

‘Dearest Munx’: The Love Letters of Christina Stead

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THE CACHE OF LETTERS or other documents retrieved from the monastery coal scuttle, and affording the basis for a whole new understanding of the fall of princes or the causes of the French Revolution, is the stuff of scholarly fantasy. It is a fantasy exploited by A.S. Byatt in her novel *Possession: A Romance* (1990), which centres on the quest for letters as the key to understanding a famous author’s life and career. I take *Possession* as a cautionary tale in approaching the phenomenon represented by the letters of the great Australian novelist Christina Stead (1902–83) and her husband, ‘William Blake, novelist and economist’, in the words of her dedication to him in *I’m Dying Laughing* (1986). (Born Wilhelm Blech (1894–1968), when this American of German-Russian-Jewish extraction anglicised his name, he immodestly called himself after the visionary Romantic poet.) Having these letters in circulation could offer readers and critics many opportunities, yet I say ‘cautionary’ because they extend and refine interpretations rather than subject them to complete revision. That said, they are extraordinary opportunities.

Along with other manuscripts, the 284 letters exchanged between Stead and Blake (141 from her, 143 from him) passed into the keeping of Ron Geering, Stead’s literary executor, at her death in 1983, and were subsequently deposited in the National Library of Australia (as the Manuscript Librarian, Graeme Powell, engagingly explained in *ABR*, June/July 2002). For a combination of reasons, including his sense of propriety and an ambiguous instruction from Christina about destroying the letters, Geering put an embargo on them until 2001, although he showed them to both her biographers, Chris Williams and Hazel Rowley, and Rowley quoted fragments appropriate to her purposes. When I succeeded Geering as executor, I decided to respect the embargo, even though I was not hampered by his sense of chivalrous protectiveness towards Stead. Approaching the end of the embargo period, I was faced with two questions: should the letters be released into the public domain? and what might be the consequences of their availability?

I inclined instinctively to the view that the letters, having survived to this point, should get into circulation and not continue metaphorically to languish in the coal scuttle. Working through them to decide whether there was any reason to extend the embargo, and already with the idea of producing an edition of them, I experienced a shameful voyeuristic thrill

from the intimate access they permit to the minutiae of the daily lives of the correspondents. These are unquestionably private letters. The moral dilemma — should I simply tiptoe away? — was quickly resolved, however. Such an extensive tranche of Stead’s writing (well over 120,000 words) is not to be suppressed. Quantitatively, her share of the correspondence is equivalent to a long novel. More important, her letters are demonstrably of a piece with her published writing both in fiction and non-fiction forms, in ways that I will indicate.

Another consideration is that so extensive — and at times intensive — a correspondence between a writer and his or her partner (in this case himself a published author) is rare. Moreover, this relationship was one Stead acknowledged to be formative. In interviews in later life, she frequently asserted, with justice, that it was Blake’s encouragement and support that got her published in the first place, and, again with justice, she constructed their life together as a great romance. To trace — and to interrogate — her repeated avowal of love and dependence in the letters is one of the challenging opportunities they provide. Part of the challenge arises from other situations where Christina’s behaviour and statements seem to contradict this narrative of romance: for instance, in actual, apparent or fantasised infidelities.

As is well-known, Stead depicted Blake in several of her novels: he is Baruch Mendelsohn in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934); Michel Alphenéry in *House of All Nations* (1938); and James Quick in *For Love Alone* (1944), the composition of which bulks large in these letters. Other Stead acquaintances figure both here and also in her fiction: in a sense, these new letters are parallel texts, alternate versions of sections of the novels, and will reward scrutiny through analysis of variations. Into the bargain, in Bill’s letters we can hear his voice: he was a charismatic speaker, both in public and in private. An illustrative digression: writing from Hollywood on 29 May 1942, Bill tells of a meeting with a radio celebrity:

Last night at the dinner he came up and asked if I was ever a banker in Paris. I said Yes and he said I knew it: I interviewed you once for the Vossische [sic] Zeitung (in 1931) and I candidly did not place you but no two guys in the world talk that way. And I expect to escape the police! I am a doomed tongue.

Much heavy love from oos
L O N E S O M E (V E R Y) B I L L

The humorous signature is characteristic; the remark about escaping the police not entirely a joke, referring to his flight from France, a wanted man, when the Traveller's Bank collapsed in 1935; and the point about his rhetorical gifts one variously made by those who knew him.

CHRISTINA STEAD AND William Blake met in 1928, when Stead, a 26-year-old Australian, newly landed in London, went to work for Blake, a married American, in a grain exchange company. Their romance blossomed: they relocated to Paris in 1929, and were rarely separated thereafter. They had relatively few occasions for letter-writing, usually when Christina was absent from their current base on holiday or in retreat to get on with her writing; or when Bill was away on business. Sometimes he travelled for an employer; at times in their own interests, as when he aspired to be a scriptwriter in Hollywood in 1942, some kind of entrepreneur in Belgium in 1947, an academic in East Germany in 1950. He writes from Leipzig in March 1950: 'I was a nobody in America relatively, here I am a Marxian writer, which in Leipzig is the highest honour in the world apart from that of the directors of party policy and actual high administration.' To no avail. For all Bill's charm, intelligence and erudition, he never mustered the authority to sustain worldly success in his own right.

Stead's first works, *The Salzburg Tales* and *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, were both published in 1934. She and Blake oscillated between Paris and London in the early 1930s, visiting the USA in 1935 after the Traveller's Bank failed; then moving to Spain for a time in 1936, and in 1937

back to the USA, where they spent the war years. During this decade, the Marxist Blake, previously employed in the finance industry, became a writer and political activist. He published novels and works on economics and international affairs (one of them was used as a textbook for undergraduates studying Marxism at least into the 1970s). His first novel, *The World Is Mine: The Story of a Modern Monte Cristo* (1938), has analogies with Stead's fourth work of fiction, *House of All Nations*, brought out the same year, by the same publisher, Simon & Schuster (his was the bestseller). Blake returned to Europe in 1946, Stead soon following, and they led a peripatetic existence in a range of temporary

accommodation in Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, France and England, where they settled in 1954. There were times of real privation: they moved between London bedsits and other people's houses for some years, until in the late 1950s Bill scored accommodation at Foxwarren Hall in Surrey as part of his package as a researcher and scriptwriter with a film-making company. That job at an end, they stayed on in Surrey suburbs. After Blake's death in 1968, Stead returned to Australia for a visit in 1969, and to live in 1974. This gypsy life bore fruit in the varied settings of her novels, but also created problems: in particular, the eclipse of Stead's literary reputation for twenty years after World War II. That she published no book between *The People with the Dogs* in 1952 and the reissue of *The Man Who Loved Children* in 1965 was in large measure due to her absence from the anglophone cultural capitals, New York and London, and that absence or exclusion was in part due to her known Communist sympathies.

All the while, Christina kept writing. One of the peculiarities of her career is the disjunction between the time of writing and the publication of much of her work. Her correspondence is the major source (almost the only one) for working out the

history of its composition.

While the letters to various correspondents published by Geering in 1992 are helpful for this kind of scholarly discrimination, as well as for identifying 'sources', the correspondence with Blake, mainly because of its intimacy, is most illuminating. The longest single sequence, which I will discuss presently, dates from May and June 1942, when Christina was attempting to finish *For Love Alone* and already fashioning *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (the two books, respectively published in 1944 and 1946, were originally part of the same

conception). As well as the 1942 sequence of letters, there are other groups of letters from the 1940s which bear on *Letty Fox*, *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* (1948), *The People with the Dogs* (1952), and *I'm Dying Laughing*; from 1949, there is a group that complements *Cotters' England* (1965), mainly written when Christina was living in Newcastle-on-Tyne with the prototypes of her characters. *Cotters' England*, published under the title *Dark Places of the Heart*, had been completed in 1953; while the posthumously published masterpiece, *I'm Dying Laughing*, was begun in 1950, with no effective work done on it after about 1960.

**Photographs of William Blake c. 1928 and Christina Stead
in the Paris years 1929–35**

THE LETTERS RUN from 1929, when the relationship began, to 1968. Perhaps significantly, the earliest letters are from Bill to Christina (that is, she kept them, though hers to him have not survived). Her happiness in their union is evident, for instance, in her exultant letter of 2 April 1929, from Paris to a Sydney friend, about 'the troubles of a person too happily husbanded ... I am very miserable here. I am contemplating returning to Darlinghurst, or Murrurundi'. Bill's letters to her are similarly extravagant, often joking on Australian themes: one of his letters to her in Salzburg in the summer of 1930 refers to the Sydney Harbour Bridge (then under construction), the feats of Australian cricketers, namely Woodfull and Bradman, and greasy wool prices. He signs himself 'As ever, William James Cook'. (Another, from Hollywood, in May 1942, has a 'P.S. at last I saw your Patzific — I waved to Australia!')

The earliest letters from Christina to Bill are in 1934. Here is part of her letter of 9 May 1935 from their flat in Chiltern Court, on Baker Street in London. The witty euphoria of her letter to Nellie Molyneux about Blake plays also when she writes to him: you would never guess that she is addressing a man on the run. Blake is in Barcelona, having officially resigned from the Traveller's Bank in Paris on 3 May and fled to Spain. While this is far from a conventional love letter, a love letter it assuredly is. Along with the teasing and fantasising banter, there is live concern: heed the note of yearning towards the end of this excerpt.

Geliebtes Kind,

I had my hair cut short and curled and don't I look — pretty — that is to say, quite nice! (Parsimonious bastard, I haven't forgotten.) But you have nothing to fear: I am not amongst madly-beautiful men: I wish I were, that is to say, I wish you were here, sitting in a room hung with mirrors. (Stinginess is not my middle name.)

When you are young and strong again, let us go to the Solomon Islands, or else through the Balkans, on foot, or else take a log-shack on Maine. I saw a picture of Maine the other day: it is a beautiful country. I should like America in the Maine if it were not such a mass o' Chusetts. I send a picture of Hawaii: if you can learn to spell Kahaulea and Kealakekua we will go there and have a sunrise out of the sea, a mango for breakfast (coffee out of a cocoanut), dance round the waiohinu tree (there must be one) with the bellydancers, dip in the lukewarm pacific foam at noon (you hate cold water so), and while doing so, catch your octopus, nab your sole, spear your trout, pinch your crab, eat and sleep and at four take a bit of exercise, a hundred yards' dash up the tallest cocoanut palm: the first to the top and back gets a couple of kealaikahikis. At night, the quick sunset, the fish-silver smooth sea, the wide, profound sky, the hosts of stars — ai, don't mention it, my mouth waters: to think of the greasy bit of homespun they stretch over our heads here. Wouldn't you love to catch your own ocky and grow your own rice? I am

miserably lonely: you must think I have a heart of iron and am the very pattern of those cold-hearted English so popular on the continent. Have a good holiday and never mind what I say. I hope that when you're quite well, strong and fit again that we can have a more united life, though. It would be pleasant if we had a real home where we knew we would stay for five or ten years, where we could have some ground and a large library. Not that I have anything against C[hiltern] C[ourt]. When we are living here and you are knitting one eye and flipping your handkerchief and at night I can smell your soote little belly, life is perfect. [Letter continues]

I WANT TO spend some time on the major sequence of the correspondence dating from May and June 1942, when Bill went west to Hollywood to make their fortunes and to establish residence in New Mexico or Nevada to enable him to secure a divorce. Meanwhile, Christina stayed in New York trying to finish *For Love Alone*, having a miscarriage, and extensive dental work. For two months, they wrote daily and at length. Their letters develop not only their domestic dialogue but also commentary by a pair of committed leftists on the political situation in those war years, on literary and journalistic circles in New York, and on the film industry in Hollywood. In these letters is played out a particular episode, a separation with a definite end when Christina travels west to join Bill. It seems as if all the letters sent have been preserved — there are no evident gaps — so reading them in chronological order of their composition we experience an enactment of the dynamic of letter-writing, the delay in response time while each missive reaches its destination, the overlapping of questions and answers. (Incidentally, letters seem to have travelled overland from coast to coast in three days: probably better than present-day airmail.) In this sequence, the essentially performative qualities of the letter genre are very clear. Beyond literal content, there is a construction both of sender and recipient in the enactment of the transaction constituted by the letter, communication with someone at a distance (not always physical distance), and the expectation of a response, though that is necessarily delayed. The definition of *letter* offered in the French Robert dictionary, 'Writing addressed to someone to tell him what one cannot or does not want to say to him orally', is both economical and relevant.

This is the first letter of the sequence. On 7 May, Christina writes to Bill at the first address she has for him, in Santa Fé, from their apartment at 212 E 16th Street, New York City:

Dearest Mux,

I hope you are having a holiday. I can't tell you how happy I was on Monday, despite all contretemps, to think of you going off to rest for a little while, you poor gink. Do really rest and not run off to see if the guidebook fellers are right or wrong in a thousand different directions. Eve Ettinger rang up [the] other evening about 9.15 and had a long earnest talk over the phone

about you. Didn't know you had left but said she had two friends in Santa Fé, ladies, have a farm, fine healthy girls would be glad to show you the points and she will write to them and you as soon as she hears your address, which will be today, from me. I told her then you would go on to H[ollywood] and she became very earnest indeed, wanted to offer you some bucks to help you over, said it was no use going there if you were worried about finances, and seemed anxious about your get-up — do not be ashamed, she has the heart of a good little girl and is really a sister to us: she wanted to see to it that you were presentable in Hollywood terms, when you met the lions. You must have had on that five-day-old shirt last time you saw her. After this do what Mother tells you, change your shirt every four days at least! This makes Three Good Uncles for you —

Good Uncle Alf — Massage Uncle:
 Good Uncle Chris — Toofies Uncle:
 Good Uncle Eve — Clean-shirt Uncle:

Asa on the other hand has no qualms: he is a Bad Uncle. He says you will be very calm and easy out there and will know how to handle the situation.

Bad Uncle Asa — Qualm Uncle:

Our varmint: the creature departed next day and was about 1 mth. that's all. It seemed a pity, why did it have to? This is what I thought for a moment: it would have been so much hope and joy for us. However I am counting that this summer we surely will go at it wholesale and take into account that I don't seem to have any staying powers in that direction. Oh, my back — after lying around for 10 days! But I got it back to erect now. (Asa was so joyful, so nice and good about it that I didn't have the heart to tell him yet, his letter-carrying and other deeds of goodwill are out of place; I will today, but it is embarrassing.) It touched me so much that you worked so hard for me all that time and really seemed to want it: it is the first time we looked at it this way. Anyhow, no more of this.

Max and Aida asked me again to go up to Hunter on 16th. I definitely turned it down. When my book is finished, I must go to Leo; I am at the end of my Leo-tether. Asa comes up each day but only stays a few minutes, so do not fear he is wasting time. I saw the front door yesterday: oh, what a mess! The old painter must be going blind and will not tell anyone: that often happens. Asa said he started to paint the glass panels too: that shows he is going blind I think: the painting is too atrocious. It is full summer here: raining now, and fat and green.

I read a Frank Norris shilling-shocker 'McTeague:' he leaves nothing out — two lifelong friend-enemies waterless handcuffed together at midday in the middle of Death Valley, one already dead — wow! It makes my hair tingle with joy. That is a story. Moreover, he is a wonderful story-teller: every detail is so homely and real: every room he describes springs into being at once, the dental parlors in a small town, the school room, everything is absolutely tangible: he had a first-rate gift. Of course it is written as for newspaper instalments and too much Eugene Sue or whatever it is stuffed in quickly but simple,

terse and vivid; his characters too, are wonderful, he is first rate at character. He is a front-rank writer, in gifts. This is the first book of his I ever read.

Well, my darling, take care of yourself and enjoy yourself. It was nice of you to telegraph: I was glad to get it.

Well, I hope I'll get through the miserable novelette in time.

A cheap letter from Mavis, it makes you squirm, for her, and the game. She'll pay it, if absolutely necessary but she throws herself on your mercy: she wants to step outside 'agency practice' and do you a favor and repay the money, but it really isn't the thing, wait —

Dear Bill,

I found on Friday that the matter of our commission on the advance you have refunded to L[ittle].B[rown]. required more discussion than I had thought it would. It seems that we had investigated a similar situation some time ago and found that it is agency practice not to refund such commissions: none of the other agents queried has ever done so. But since you sought and made your Dial Press contract yourself and paid us a commission for very little work on our part we will refund the \$50 on the L.B. contract if you feel strongly that it is due you. I am asked to point out, however, that both commissions paid us have not equalled the commission of \$200 which would have resulted if the book had gone through with L.B.

We are more anxious to settle this matter fairly than to adhere to 'Agency Practice' I assure you, but I wish you would consider the facts from the agency point of view and write me again.

As ever, sincerely,
 (May 5) Mavis.

Of course there is only one answer to this. I think we are pretty hardened to every kind of chiselling by this. This is unquestionably Miss Otis's hand.

To think that those rascals have just made a fortune out of Steinbeck's trash and now want to chisel \$50 out of a poor author! Well, such is life in El-Hel. (Rabbinical name for New-York.)

Let me know what day you set out for Los. (Fres and Fran.) Alf and I will get together on that day and worry ourselves sick about whether you —

Got a massage —
 Did your Hah.

Do not be mad with me, sweet. I am very anxious for you to get a good serious, not flashy, job in the old Port of Shadows; and I am anxious to get one too. Enough kafoozling round El-Hel.

Love,
 Christina

PS. 'Diss iss GROSSMANN. I like very much to invite you and Ruth to Teatr one evening. I want to thank you very much for your book: it is a great honor for me diss inscription. I am

reading it: very much it iss a very harrrd lecture forr me.’ Apparently still thinks Ruth is my varmint: will tell Ruth not to let down good old man. This will be a great theatre party: you will have a good time attending it even in absentia! I told him his books were a very harrrd lecture forr me. He relished this joke. (I don’t mean I mocked his actual language.)

I won’t labour explanatory annotation. I cannot account for the nickname ‘Munx’ for Bill. Perhaps it is a version of ‘monk’, referring to his celibate state during their separation? Or of ‘monkey’? She first uses it in 1941, and it persists, with variants (‘Dearest Monkele’) for some years, sometimes reciprocated by him, as on 29 May, ‘Dearest Old Monko’. Munx was not her only name for him: ‘Chick’ is common, and there are others less common, such as ‘Brown Wee’. Asa Zatz is their young landlord, the prototype for Edward Massine in *The People with the Dogs* (1952); while Aida and Max Kotlarsky also appear in that novel. Leo Horney is a dentist the Blakes knew in Paris, who is undertaking major work on Christina’s mouth. The discussion of the naturalist novelist Frank Norris’s *McTeague* (1899) is a fine demonstration of Christina’s eclectic readerly enthusiasm. Mavis Macintosh is Bill’s literary agent. Henryk Grossmann, a Marxist intellectual held in high regard by Blake, returned to East Germany after World War II and from there assisted Bill in various ways. In a later letter, dated 11 April 1944, when Bill was in Montreal, Christina added a postscript about Grossmann, an instance of her cannibalising her acquaintance for her fiction:

P.S. Bring this letter back, so that I can remember about the Doc. if I write about him, because I didn’t make any notes. There was a lot more, you know how he talks. I should have made notes, but didn’t.

The letter of 7 May 1942 might be a transcription of the everyday speech of a good talker, moving by seemingly random association to pass on the news of the day to an absent lover. What must have been the major item, Christina’s miscarriage, comes only after the fond and somewhat facetious injunctions about Blake’s taking care of himself. This kind of uneven, surging narrative movement is similar to that of the novels, particularly the first-person *Letty Fox* and *The Little Hotel* (1973), and sections of the others in which one of the great talkers (Emily Wilkes or Sam Pollitt) takes the floor.

Similarly profuse letters follow: generally once but sometimes twice and even three times a day. As is the case for

the correspondence as a whole, the letters are substantial (several pages, mostly around 1200–1500 words) and read like an extension of their daily conversations. They are mostly typed, but the idiosyncrasies of Christina’s typescripts are as recognisable as any handwritten manuscript (Bill’s are more uniform). The technology of the manual typewriter is now almost as quaint as that of the quill and ink-well, yet awareness of it gives some appreciation of the extent to which Christina incorporated second — and third — thoughts into her writing, with handwritten insertions, typed addenda in the margins, and so on. She had taken touch-typing lessons, but went for speed rather than accuracy, which means that the scripts produced on a portable typewriter with a small typeface (Élite), sometimes on poor-quality paper stock with a ribbon not necessarily in its first youth, and with narrow margins (she was of the generation brought up not to waste paper), can be challenging to decipher.

Here is another letter from the Hollywood sequence, again from Christina to Bill, on 7 June 1942: there is more news of friends — the Bloom family, Harry, a pharmacist (figured in *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat*; possibly at some time Christina’s lover), his wife and children; Blake’s daughter Ruth; and Mike Gold, a Communist writer and activist. But there is also extensive detailed discussion of her work-in-progress, *For Love Alone*, with the identity of Jonathan Crow under the microscope; and a prescient comment about her ability to write a Hollywood novel. The consciousness of her craft is pervasive.

Dearest Chick,

Not a news today: it is steamy, slightly overcast. I dug up that old Bras. Montpellier photo of youse and me and put it on the dressing-table, makes me feel better. As it is so long since I saw it, I can now see how we both looked then. You certainly looked well in Montp., oh, those slinky eyes. As for me, on that hungry face, I recognise more Butters expression than Stead expression, despite the blondish overcast. In my psyche too, despite occasional explosions of Auntie Jess (perish the thought!) I think there is more dark-psyche (Butters) psyche than platinum-blonde-psyche (Stead). Fruitful train of thought! I am sterile today.

The photo anyhow makes me feel I am going to see you soon; which is also true. Got on with J[onathan] C[roWE] yesterday. If I can turn the corner today, which I think I can — that is, run on to that long part already written (in London) I will be a fair way along and will send all that to Covici tomorrow. Would be a good idea because I probably won’t be able to work tomorrow night, having teeth out and things tomorrow at 5.30

‘The definition of *letter* offered in the French Robert dictionary, “Writing addressed to someone to tell him what one cannot or does not want to say to him orally”, is both economical and relevant.’

p.m. I think I at last understand J.C. (he was not a real devil of ingenuity after all, a quite poor brain and not particularly sly), but I did not until I drew a plan of his house in the 'slums' as he loved to say (a monster of self-pity) and figured out the bedrooms of the 3 brothers (he had 2, was the youngest) and the type of the mother (she was one of those mothers who kept her sons bachelors: a man-eating type — dominated quietish husband, kept 3 sons bachelors, surrounded herself with celibate men). I have often noticed before, that your understanding of a psychic knot only occurs when you have put down the material details — furniture and the rest. One should be a stage-manager. They say that Ibsen, as a child, when first starting to write plays, had a series of dolls which he placed about, himself taking all the parts. I think this would be an excellent idea for writers. I find my stock of characters is too small however: and after this book is finished I must go out and actually fill notebooks with characters. I am short of them. Warning sign: I have written my last two books about my childhood and youth. Bad. Of course, I am maturing Harry and Mike and Anne and that set-up for a book. I am looking forward to Hollywood: people say, I can do a good book on it and I think this is so.

Am tiredish, but not tired. Should like to get out of this apt. and get some fresh air (although it has been remarkably airy here so far). Am going to see Harry one night this week. He is so tired: he is breaking up. Isn't it dreadful? And what chance of his getting out of it? Janet is going in for some scientific study — chemistry, bacteriology — not artistic, not intellectual, but good at keeping notebooks and remembering details, Anne thinks she will be good at this: so do I. The boy is quite a problem with his retired view of the future. He does not expect to get a job in music for six or seven years — and you know what they get, as pay. If it were not for his feet, Harry would not mind so much — but no holidays too!

Well, darling, hope to tell you tomorrow I have sent in big wad of J.C. to Covici. I cleaned out another closet yesterday: it takes hours. You would never credit it. I do it when I do not work in the afternoon. Never sleep in the afternoon when you are away. (Shows a certain tension.)

It is odd: about 'for whom do you write?' you know. Writing about J.C. I find myself thinking not about myself at all but about the poor kids who are all in a jam with the sejuicers, Ruth, Nadine, and the others. The seducer of any kind, is not well understood by the rest of mankind: there are several of him, to begin with. (If he were understood he wouldn't seduce, I suppose.) For instance, Pete, financial seducer: who understood him? People's opinions of him were nearly always a way off-centre. About Alf: many people say he is stupid!!! 'Just a business-man.' That helps a lot. People think Mike is 'timid' or 'too much loved and so spoiled' etc. Only those who know him well know what a perverse, deep, vain and self-interested man he is and what kind of gifts he has. You can imagine Harry's shriek of laughter at the idea that Mike is 'timid' — and yet, in a way he is too. He is terrified of the platform even though he

gives speeches without shame, when he has prepared nothing, for the sake of the money. Well ...

I am taking some J.C. material from Mike, there is a superficial resemblance, although Mike is gifted, mature, and J.C. not. This in a way clears the ground for a proper fullgrown character of Mike in another book. You know how I do this, always sketch in a chief character several times before he really appears, as Marpurgo: and then he leaves trails after him, too. As to Mike: there is the sketch in the H[ouse] of All Nations, which is a goodhumoured outside sketch: I thought of him in the character of Sam Pollit, as he has certain Pollit characteristics and no question at all that Elizabeth recognised those (worse) traits, that is why she raves about the Man Who and why Mike hates it so much. (I know he does.) But when I do a real character of Mike I will give the entire character in its perversity but not meanly, though with meannesses. A truly great character must have meannesses: I don't know why this is. Look at the private, stupid side of Lincoln! In fact, I think greatness of character in a book can only be of two kinds; both with negative aspects — a great emotional character, that is partly with dream-feeling, like Rochester, not quite a person, like your Cristobal (in spots) and your Karl (in spots) or a person with a great vice (like any of Balzac's great characters — that was his key to character of course, the master-vice) like Sam Pollit. Perhaps I am too simple. But I may say I have only got as far as this in character-study. I often wonder if it is possible to take a 'great positive' view. I really doubt it: I believe it is impossible for an artist to be a great positive. Why is this?

Well, Munko, here I am chattering you to pieces, just as if you were at home: poor old thing with his alleged 'silent woman' who is really an infernal chatterbox, Auntie Florrie all over again.

Take care of yourself, darling. Made enquiries about Parergol and Levine hummed and ha-aed about it, not very enthusiastic, recommended a thing called CALCIUM PANTOTHENATE, in 10 mg. pills, 100 in a bottle, about \$3 a bottle: I don't know how you take it, but it tells you. Harry does not know much about Parergol, said be careful about the drug-manias of the Coast: they are known to be drug-crazy out there, one thing after another. However there are several kinds of this vitamin-B complex preparation which act internally, and tone up the glands as well, and calcium pantothenate is considered very good: he is taking it himself and he believes that it will gradually help to restore colour to your hair. So he is getting some for me. It is expensive. I will not send it, as the time is now short, but will bring it to you. Perhaps I should take some? Not that I have any grey hair, but after all, I am no chicken and — anyhow I don't want to be a fool. You take it, anyhow. He says everyone is now taking this type of thing for grey hair and it is really supposed to work — lab. tests 80% success — in most cases. Of course, all this is new. What will be the result of this wide taking of vitamins and so on? We will not see until twenty years later when this group of middleaged people prolonging their youth get to be 60 and so on. Perhaps we will all be having

children at 60! The place will be spread with maternity hospitals.

Take care of yourself. Love, love.
Your
Christina.

What is most striking in the discussion of Crow is the way the character is part of the fabric of her existence: the 'original' Keith Duncan is never mentioned here, but what she says about analysing and understanding J.C. suggests a protracted process of both exorcism and incorporation. That she and Blake had discussed J.C. before emerges as the correspondence proceeds. Indeed, the dialogue of Stead and Blake in this letter well exemplifies the nature of their creative interaction (elsewhere in the correspondence the possibility of their collaborating on a Hollywood novel is pursued). On 14 June she reflects further on J.C., connecting certain events of her novel with Hitler's activities in 1936. When she announces on 21 June that she has changed the name of the Blake character from James Eyre to James Quick, Bill replies three days later that he prefers Eyre, though the charge of his letter is in his hopes that a film version of *The World Is Mine* can be secured. It never was, and the pattern of Bill's letters in this phase is one that becomes very familiar over the years. Hope springs eternal for him: tomorrow he is to have lunch with Groucho Marx, a meeting with Louis B. Mayer, which will be the turning point — but somehow, the encounters never happen, the plans never mature.

The letters then provide some insights into the process of development of *For Love Alone*, and some of the author's ruminations on the art of fiction. They also offer a somewhat chilling basis for examining the fine line between people Stead knew, and her appropriation of them for her novels. Her letters from Newcastle, when she was living with the Dooleys, are perhaps the most deliberate, and morally dubious, of such cases: the parallels with *Cotters' England* are almost exact. The various comments on Ruth McKenney and Richard Bransten (sometimes referred to as 'R&R') from the early 1940s until well into the 1950s are more equivocal and oblique: a study of the various versions and working drafts of *I'm Dying Laughing* would usefully include consideration of the ways they figure in these letters. It was the case, remember, that she more than once transposed other people's letters

into her fiction: her father's in *The Man Who Loved Children*, and Ruth Blake's in *Letty Fox*.

The 1942 sequence unfolds with Christina explaining her stratagems for sprucing up their flat, the prospects of letting it, her clothes, her failure to win a Guggenheim Fellowship, progress with the novel (ever hopeful that tomorrow she will turn the corner). Bill responds to her various anxieties, often in the form of an ingenious and reassuring calculation. But she also looks out for him, for example quietly suggesting on 15 May that he should not expect everything to happen at once. His letters are full of the excitement of fresh scenes and situations (his first letter from Santa Fé amusingly describes the streets full of Gary Coopers), information and opinion, along with explicit love talk, and discussion of the logistics of the divorce (which doesn't happen for a number of years). He is curiously guileless, versatile and hard-working, able to turn out a movie 'treatment' overnight. He was also working on *We Are the Makers of Dreams*, his novel about the publishing industry, though it did not come out until 1959. As the date of her departure, often postponed, finally approaches, he gives her endless fond and fussy advice about the long train journey west — when to buy food, how much to tip. The final letter is dated 28 June, when Christina is at last setting off.

Christina Stead,
photographed by Ron Geering

THE PARTICULAR NARRATIVE pattern of this episode recurs in other sequences of the letters. There is a substantial sequence late in 1946, which parallels this one, when Bill set sail for Europe, yet again to seek their fortunes, while Christina packs up the New York apartment and prepares to join him. The final group of letters in 1968, when Bill has already set off on his last journey, is in part a reprise, but with the significant variations that this time he is not able to write back, and that they will not be making yet another fresh start together.

Christina had been ill with bronchitis, and unable to visit him in hospital in central London. Hardship had made her more querulous, and she was clearly in denial about the gravity of his condition (he had cancer of the throat and stomach), proposing that he should convalesce with friends in the country. Her own improved health and spirits are apparent in the characteristic drollery of the first of this sequence, dated 5 January 1968:

This never happened, that I didn't write to you. But I expected to see you today. Now it is Monday — I hope. I hope by Monday you will have got on to that good old Scots diet, porridge. It will not interest you to know that I asked my dear old aide Mr. Saunders to bring me in some cornflakes for breakfast — a coincidence. I have been off my oats. I wrote the requisite note to the S[wiss] B[anking] C[ompany] this morning. First time round, though fuzzy, (my first literary effort for a long spell but what a good one, 'please deposit 1200 pds. to my account' —) I got the date right. But I had to do it again, everything else went wrong.

Yet as the days go on, through her chat about household doings swells the refrain of what Bill means to her. Her letter of 9 January ends:

I miss you, I need you — there isn't much here without you. Life seems a poor thing, just the little incidents. I shall be very glad and happy to see you. You know I need you, dumb as I am. With love,
Chris xxxxxx

She repeats these sentiments in her letter of the following day, 10 January:

I miss you dreadfully. It's a long time. What else have I, love? You know I don't care for the accidents of the writing career. Writing to me, anyhow, was never a career. Love, love.

The last of the letters is dated 11 January. It ends with a joking remark, and a plaintive tribute: does she begin to acknowledge that he is mortally ill?

I am running out of envelopes — so have to get out, you see. I hope you'll be around here soon. What have I done with my life — eh? — but one thing — you? The rest flies down the wind.
Lots of love,
Christina

Bill died on 2 February 1968.

FROM THE EARLIEST surviving of her letters to him, to the last, Christina proclaims the depth and intensity of her love. To identify the recurrent trope is not to imply that these protestations are anything less than heartfelt. Such identifications, however, serve as a reminder that a letter, like any text, is not to be taken literally, and is to be read in accordance with its generic conventions. After all, the letter is as formal a genre as the sonnet. It is an overtly functional genre, an extension of daily life, intended for communication in particular circumstances. Although a letter might not present the particular challenge of a composition in fourteen lines,

with a few possible rhyme schemes, there are conventions, if no longer the prescriptive rhetorical ones of antiquity. Date and place of inscription are provided, there is an opening and a closing salutation, the message, and a signature. Yet the letter is also characterised, Béatrice Didier observes, by 'fragmentation, discontinuity, the absence of development and formal arrangement'. And as Martine Reid points out, there is 'an "internal contradiction" between the letter's implied "spontaneity, naturalness, and originality" and the inevitable artifice of its form'. While such a contradiction is abundantly evident in the letters exchanged by Stead and Blake, there is a further quiddity in this case. For these professional writers, each having a particular affinity with the impromptu, the gap between a 'normal' or private and a professional or public activity is significantly closed in letter-writing. The question of how these letters are to be read is intricate, and enticing.

For in the love letters of Christina Stead and William J. Blake, we have more than simply a collection of letters, we have a correspondence. The implication of reciprocity always attends a correspondence, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (which Christina declared to be one of her favourite books) testifies: 'The action or fact of corresponding, or answering to each other in fitness or mutual adaptation.' The definition strikes me as curiously appropriate in this situation, where the whole is certainly greater than the sum of its parts.