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INTRODUCTION

by Daphne Patai

For nearly fifty years, the identity of 'Murray Constantine', pseudonymous author of *Swastika Night*, has been concealed from public view. Only in the early 1980s, in response to persistent inquiries, did the novel's original publishers acknowledge that 'Murray Constantine' was in fact Katharine Burdekin. Born in Derbyshire in 1896, Burdekin died in 1963 having published ten novels between 1922 and 1940.

Intensely interested in politics, history, psychology and religion, Burdekin experimented with a number of literary structures, yet her novels, whether published pseudonymously or under her own name, are clearly the work of one hand, one creative intelligence in the process of development. Though Burdekin's feminist critique appears in her realistic fiction and even in her children's book, she excelled above all in the creation of utopian fiction, and the special vantage point afforded by the imaginative leap into other 'societies' resulted in her two most important books: *Swastika Night* (1937) and *Proud Man* (1934). When these novels first appeared, contemporary reviewers tended to miss Burdekin's important critique of what we today call gender ideology and sexual politics, though on occasion they noted her feminist sympathies, which, indeed, led some to guess that 'Murray Constantine' was a woman. With this reprint of *Swastika Night*, Burdekin's works may finally begin to find their audience.

Like fictional utopias ('good places'), dystopias ('bad places') provide a framework for levelling criticisms at the writer's own

historical moment. But in imagining in *Swastika Night* a Europe after seven centuries of Nazi domination, Burdekin was doing something more than sounding a warning about the dangers of fascism. Burdekin's novel is important for us today because her analysis of fascism is formulated in terms that go beyond Hitler and the specifics of his time. Arguing that fascism is not qualitatively but only quantitatively different from the everyday reality of male dominance, a reality that polarises males and females in terms of gender roles, Burdekin satirises 'masculine' and 'feminine' modes of behaviour. Nazi ideology, from this point of view, is the culmination of what Burdekin calls the 'cult of masculinity'. It is this connection, along with the strong argument against the cult of masculinity, that set Burdekin's novel apart from the many other anti-fascist dystopias produced in the 1930s and 40s.¹

Burdekin envisages Germany and England in the seventh century of the Hitlerian millennium. The world has been divided into two static spheres – the Nazi Empire (Europe and Africa) and the equally militaristic Japanese Empire (Asia, Australia, and the Americas). In the Nazi Empire Hitler is venerated as a god, exploded from the head of his father, God the Thunderer, and thereafter undefiled by any contaminating contact with women. A 'Reduction of Women' has occurred by which women have been driven to an animal-like state of ignorance and apathy, and are kept purely for their indispensable breeding function. All books, records and even monuments from the past have been destroyed in an effort to make the official Nazi 'reality' the only possible one. A kind of feudal society is in force throughout the Nazi Empire, with German knights as the local authorities, indoctrinators of a Teutonic mythology whose spurious nature has long since been forgotten. The women are kept in cages in segregated quarters, their Reduction complemented by the exaltation of men. This situation has led to homosexual attachments among males (Burdekin suggests that male homosexuality may involve embracing, not rejecting, the male gender role), though procreation is a civic duty for German men. Christians, having wiped out all the Jews at the beginning of the Nazi era, are now

themselves loathed, considered Untouchable.

Seeing the relationship between gender hierarchy and class structure, Burdekin, in her earlier novel *Proud Man*, had written that English society (which that book's fully evolved narrator labels 'subhuman') is divided horizontally by a privilege of class and vertically by a privilege of sex. In *Swastika Night* she further suggests that the sop of gender dominance ensures the co-operation of men who are themselves the victims of domination: no matter what their status, they are granted the assurance of still being superior to women.² The German men, meanwhile, embrace the Hitlerian creed, which includes the words: 'And I believe in pride, in courage, in violence, in brutality, in bloodshed, in ruthlessness, and all other soldierly and heroic virtues.' If this is satire, it is also an accurate representation of Nazi ideology and only a slight exaggeration of a masculine gender identity considered normal in many parts of the world.

Burdekin focuses on two essential aspects of the masculine ideology depicted in *Swastika Night*: women's lack of control over their own bodies and over their offspring. To these correspond the two fundamental institutions of the novel's Hitlerian society: men's right to rape and the law dictating Removal of the Man-Child from his mother's care at eighteen months, so that he may be raised by and among men.

Understanding that rape is in its essence an assault on female autonomy, Burdekin articulates the logic of rape within a male supremacist society. In a traditional sexually-polarised society, women challenge male supremacy by their right of rejection. The female's selection of a sexual partner, 'natural' in much of the animal world, becomes a perpetual affront to human males' vanity. By depriving women of this right men transform them into mere objects to be used solely according to men's wishes. Given the cult of masculinity, of course men could not permit women to continue to exercise this right of rejection. Hence the institutionalisation of rape as a routine practice, a constant reminder to women of their lack of importance and autonomy. Men's obligations are only to one another; thus women in *Swastika Night* are free from rape if and when they wear an

armlet marking them as one man's possession – and, indeed, this is their sole 'freedom'. Power over women, not sexual pleasure, is the issue – for only boys are considered beautiful, desirable, lovable. The women, for their part, are indoctrinated from childhood with their own insignificance and their proper role in accepting men's will. The logic of the social rules in *Swastika Night* is unrelenting. Women must not know that more girl children are needed, that the disproportionate number of male births is a danger to the society: '... if the women once realised all this, what could stop them developing a small thin thread of self-respect? If a woman could rejoice publicly in the birth of a girl, Hitlerdom would start to crumble.' And, of course, neither men nor women have any true knowledge of the past, any historical memory prior to the advent of Hitlerism.

In *Proud Man* Burdekin criticises Adlous Huxley's *Brave New World* for its assumption that human beings would be the same even under totally different conditions. She herself does not make that mistake. Her women, in *Swastika Night*, have indeed become ignorant and fearful animals; their misery is their only recognisable human feature. Burdekin is also careful to show even her positive male characters as seriously flawed by their environment. There are no simple heroes in her book, but there are men struggling toward understanding and, with the help of knowledge, each is able to overcome his conditioning to some extent.

The novel's protagonist, the Englishman Alfred, is a figure destined, like his historical namesake, to contribute to his country's freedom. But Alfred is emphatically not a warrior. Burdekin had published a pacifist novel, *Quiet Ways*, in 1930, in which she attacked the very idea of manliness as dependent upon violence and military prowess. In *Proud Man* Burdekin defines a soldier as a 'killing male', and in *Swastika Night* she continues the attack on militarism through Alfred's opposition to the ideology of Nazism. He realises that violence, brutality and physical courage can never make 'a man', but only ageless boys. To be a man, in his view, requires a soul. Therefore, liberation from Hitlerism, in *Swastika Night*, cannot come through violence and brutality, the 'soldierly virtues'.

Victor Gollancz, the original publisher of *Swastika Night*, added a note to the novel when it was reissued in July 1940 as a Left Book Club selection (it was one of the very few works of fiction the Club ever distributed). Perhaps because the pacifist impulses at work in *Swastika Night* would not have met with much sympathy once the war against Hitler had started, Gollancz included in his comments the following words: 'While the author has not in the least changed his mind that the Nazi idea is evil, and that we must fight the Nazis on land, at sea, in the air and in ourselves, he has changed his mind about the Nazi *power* to make the *world* evil ...' This upbeat message, however much needed at the time, dilutes and misrepresents the tenor of *Swastika Night*, for the book's lasting contribution is precisely its transcendence of the specifics of Nazi ideology and its location of Nazism, and militarism in general, within the broader spectrum of the 'cult of masculinity'. Hitler did not invent the concepts of inequality and domination, whether racial or sexual. He merely carried them one logical step further, and Burdekin began her critique there.

Complementing the emphasis on the 'cult of masculinity' is Burdekin's analysis of women's complicity in their own subjugation. The German knight von Hess, although he possesses the secret manuscript that gives him some knowledge of the past, still believes in women's inherent inferiority. Analysing their acquiescence, he concludes: 'Women *are* nothing, except an incarnate desire to please men.' Von Hess is thus shown to reproduce, at the same time as he criticises, the views of von Wied, a scholar-knight who, centuries before, had proved that women were not human. The ideas attributed to von Wied in *Swastika Night* closely resemble those of the pre-fascist Viennese ideologue Otto Weininger whose 1903 book *Sex and Character* develops an extraordinary catalogue of purported female characteristics. Drawing on Plato and Aristotle, Weininger sees the male principle as active, as form, while the female is mere 'passive matter', a nothingness that needs to be shaped by man, hence woman's famous submissive 'nature'. Woman is negation, meaninglessness, and man therefore fears her, Weininger writes; she is possessed by her

sexual organs and only comes in existence through sexual union with man. To Weininger, who considers sexuality immoral, woman thus keeps man from attaining his true moral existence. He concludes that fecundity is loathsome and that the education of mankind must be taken out of the hands of the mother. Equating women with Jews, Weininger contrasts them with men and Aryans, but though the Jews are the lowest of the low, he writes, in words echoed in the Hitlerian creed in *Swastika Night*, 'the woman of the highest standard is immeasurably beneath the man of the lowest standard'.

Just as the knight von Hess, in *Swastika Night*, rejects some of von Wied's theories, so Alfred is able to reject some of what von Hess tells him. Evolving his own explanation for women's acquiescence in their Reduction, Alfred decides that women's lack of development is the result of their crime in not valuing themselves: they believed the male sex was not just different, but better. Hence they accepted the patterns imposed on them by men. The world's values are masculine, he thinks, because there have been no women; that is, no true women not deformed by the demands of masculinity. Women's submission is not due to their nature, Alfred realises, but rather to the fact that women have never had two things that are available to men. One is sexual invulnerability; the other is pride in their sex, 'which is the humblest boy's birthright'. Women, Alfred concludes, need to rediscover their own 'soul-power'.

Burdekin sheds further light on the origins of women's acquiescence to their Reduction in the analogy developed within the novel between the political and the personal, the public and the private spheres. The Nazi Empire treats its subject people the way Nazi men treat women – as objects to be conquered and subjugated. In describing how the Empire governed, by inferiorising rather than assimilating the subject peoples, von Hess says: 'Exclusion is an excellent way of making men feel inferior.' Although *Swastika Night* only hints at the causes of the 'cult of masculinity', Burdekin addressed the issue more directly in her earlier novel, *Proud Man*. In this work, which makes profound criticism of conventional gender ideology, Burdekin traces the root cause of patriarchy back to

the male need to redress the natural balance that gives women greater biological importance than men.

Like Karen Horney, whose essays on feminine psychology were available in English in the 1920s, Burdekin sees the male imposition on women of a devalued social identity as resulting from a fundamental fear and jealousy of women's procreative powers. This explains men's insistence on women's inferior artistic (and other) abilities, the narrator of *Proud Man* asserts. Indeed, men's pride is an uneasy one, 'not founded on a solid biological fact'. Hence also the more profound training in appropriate gender-role behaviour that boys undergo – based on an anxiety that they will not develop into proper 'men' without an enforced separation from women – in single-sex schools, clubs, sports, and, above all, the military. The charm of war, Burdekin writes, is due to its exclusion of females. In *Proud Man* Burdekin distinguishes between gender and sex (to use our terminology) and concludes that men and women must be transformed: 'They must stop being masculine and feminine, and become male and female. Masculinity and femininity are the artificial differences between men and women. Maleness and femaleness are the real differences ...'

In their tone and vocabulary, Burdekin's arguments in *Proud Man* have an extraordinarily contemporary ring – a ring perhaps less apparent in *Swastika Night* when we read it today since its overt political situation belongs to our past. Burdekin speaks of the phallus as the guarantor of civic power; but, unlike Karen Horney, she never attributes to it any actual superiority. It is the social significance of the phallus that counts. This psychology finds its fulfillment in the nightmare scenario of *Swastika Night*, in which phallic pride has become the organising principle of society. Burdekin strips bare the disguises of adult 'manliness' (a pejorative term in many of her writings) and shows us men forever affirming their masculinity, and women, reduced to female animals, ever embodying a reassuring contrast with that glorious masculinity. She thus politicises a comment made by a thwarted female character in H.G. Wells' novel *The Passionate Friends* (1913). Complaining of the sexual specialisation forced on women, this character writes:

'Womankind isn't human, it's reduced human.'

Burdekin's perspective resembles that of the American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman who, in her feminist utopia *Herland* (1915), has her male narrator slowly develop the conviction that 'those "feminine" charms we are so fond of are not feminine at all, but mere reflected masculinity – developed to please us because they had to please us.' A similar observation also occurs in Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own* (1929). With bitter irony Woolf writes: 'Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glory of all our wars would be unknown.'

Although Burdekin, in her earlier works, was already attuned to the problems of gender ideology, Hitler's rise to power apparently helped crystallise in her mind the dangers of conventional notions of masculinity. To a feminist following events in Nazi Germany (and, before that, in Mussolini's Italy), the logic of fascist gender ideology must have stood out. Nazi statements about women were clear enough. In 1932, a year before the Nazis destroyed all branches of the women's movement, the Reichskomitee of Working Women made an appeal to Germany's working-class women. Published in *Die Rote Fahne* (The Red Flag), a German Communist newspaper, the appeal denounced Nazi brutality and called upon women to engage in anti-fascist action, saying: 'The Nazis demand the death sentence for abortion. They want to turn you into compliant birth-machines. You are to be servants and maids for men. Your human dignity is to be trampled underfoot.'³ Winifred Holtby, in her 1934 book *Women and a Changing Civilization*, also warned her readers about the attack on reason implicit in the development of fascism in both Germany and England. She concluded: 'The enemies of reason are inevitably the opponents of "equal rights".'

Hitler's view of the proper role of women was originally set forth in *Mein Kampf* (1924): they were to reproduce the race. Elaborating on this in his 8 September 1934 speech before National Socialist women, Hitler argued that the 'natural'

division of labour between men and women involved a harmonious complementarity between the greater world (male) and the smaller world (female). 'The program of our National Socialist women's movement contains only one point – and this is: the child.' Political life, Hitler argued, was 'unworthy' of women; hence Nazi policy excluded them from it.⁴ Unlike Burdekin's scenario in *Swastika Night*, however, Nazi policy encouraged the health and well-being of racially desirable women. Promotion of motherhood took the form of a series of laws providing for maternity benefits and care as well as for marriage incentives – for those people who could produce 'hereditarily valuable' offspring for the nation.⁵

Burdekin's special insight was to join the various elements of Nazi policy into one ideological whole. She saw that it is but a small step from the male apotheosis of women as mothers to their degradation to mere breeding animals. In both cases women are reduced to a biological function out of which is constructed an entire social identity. And she linked this reduction to the routine practices of patriarchal society. Joseph Goebbels, Nazi propaganda minister, had articulated the gender ideology of Nazi Germany in his speech on 11 February 1934: 'The National Socialist movement is in its nature a masculine movement ... While man must give to life the great lines and forms, it is the task of women out of her inner fullness and inner eagerness to fill these lines and forms with colour ...'⁶

A year after the publication of *Swastika Night*, Virginia Woolf, in *Three Guineas* (1938) also connected the tyranny of the fascist state with the tyranny of patriarchal society. Recent studies of fascism have further corroborated the connection. Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, for example, in an article on female sexuality in fascist ideology argues that one cannot talk about fascism without at the same time talking about patriarchy. Her analysis locates the originality of fascism 'not in any capacity to generate a new ideology, but in its conjunctural transformation and recombination of what already exists'.⁷

A further aspect of *Swastika Night* of interest to contemporary readers is its resemblance to George Orwell's *Nineteen*

Eighty-Four. There is no direct evidence that Orwell was acquainted with *Swastika Night*, published twelve years before his novel; only the internal similarities suggest that Orwell, an inveterate borrower, borrowed also from Burdekin. As it happens, Victor Gollancz, publisher of *Swastika Night*, was also Orwell's first publisher, and Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* was itself a Left Book Club selection, in 1937, just as *Swastika Night* was in 1940.

Both *Nineteenth Eighty-Four* and *Swastika Night* depict totalitarian régimes in which individual thought has been all but eliminated and towards this end all information about the past, and even memory itself, have been destroyed – much more thoroughly in Burdekin's novel than in Orwell's. In both books the world is divided into distinct empires in perpetual and static competition. There is a similar hierarchy in each novel, and the most despised groups (proles; women) are regarded as brute animals. The hierarchical extremes alone are to some extent free of domination. The knights and the Christians are not subject to constant search in *Swastika Night* – the knights because of their important position, the Christians because they are Untouchable. Similarly, in *Nineteenth Eighty-Four*, Inner Party members can turn off their telescreens, and the proles are not obliged to have them installed, for the proles simply do not matter. And, in keeping with the very concept of hierarchy, in both societies the upper echelons have material privileges denied to others.

Furthermore, in each novel there is a rebellious protagonist who is approached by a man in a position of power (O'Brien, the Inner Party member; von Hess, the knight). This powerful man becomes the mediator through whom the protagonist's tendency to rebel is initially channelled, and in each case he gives the protagonist a secret book and hence knowledge. In both novels, also, a photograph provides a key piece of evidence about the past. Winston Smith and Alfred each attempt to teach a lover/friend (Julia; Hermann) about the past by reading from the secret book, but meet with resistance or indifference. In both cases a curious detail occurs: Julia and Hermann sleep while the book is read aloud, a mark of their

lack of both interest and intellectual development.

As in *Swastika Night*, in *Nineteenth Eighty-Four* the secret opposition is called a Brotherhood. Despite the apolitical inclinations of Hermann and Julia, each is drawn into the protagonist's rebellion and ultimately destroyed by it. In both novels, too, there are official enemies to be hated: Goldstein in *Nineteenth Eighty-Four*; the four arch-friends, enemies of Hitler, in *Swastika Night*; and the eternal mythical leaders, Big Brother and Hitler, to be adored. Finally, as if in enactment of the theories of Wilhelm Reich, in both novels a distortion of sexuality occurs: in *Nineteenth Eighty-Four* by the prohibition of sex for pleasure; in *Swastika Night* by the degradation and Reduction of women which has made love and sexual attraction a prerogative of men. And in both novels sex is encouraged for the sake of procreation, but only with certain people.

Orwell gave names to phenomena that also appear in *Swastika Night*; indeed, the main contribution of *Nineteenth Eighty-Four* to modern culture probably resides in these names: 'Newspeak' is Orwell's term for the reduction of language that is designed to inhibit thought. In *Swastika Night*, too, concepts and words have been lost. 'Marriage' and 'socialism' are such items, and the idea of women as proud and valuable human beings. 'Doublethink' is Orwell's term for the ability to hold contradictory thoughts in one's mind simultaneously without experiencing the contradiction, and by extension it refers to the ability to censor one's own thoughts and memories – as the women do in *Swastika Night* when they negate the evidence of their own senses in favour of the official ideology they have absorbed.

But Orwell cannot and does not provide a name for the key factor that explains the Party's preoccupation with domination, power, and violence: these are elements in the gender ideology that Burdekin labels the 'cult of masculinity'. By her ability to name this phenomenon and analyse its workings in the world, Burdekin gives her depiction of a totalitarian régime a critical dimension totally lacking in Orwell's novel. *Swastika Night* and *Nineteenth Eighty-Four* are both primarily about men and their behaviour. Burdekin addresses this explicitly in her exposé of

the cult of masculinity. But Orwell, taking the male as the model for the human species, seems to believe that he is depicting innate characteristics of human beings. Thus the despair one senses at the end of Orwell's novel and the hope that still exists at the end of Burdekin's are linked to the degree of awareness that each writer has of gender roles and power politics as social constructs.⁸ Orwell resolutely refuses, throughout his works, to question a gender ideology that he fully supports. Therefore, he can only, helplessly, attribute the pursuit of power to 'human nature' itself. Burdekin, by contrast, is able to see the preoccupation with power in the context of a gender polarisation that can degenerate into the world of *Swastika Night*, with its hypertrophied masculinity on the one hand and its Reduction of women on the other. Tracing the relationship between these two extremes, as well as their continuity with the gender stereotypes of traditional 'civilised' society, Burdekin makes a resounding critique of the dangers of male supremacy.

Notes

- 1 See Andy Croft's important article 'Worlds Without End Foisted Upon the Future – Some Antecedents of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*' in Christopher Norris (ed.), *Inside the Myth: Orwell, Views from the Left*, London 1984, pp. 183-216. Croft considers *Swastika Night* 'undoubtedly the most sophisticated and original of all the many anti-fascist dystopias of the late 1930s and 1940s'.
- 2 Deborah Kutenplon, 'The Connections: Militarism, Sex Roles and Christianity in *The Rebel Passion* and *Swastika Night*', unpublished paper (1984).
- 3 Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen, *Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in Documents*, Vol. II, 1880-1950, Stanford 1983, p. 383.
- 4 Ibid., pp. 377-8.
- 5 Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Society*, New York 1975, pp. 41ff.
- 6 Cited in Clifford Kirkpatrick, *Germany: It's Women and Family Life*, Indianapolis 1938, p. 116.
- 7 Jane Caplan, 'Introduction to Female Sexuality in Fascist Ideology', *Feminist Review*, No. 1, p. 62.

- 8 For a more detailed discussion of *Swastika Night* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, see my 'Orwell's Despair, Burdekin's Hope: Gender and Power in Dystopia', *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 85-95, in which some of the comments in this introduction originally appear; and also my *Orwell Mystique: A Study of Male Ideology*, Amherst 1984, pp. 253-63.

For further information on Katharine Burdekin, see Daphne Patai's afterword to *The End of This Day's Business* (Feminist Press, 1989) and her foreword and afterword to *Proud Man* (Feminist Press, 1993).

Other works by Katharine Burdekin

Anna Colquhoun

The Reasonable Hope

The Burning Ring

Quiet Ways

The Children's Country (Kay Burdekin)

The Rebel Passion (Kay Burdekin)

The Devil, Poor Devil (Murray Constantine)

Proud Man (Murray Constantine)

Swastika Night (Murray Constantine)

Venus in Scorpio (Murray Constantine and Margaret Goldsmith)

The End of This Day's Business