydney/>.

²⁸⁷ Nicole Moore, "Dorothy Hewett in conversation with Nicole Moore", *Jacket* 9, (1999): online. <http://jacketmagazine.com/09/moor-iv-hewe.html>

If the socialist realists over-estimated the radical potentialities of the novel, believing in its ability to foster working-class consciousness, then contemporary liberal progressivism also posits a basic cause-and-effect relationship between the text and the world: “It’s likely”, Diviney states, “that this novel has contributed to the suicidal ideations of vulnerable people”. The reader is told that “Stead’s depiction of Michael’s suicide runs contrary to the modern rules prescribed by the Australian Press Council”—although it is unclear if we are meant to take this as a criticism. (Is one supposed to wish the history of world literature conformed to the rules prescribed by the Australian Press Council?). For the liberal sphere, the result of this prescriptivism—stemming, as with the socialists, from a literalist conception of literature’s relationship to social reality—is moralism, rather than the socialist politics of a previous time. But both lead to a quickness to denunciation; indeed, Diviney states of the novel that he “hate[s] it in so many ways”.²⁸⁸ Ironically, such a brazen antipathy towards the novel, such exaggerated claims for the social harms allegedly caused by a work of fiction, is reminiscent of none other than the socialist realists’ position on Patrick White.

The final sentences of the piece are a revealing take on ‘Australianness’ in the novel and provide an opportunity to summarise the discussion of nationalism that has been threaded throughout each of the chapters of this thesis. “The novel’s vision of the antipodes is as much a view of interwar Europe as of Australia,” Diviney argues, asserting that the novel “finds in Sydney’s errors the greater failings of the unstable phenomenon of ‘Western civilisation’ which tears the bodies of earth, water, and flesh that constitute it.” Diviney’s unifying of “Sydney”, “Australia”, and “interwar Europe” under the single banner “Western civilisation” is typical of a contemporary anti-colonial politics that sees the West as a monolithic and hegemonic entity, and the settler colony of Australia as an undifferentiated part of this whole. Diviney’s reading of the novel incorrectly understands Stead’s own perspective on the relationship between Europe and Australia; as my first chapter shows, her novel interrogated the notion that Australia was an outpost of Europe. In wholly condemning ‘Australia’ as part of the nefarious ‘Western civilisation’, Diviney’s critique differs from the mid-century socialist view that the progressive aspects of an Australian tradition could be used to agitate against the destructive aspects—and not all

²⁸⁸ The notion that contemporary liberal culture’s relationship to literature represents a kind of Zhdanovism has been argued by philosopher Justin E. H. Smith, “HR Managers of the Human Soul: On Our Own American Zhdanovshchina”, *Hinternet*, (June 5): online. <https://justinehsmith.substack.com/p/hr-managers-of-the-human-soul>

aspects were thought to be destructive—of ‘Western civilisation’. The anti-colonial position on Australian settler nationalism—that is, a rejection of it—is the outcome of a long and varied history that I have examined hitherto. Cultural nationalism had both right- and left-wing proponents in the early twentieth century, as represented by for example P. R. Stephensen and the Palmers, respectively. Stead was an uncategorizable outlier, engaging with the question but not schematically. Insofar as the mid-century socialists were nationalists, identifying with a tradition of Australian workerism, they were also internationalists, their positions determined by Cold War polarities more than parochial nativism. It was with the New Left that the anti-nationalist position came to be taken up by the left and also the literary establishment, and Patrick White was an important figure in this process. Diviney shares common ground with White in finding nothing of utility in an Australian cultural nationalism, but as a known Europhile White would never accede to the totalising claims about the West’s singularly destructive nature.

The relationship between the political left and literary style is such a fertile question, a question that remains alive after decades of debate, because it is a more specific version of one of the problematics central to literary expression itself, which is the relationship between the word and the world. As I have shown in the thesis, political concerns over style have always been proxies for concerns about other things too: nationalism, individualism, spirituality, and materialism, for example. The ideological tensions that cluster around these underlying themes still exist, even if they are no longer funnelled through debates about the revolutionary potential of the realist novel. On the whole, the far left in recent decades has played a less assertive and certainly less organised role in literary production than it did in the post-war years, but left-wing writers and left-wing concerns continue to substantially contribute to Australian fiction. If this thesis serves any purpose, it should be as an injunction: let the attempts to reimagine the ways left-wing politics intersect with artistic practice be historically informed ones.

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