"On the Knife-edge of Time": Katherine Burdekin and Naomi Mitchison

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Abstract:
Demonstrating direct links between different works is not the intention here, although some clearly do exist and are able to be explored. The objective is to understand the political context of the writing of the time, not from a perspective that examines women writers from a rubric of male-created and dominated modernism but from the perspective of the women writers themselves and their own understanding of the relationship between gender and war. However ground-breaking the three-volume work of Gilbert and Gubar may have been, however seemingly encompassing the two volumes of Bonnie Kime Scott's Refiguring Modernism, the projects depend a great deal on the vision that male writers have of women and women writers. With a new language provided by the war, men saw women as the enemy, but their misogyny was grounded in an historical antipathy that many women writers of the period comprehended to various degrees of sophistication and demonstrated through various kinds of work, particularly prose and particularly polemical prose.

> *Let us try to drag up into consciousness the subconscious Hitlerism that holds us down. It is the desire for aggression; the desire to dominate and enslave. Even in the darkness we can see that made visible. We can see shop windows blazing; and women gazing; painted women; dressed-up women; women with crimson lips and crimson fingernails. They are slaves who are trying to enslave. If we could free ourselves from slavery we should free men from tyranny. Hitlers are bred by slaves.*
> Virginia Woolf, "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid"

1 Paul Fussell's landmark work, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, unintentionally establishes a kind of pre-Hegelian mind set that he claims dominates thought after the First World War. Beginning by naming one manifestation of that mind set, "The *Versus* Habit," Fussell expands the notion:

> The physical confrontation between "us" and "them" is an obvious figure of gross dichotomy. But less predictably the mode of gross dichotomy came to dominate perception and expression elsewhere, encouraging finally what we can call the modern versus habit: one thing opposed to another, not with some Hegelian hope of synthesis involving a dissolution of both extremes (that would suggest "a negotiated peace," which is anathema), but with a sense that one of the poles embodies so wicked a deficiency or flaw or perversion that its total submission is called for. [. . .] But with the landscape, the former domain of "beauty", ravaged and torn, and with "fear" no longer the thrill of the old Sublime but a persistent physical terror, the time-honored nineteenth-century synthesis is no longer thinkable. (79)

Under the sub-heading "The Persistent Enemy," Fussell establishes a binary paradigm as the font of modernism and suggests that in "some special ways the modern world chooses to put things do appear profoundly affected by the sense of adversary proceedings to which the war accustomed both those who had fought and those who had not" (105). He traces "frantically

clever displacement[s] of the idea of war," in universities like the one attended by Christopher Isherwood (106). What he says of Pound's "truffle-snuffing for enemies" is then expanded to include the likes of T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis and D.H. Lawrence, so that "The Great War Staff and 'home-front' merge to assume the shape of the common enemy, persisting as club-man, don, divine, editor, industrialist, and politician" (112). In this section of the book, Fussell frames modernism as founded on the essence of adversarial relationships and he ends the section with a quotation from Jung's interpretation of a dream: "The happenings in the dream suggested that the war, which in the outer world had taken place some years before, was not yet over, but was continuing to be fought within the psyche" (113).

2 What Fussell neglects to mention is how the common enemy, possibly the predominant enemy in the male-created post-war psyche who had become the focus image of the Home Front, was woman. Certainly, the modernisms of Pound, Lewis, Eliot and Lawrence are full of misogynies now more clearly understood for what they are: a pervasively common position against women that is the founding mythology of modernism so clearly enunciated by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar.[1]

3 The decade following the war was viewed by many as a time of possibility, certainly a time when one was forced to register change, whether to the good or ill. In contrast, through the 1930s, with the backlash against the advances women had made, the economic uncertainties and, finally, the threat of Fascism, the experiences of the First World War were revisited and rewritten. Many women writers integrated that experience into texts in a way they had not in the 1920s.[2] Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* is an obvious instance of that impulse.

4 The work of the 1930s that explores the issues of Fascism and pacifism, gender and war, far exceeding others in the complexity of its thought and perspicacity, is Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*. It is a difficult text, one which, as Roger Poole suggests in his "Preface" to *The Unknown Virginia Woolf*, needs to be explored more fully. "[I]ncreased attention to the textual nature of Woolf's thinking" he comments,

> is accompanied by an awareness that the ideas she was proposing at the end of her life, those in *Three Guineas* and in *Between the Acts* particularly, were so irreceivable that they are recorded only in a half-occluded form. It will take some time and ingenuity to find adequate ways of recuperating this later work, in which she emerges as a political thinker and one, moreover, who analyses the causes of militarism and war in the detours of the male psyche. As we move into a world of ever more bitter and more localised and more closely defined nationalism, Woolf's account of the origins of war

[1] See Lesley Higgins's *The Modernist Cult of Ugliness: Aesthetic and Gender Politics* for the most trenchant and informative work on the dependence on gender and misogyny in the construction of modernism.
[2] The backlash is articulated most thoroughly in Naomi Mitchison's *Home* and Winifred Holtby's *Women*.

needs to be unravelled and faced. (xxvii-xxviii)

The Years needs to be added to the later works Poole discusses, but at the same time the subversive nature of *Three Guineas* cannot be over-estimated.

5 At the same time, contemporary readings of *Three Guineas* could be enriched if the work of other women of the period who contributed to Woolf's thought are examined and credited. Demonstrating direct links between different works is not the intention here, although some clearly do exist and are able to be explored. The objective is to understand the political context of the writing of the time, not from a perspective that examines women writers from a rubric of male-created and dominated modernism but from the perspective of the women writers themselves and their own understanding of the relationship between gender and war. However ground-breaking the three-volume work of Gilbert and Gubar may have been, however seemingly encompassing the two volumes of Bonnie Kime Scott's *Refiguring Modernism*, the projects depend a great deal on the vision that male writers have of women and women writers. With a new language provided by the war, men saw women as the enemy, but their misogyny was grounded in an historical antipathy that many women writers of the period comprehended to various degrees of sophistication and demonstrated through various kinds of work, particularly prose and particularly polemical prose. Women were not necessarily engaged in the men's battle, however, and although they may have addressed themselves to the battle in which they saw the men engaged, it was with an eye on the larger issues that were articulated by the battle. As a result, in retrospect the men seem to have embarked on a battle with phantoms, following the metaphor of Jung's dream. With the rise of Fascism, the women attempted to encompass larger issues than the so-called sex war.

6 In other words, Gilbert and Gubar's umbrella title of the three-volume *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* is more accurate than they intend. The premise of their text is well-presented in the subtitle of the first volume, *The War of the Words*, for by the 1930s that war, if it had existed at all, was over for the women writers of the time, even those with little or no political consciousness. It is possible that the retreat into male pseudonyms[3], the desire for an answer in pacifism to the threat of the oncoming war, the increase in polemical/political writing--all speak the language of defeat in the face of the unconquerable: Fascism. During the 1930s, then, women writers disinherited from a future they had barely glimpsed in the 1920s were taking the position of the outsider that Woolf calls

[3] Storm Jameson, for example, published three novels under two different male pseudonyms in the 1930s. Although she frequently wrote in quite different styles, in no other decade did she publish under a male pseudonym. She continued to published a variety of books until into the 1970s under her own name.

for as the only political position available to women by the time she published *Three Guineas* in 1938.

7 Katherine Burdekin, who wrote under a male pseudonym during the 1930s after having published six books under her own name in the 1920s, is one of the women who have been retrieved from the dust-heap of women writers forgotten and lost from history. Daphne Patai, who wrote the Introduction to the Lawrence and Wishart 1985 re-issue of *Swastika Night*, has brought Burdekin to light through her work on George Orwell (see Patai's *The Orwell Mystique: A Study of Male Ideology).*[4] Patai makes a convincing case for Orwell having read *Swastika Night* and for Orwell, "an inveterate borrower," having used much of the dystopia constructed in that novel for his *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published twelve years later. Both, Patai says, "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"; both have a "rebellious protagonist who is approached by a man in a position of power [. . .] who becomes the mediator through whom the protagonist's tendency to rebel is initially channeled, and in each case he gives the protagonist a secret book and hence knowledge"; in both "the secret opposition is called a Brotherhood;" and in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* "Orwell gave names to phenomena that also appear in *Swastika Night*" (xii-xiii). Here, however, the comparison ends, and as Patai has pointed out in "Orwell's Despair, Burdekin's Hope: Gender and Power in Dystopia," "*Swastika Night*, like Burdekin's other work, is a strongly feminist text, while *1984* [sic], like Orwell's other work, is androcentric and misogynistic" (Patai, "Orwell's Despair, Burdekin's Hope" 85). As Patai demonstrates quite convincingly, Orwell's novel is far more simplistic and, in the end, less realistic in its dystopic portrait. Orwell, Patai argues,

> 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. (Patai, "Introduction", *Swastika Night* xiii)

That critical dimension, again, is found in Burdekin's chilling portrait of the success of Nazism, seven hundred years after it has conquered Europe and half the world while the Japanese hold power in the other half.[5]

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[4] See also a letter from Gilbert Bonifas who quotes a letter to himself from Geoffrey Gorer, a friend of Orwell's, who says, "I can think you can assume that I did give/lend him a copy [of *Swastika Night*]" (*Notes and Queries*, March 1987, 59).

[5] Elizabeth Russell says that in *Swastika Night*, "the Nazis are competing with the Japanese for world power" (21). However, what is more significant is not that they are competing but that they are on a constant state of war

8 Whatever *Swastika Night* has in common with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the differences are more compelling. The novel begins with a service in the Holy Hitler chapel, an ordinary monthly worship:

> *I believe,* sang all the men and boys and the Knight in unison, *in God the thunderer, who made this physical earth on which men march in their mortal bodies, and in His Heaven where all heroes are, and in His Son our Holy Adolf Hitler, the Only Man. Who was, not begotten, not born of a woman, but Exploded!* (A terrific crash from the organ and the drums, and all right hands raised in the Salute acknowledged that tremendous miracle.) *From the Head of His Father, he the perfect, the untainted Man-Child, whom we, mortals and defiled in our birth and in our conception, must ever worship and praise. Heil Hitler. Who in our need, in Germany's need, in the world's need; for our sake, for Germany's sake, for the world's sake; came down from the Mountain, the Holy Mountain, the German Mountain, the nameless one, darkness then, in sin and chaos and impurity, ringed round by devils, by Lenin, by Stalin, by Roehm, by Karl Barth, the four arch-fiends, whose necks He set under His Holy Heel, grinding them into the dust.* (With a savagery so familiar that it could hardly be called savagery all the male voices growled out the old words.)*Who, when our Salvation was accomplished, went into the Forest, the Holy Forest, the German Forest, the nameless one; and was there reunited to His Father, God the Thunderer, so that we men, the mortals, the defiled at birth, could see His Face no more.* (The music was minor, the voices piano and harmonised, with a sweet and telling effect after the long unison.) *And I believe that when all things are accomplished and the last heathen man is enlisted in His Holy Army, that Adolf Hitler our God will come again in martial glory to the sound of guns and aeroplanes, to the sound of the trumpets and drums.And I believe in the Two Arch-Heroes, Goering and Goebbels, who were found worthy even to be His Familiar Friends. And I believe in pride, in courage, in violence, in brutality, in bloodshed, in ruthlessness, and all other soldierly and heroic virtues. Heil Hitler.* (Burdekin, *Swastika Night* 5-6)

This perversion of the Apostles' Creed begins the novel with startling brutality, presenting a worship of Hitler by referring parodically to a Christian affirmation of faith. The expansion of the formalities of Christianity continues with the Knight who is leading the service sustaining the rote language ritual, "reading in his pleasant Knightly German the fundamental immutable laws of Hitler Society" (7). Much of what the Knight is professing is a reminder of the hierarchical nature of the society in which they live:

> *As woman is above a worm,*
> *So is a man above a woman.*
> *As a woman is above a worm,*
> *So is a worm above a Christian.*

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readiness and, in a sense, complicit in sustaining mirroring structures of power. What supports the cult of masculinity is war readiness, a consciousness of a state of war, rather than actual war, which Burdekin presents as "the hope of war" (*Swastika Night* 76). Fussell points us to Anthony Burgess's 1962 dystopia, *The Wanting Seed*, where there is a constant state of war as a mechanism to control the people by having them in a continuous state of war excitement and to eliminate excess population and "such anti-social elements as female 'cretinous over-producers' and male 'corner boys and [. . .] criminals'" (222). The main character escapes the slaughter, but only after having realised that the enemy is not the "Orientals" they were told they were going to fight, but women. Fussell makes no comment.

and

As a man is above a woman,
So is a Nazi above any foreign Hitlerian.
As a Nazi is above a foreign Hitlerian,
So is a Knight above a Nazi.
As a Knight is above a Nazi,
So is Der Fuehrer (whom may Hitler bless),
Above all Knights,
Even above the Inner Ring of Ten.
And as Der Fuehrer is above all Knights,
So is God, out Lord Hitler, above Der Fuehrer.
But of God the Thunderer and our Lord Hitler
Neither is pre-eminent,
Neither commands,
Neither obeys.
They are equal in this holy mystery.
They are God.
Heil Hitler. (7-8)

There is no exchange between the Knight who leads the service and the congregation and at the end "The men and boys moved in an orderly drilled way out of the church" (8) in order to make way for the women and girls, who only attend services once every three months, when they were herded like cattle into the church, tiny girl-children, pregnant women, old crones, every female thing that could walk and stand, [. . .]. The women were not allowed to go further into the church than the Goering and Goebbels arms; they had to stay jammed up in half the body of the Swastika [the shape in which the church is built], and they were not allowed to sit down. (8)

> While the women stand, so as not to defile the seats the men use, the Knight exhorted them on humility, blind obedience and submission to men, reminding them of the Lord Hitler's supreme condescension in allowing them still to bear men's sons and have that amount of contact with the Holy Mystery of Maleness; while he threatened them with the most appalling penalties should they have any commerce with the male Untouchables, the Christian men, and with milder punishment should they, by word or weeping, or in any other way oppose that custom, that law so essential to Hitler Society, the Removal of the Man-child-- (8-9)

The service functions as an exhortation to produce more male children and to remind the women of the laws of their society. For the women, however, it turns into a ritual of grieving for their lost sons:

> Perhaps one had just had her little boy taken away from her at the age of eighteen months, fetched by the Father in the usual ceremonious way ("Woman, where is my son?" "Here, Lord, here is your son, I, all unworthy, have borne----"), and where was he now? his baby limbs in the hard hands of men, skilled men, trained men, to wash

> him and feed him and tend him, and bring him up to manhood. Of course women were not fit to rear men-children, of course it was unseemly for a man to be able to point to a woman and say "There is my mother"--of course they must be taken away from us, and never see us and forget us wholly. It's all as it should be, it is our Lord's will, it is men's will, it is our will. But though a woman might go through the whole ceremony of Removal dry-eyed and not make a moan, and even utter the formal responses in a steady voice, and though she might refrain from weeping afterwards, yet, when she got into the church at the next Women's Worship, she would be certain to break down. All together, women fell into a sort of mass grief. One worked on another, and a woman who had not suffered from a Removal for several years would remember the old pain and start a loud mourning like a recently bereaved animal. The more the Knight told them not to, the harder would they weep. Even the bellowers and stormers among the Knights could not stop women crying at their worship. Nothing could stop them, short of killing them all. (9-10)

9 The grief of the women is contrasted with the Knight's speculations that throw into relief the secret worry of present-day Nazism--the women are producing too few female children: "It seemed as if, after hundreds of year of the really whole-hearted subjection natural under a religion which was entirely male, the worship of a man who had not mother, the Only Man, the women had finally lost heart" (11). While the Knight contemplates the future of Nazism, he considers, "They've destroyed us by doing what we told them, and now unless the Thunderer can throw the whole mass of Germans out of his head we're coming to an inglorious end" (12). During the service, then, the Knight inadvertently exhorts the women to bear more strong daughters rather than more strong sons. Having realised this exhortation to be "a crashing mistake" (13) he quickly hypnotizes the women into believing that they misunderstood his words:

> If they once knew that the *Knights*, and even der Fuehrer, wanted girl-children to be born in large quantities; that every fresh statistical paper with its terribly disproportionate male births caused groanings and anxieties and endless secret conferences--if the women once realised all this, what would 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. (14)

10 The previous paragraphs describe the events of Chapter 1, the premises upon which the presented society rests. The plot is simpler. Hermann, who has attended the service conducted by the Knight, meets his English friend Alfred, sent from England to Germany on a pilgrimage. The two had met when Hermann was part of the German army of occupation in England and Alfred was working as an airplane mechanic. They become friends in spite of their differences: "Alfred was urban, quick-witted, a machine-man skilled and rejoicing in his skill; Hermann was slow-brained and bucolic, half-skilled, strong and rejoicing in his strength" (18). They go for a walk in the woods and after a brief conversation, Alfred reveals

that he has a dream of an independent England and the destruction of Nazism; Hermann is thrown into a wrenching conflict between his friendship and love for Alfred and duty to his country.

11 During the service, Hermann had been terribly attracted to a beautiful young boy who was a visiting singer. While in the woods Hermann hears screams and rushes to the rescue, only to find the boy attempting to rape a Christian girl. Christians are considered lower than worms and live outside of the societal structure, so that intercourse with a Christian woman, therefore, as lowest of the low, is regarded as serious offence. Further, intercourse with a woman under sixteen was also a serious offence, "far less for the sake of the little girls than for the sake of the race. Very young girls if just adolescent might bear puny babies as the result of rape. Over sixteen, women's bodies were well-grown and womanly, that danger was past, and as rape implies will and choice and a spirit of rejection on the part of women, there could be no such crime" (13). When Hermann reaches the pair, his "whole body filled with delicious thundering warming floods of rage. He loathed the boy for being even interested in girls [. . .] --Hermann was physically jealous" (33). He beats the boy to a pulp, only stopping short of killing him as Alfred intervenes.

12 When they take the boy back to the village, Hermann must testify before the Knight about the beating, whereupon the Knight meets Alfred. The incident of the beating frames the rest of the action, as the Knight passes on to Alfred and Hermann, who is present at Alfred's insistence, his secret--a history of the European world written by a forefather that contradicts the present history and, more impressionably, a photograph of Hitler showing him to be quite insignificant compared with the huge blond god now worshipped. Moreover, the photograph shows Hitler with someone who to Hermann and Alfred looks like an enticingly beautiful boy but who, however, is revealed to be a girl. After Hermann and Alfred recover from the shock of Hitler possibly having been contaminated by the presence of a girl, Herman, Alfred and the Knight speculate on how and why women have become the imprisoned creatures that the men now know. "They acquiesced in the Reduction of Women," states the Knight.

> Women will always be exactly what men want them to be. They have no will, no character, and no souls; they are only a reflection of men. So nothing that they are or can become is ever their fault or their virtue. If men want them to be beautiful they will be beautiful. If men want them to appear to have wills and characters they will develop something that looks like a will and a character though it is really only a sham. If men want them to have an appearance of perfect freedom, even an appearance of masculine power, they will develop a simulacrum of those things. But what men cannot do, never have been able to do, is to stop this blind submission and cause the women to ignore them and disobey them. It's the tragedy of the human race. (70)

Hermann asks that no more be disclosed to him while Alfred takes on the request of the Knight, who has no sons, to be the keeper of the book of history and the photograph. They return to England, the book is hidden and Alfred begins introducing the text to his eldest son. Eventually they are betrayed, however, and Hermann and Alfred are killed. The book is secreted by Alfred's son in the house of a Christian, the one place (other than a Knight's residence) that will not be searched.

13 Throughout the plot the representation of women sustains the dystopian cultural configuration: the rise of Nazism depends on the subjacent position of women and the subjection continually reinforces the structures of Nazism and the male brutality contained therein. Burdekin is quite conscious about the necessity of an intense hierarchical structure as a method of sustaining the fragility of male power, even maleness itself. In another speculative work on the relation of the sexes, *Proud Man*, published in 1934 again under the pseudonym of Murray Constantine, Burdekin has a central character returning from the future in a dream. The character is non-gendered, considering herself/himself as human and, as a result, in the present day of the novel takes on each gender in turn, commenting on the ways of subhumans in the contemporary world ("You will understand that in my dream I could not be a person," she/he comments, "for none were in existence, but must appear to be either a woman or a man") (Burdekin, *Proud Man* 65). She/he is scathing about either sex and their behavior and speculates that the sex drive in humans is amiss and should be more like other animals, wherein the breeding period is limited and, therefore, the "sex obsession" limited too. As the outsider looking on, she/he points to the hierarchical nature of the culture she is visiting:

> A privilege of class divides a subhuman society horizontally, while a privilege of sex divides it vertically. Subhumans cannot apparently exist without their societies being divided, preferably in both these ways, though the intense antagonism, either open or secret, conscious or unconscious, which privilege of either kind engenders, prevents any subhuman society from having the stability necessary to its permanent existence. (17-18)

Although class figures occasionally in her/his exploration of subhuman life, it is the relationship between the sexes that predominates the novel and that predominates her/his discussion of war:

> For though a subhuman might not kill another subhuman of his own nation, there was nothing to stop a whole group or nation attacking and killing another nation, for that was against no law, it was not murder, and it was *right*. These large organised killings were called wars, and are habitual among many primitive, and all civilised nations.[. . .] A short time before the years of my dream there had been one large and important war involving many nations, and one large and important reversal of class privilege

> successfully carried out by a nation, the population of which was probably greater than all our human populations combined. These two events had upset the delicate balance of the civilised world, had made the nations involved in them fearful and uneasy beyond their wont, and had tangled their *economy* probably past unravelling. (19)

Although in the novel the post-war period meant that women could enter into "all the peaceful professions" (32), boys were still valued more than girls, "and until the idea of war has lost its attractiveness for the race, or until women kill and are killed in wars as freely as men, this must always be so" (32). The fearfulness and uneasiness had resulted, however, in

> the complete emergence of the sex antagonism. That which had been secret and subconscious was now open and conscious. It was hardly possible to open one of their books without coming across some expression of this sex antagonism. Whatever they wrote this uncontrollable hatred was bubbling at the bottom of their minds. As one would expect, in this sex antagonism the hatred of the men for the women was the most serious. (32)

Part of the sex antagonism of men is explained to her by the priest she (for at this time she is called Verona) first lives with after she has arrived in present time, and his statements are re-echoed later in *Swastika Night*. '"All men"' Andrew Gifford says, '"have a contempt for women, and indeed as you will find out if you have anything to do with them, they are poor stuff, and not to be compared with the females of animals and birds. But I have always believed that they should not be such poor stuff, and sometimes I think it must be our fault, men's fault, that they are what they are"' (113). Later, when she lives as Alethea with another woman Leonora Simmons, she presents the best possible resolution for the gender gap when she says

> They [men and women] 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. Hardly any women are female, and no men are male. You want the real difference to make the love and the work and the unit, but the artificial differences make nothing but a mess. (178-79)

Leonora is reconciled with the man she loves through her experience of living with Alethea, not because she will be happy but because she will be less unhappy (there is little or no romance here). The exploration of her unhappiness caused by the death of a bastard child (of whose existence the father was unaware) through meningitis becomes the method by which the two women explore femininity and femaleness, as Alethea is clearly puzzled as to why women would choose to be feminine. Leonora describes the feelings of guilt surrounding her daughter Cordy's death, the not being able to take care of her cub, almost with inarticulateness, sending Alethea to Aldous Huxley and Point *Point Counter Point*, where

Huxley "seems to me in that episode to be something of a sadist, writing that piece to torment poor mothers" (183).

14 It can be no coincidence that the only writer mentioned by name in *Proud Man* is Huxley in connection with his description of meningitis in *Point Counter Point*. Huxley makes use there of the death of Naomi Mitchison's nine-year-old son Geoff by the same disease. Huxley's knowledge of Geoff's illness and death had come through his relationship with Mitchison, who was, according to her biographer, "offended that Aldous had used her tormented experience as fodder for his fiction" (Benton 54). She, too, was "touched [with] guilt as a mother, although there was [as Burdekin explains about the death of Cordy], in truth, little she could have done to keep him alive" (53). Mitchison mentions Murray Constantine and *Proud Man* in her non-fiction book *The Moral Basis of Politics*, published in 1938, the same year as *Three Guineas*.

15 The *Moral Basis of Politics* is heavily informed with Mitchison's particular brand of Left-leaning Labour politics.[6] It was written as an attempt to understand the near hopelessness of a political resolution to the rise of Fascism. She proposes a moral political life without a Christian framework and, to be truthful, her arguments are not very satisfying. Because of her waning commitment to communism, for example, she allows the idea of economic competition, admitting, however, that "The vision of competition holds not only in the economic sphere, but also in, for example, personal relations. Sex-competition is thought well of as part of the vision; both Desdemona and Othello were victims of it. Can we possibly suppose that it is compatible with the good life?" (Mitchison, *Moral Basis*, footnote, 48). The answer to this rhetorical question may be "No," but Mitchison's flirtation with the ideologies of the Soviet Union was over and she does not offer much to replace one of the fundamentals of capitalism, competition.[7] Her discussion of pacifism is equally muddy, and through the 1930s she was ambiguous and did not commit herself in the larger political sphere to a strong pacifist position. In *The Moral Basis of Politics*, she explores her ambiguity, designating people P pacifists (of the band-wagon variety) or Pp pacifists (those devoutly committed to

[6]The formation and development of Mitchison's political leanings in the 1930s can be tracked through three volumes of autobiography: *Small Talk . . .: Memories of an Edwardian Childhood* (London: Bodley Head, 1973), *All Change Here: Girlhood and Marriage* (London: Bodley Head, 1975) and *You May Well Ask: A Memoir 1920-1940* (London: Gollancz, 1979).

[7] Mitchison had visited the Soviet Union in 1932 and was taken by what she observed of the position of women in the new society. However much she approved of abortion as a woman's choice, she was shocked by the crudity of the abortion she saw performed at a hospital there. She recorded her thoughts about what she had seen in her novel, *We Have Been Warned*. Jill Benton is too kind in her criticism of this novel, which is badly tainted with Mitchison's patronising class consciousness. When an upper-class character very like Mitchison is raped by a member of the proletariat, she forgives him because he lives in a house with a very dirty bathroom and bad plumbing.

pacifism even in the face of death). In the end, she realizes that her short-term response to the rise of Fascism, by this time wearing the face of Hitler, "brings not peace but the sword." Then, she goes on to explain,

> the short-termers agree to be the sword-point and agree also to lose their souls--to do what they know is not right--in the faith that, sheltered by their bodies, right will survive. But if this is annoyingly sentimental, let me suggest that, if Fascism wins in Europe and in England, the pacifists may die nobly, but their ideas will not survive, and they will certainly be unable to make converts in a nation which is Fascist-conditioned; whereas if Fascism is kept from them by violence, those who have used the violence will probably never be able to have or use pacifist ideas themselves--if they survive they will be too busy, too hopelessly engrossed in administrative difficulties (possibly including the severe moral difficulties of a provisional military dictatorship)--but pacifism itself with all that it implies will have a chance in the end. (Mitchison, *Moral Basis* 345)

The fallaciousness of this argument notwithstanding (it would depend on pacifists being born not made), Mitchison admits, finally, that "it may be essential for the future of the world, in so far as one can judge such things, that the long-term ideas of the true pacifists should survive." However pragmatic the short-term resolution found in violence must be, the

> short-term good must vanish and change, being essentially of a given situation and not in any way transcendent, and we are willing for it to do so (as the dynamic situation changes), provided that the long-term good survives--and I believe that completely thorough Pp pacifism goes with and implies more and deeper and more creative ideas than the mere right not to be killed or kill, [. . .]. (344-45)

What is included in the transcendent is a rationing of physical and especially sexual appetites in much the same way as the protagonist suggests in *Proud Man*, and, in fact, Mitchison footnotes Burdekin's book as a possible guide to a "future good society" (364). Mitchison's own personal struggle was with "that wanting of power [which] is my own besetting and class sin" and she cites her historical novels as attempts "to turn power into something else: as with the power held by Erif, Tarrik and Philylla in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*" (338).

16 *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* has been in print since it was first published, to great critical and popular acclaim, in 1931. The action of the novel takes place between the years 228 BC and 187 BC and is centred on the family of Erif Der. At the beginning of the novel Erif Der is still a girl, who has inherited from her mother the ability to do magic, but her father Harn Der holds most of the power in the village and surrounding countryside. In order to become chief, he insists on Erif Der marrying the present chief, Tarrik, but then on her using her magic to kill Tarrik so that her father can be his successor. The marriage takes place, but with the help of a new arrival, Sphaeros the Stoic, Tarrik resists Erif Der's magic and eventually persuades Erif Der that her love for her husband is stronger than her obligation

to her father. When she has a son, eliminating any possibility of her unforgiving father becoming chief, her father kills the child. Erif Der waits for a moment of retribution, and in a stunning portrayal of ancient fertility rituals, Erif Der murders her father.

17 Erif Der must leave the community, not only because of the patricide but because she has murdered her father during a fertility rite and that act may affect the crops and livelihood of the people. With her brother Berris Der she travels, spending a great deal of time among the Spartans and learning their ways, and waits to fulfill a prophecy that will enable her to return home, signifying that any blight she may have brought to the land has passed. Berris Der is a creative foil to Erif Der's magic. A sculptor, he struggles with ideas of beauty imposed from the outside upon his own internal sense of proportion and vision.

18 Berris Der falls in love with a Spartan woman, Philylla, competent rider and skilled archer, who also becomes a friend of Erif Der. Mitchison's characters present the difficulties inherent in the distribution of wealth and the denial of luxury, ornament, and the ideas of beauty to which Berris Der is committed. The suicidal end of the Spartans is one of the more moving passages in the book, but it is not enough to confirm the historical portrayal as accurate. What Mitchison challenges the reader with throughout the novel is the idea of change. The Spartans live, like other peoples portrayed, in a time of volatile change, and Mitchison wishes to understand the nature of change. Tarrik, for example, moves from a careless young man to one who explores the nature of what societal transformations he as chief and Corn King has brought about and whether or not these changes are healthy for the society at large. He contrasts the old life in his country with the new, questioning the morality of change and the place of the individual:

> In all this, Tarrik tried to find himself. He felt profoundly that he had at some point and unknown to himself taken a step that had landed him dry and lonely outside the stream of life. He was out of harmony. And now he could not retrace his steps. Erif Der, his wife, had done the same thing and he loved her, and he was deeply anxious for her. Yet was the old Marob life harmonious? Was it part of the order of nature to work magic, steal sun and rain for your own seasons and crops, almost to alter the courses of the stars? He thought not. Perhaps it had been--before people like himself had begun to question it. Once upon a time it had been part of the order of nature for men to eat the enemies they had killed; there was nothing wrong or abhorrent about it. But now that would be a pitfall in a clear road. With time and questioning, rights become wrongs and wrongs rights. The Corn Kings before him had been satisfied. They had accepted that their lives should end, as they all had unless they had been killed or died suddenly when still in their strength, in that last way, in that queerer feast than any they had made part of before. It had been natural; that was their life reabsorbing itself into the life of Marob out of which it had come. But he, Tarrik - Charmantided -- he was not satisfied. (Mitchison, *Corn King* 252-53)

19 The exploration of change is accompanied by one projected through the character of Erif Der, who remains as outsider in each of the societies they visit and examines the role of women. The *Bildungsroman* nature of the text, then, allows Erif Der to grow from unknowing girl to knowing woman, but here Mitchison's vision falters. Focusing on a period of upheaval that reflects her own, Mitchison explores the nature of political change and the way in which that change encompasses, or more frequently does not encompass, the needs of women.

20 Begun in 1925 when Mitchison was full of enthusiasm for the future and, particularly, women's role in it, *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* was finished in 1930, by which time Mitchison was already considering a somewhat different possibility for women. By the time Mitchison finished *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, her political horizon had shifted, and by the end of the novel Erif Der can be read as no longer the strong, willful, sometimes erring but always progressing heroine of the previous hundreds of pages. The novel has remained popular because of its strong historical grounding, romantic politics and graphic descriptions of sex and death and the life of the times. It would have been a better novel if Mitchison's political antenna had not already been recording a change in the wind for women. By 1938 and *The Moral Basis of Politics*, Mitchison's politics were muddied. In 1934 and the publication of *The Home and a Changing Civilisation*, however, she was as clear as she would ever be about the politics of gender.

21 *The Home and a Changing Civilisation* in its early pages is historically grounded in early Athens, where "As far as we can make out the Athenian home was an unimportant place, where disregarded and discouraged women led a shut-in and completely dependent life." In contrast with the historical evidence, however, the women of Aristophanes, "do not seem depressed and discouraged creatures." She cites Praxagora, "the heroine of the *Ecclesiazuses*, [who] plans a Utopia which is rather silly but has its points, and where the "home definitely comes to an end, all property is in the hands of the state, which provides for its citizens, so that no woman has to be dependent on a man." The result is that Praxagora

> goes further than even the most modern sexual reformers: marriage is done away with and all relationships between men and women are completely free except that the plain and unprepossessing of both sexes are given their fair share, the state intervening in their favour. Praxagora's male interlocutor in the dialogue is profoundly shocked at the thought that no man would know (or own) his own children, but Praxagora is obviously delighted at the idea that the child's only legal parent should be its mother and that the father of all should be the impersonal state. Hence she goes back to the matriarchy or forward to Communism. (Mitchison, *The Home* 13-15)

Here is the foundation of the structure of *The Home*: rather than project a utopia, she presents a supposedly historically grounded one and works retrospectively to present day. Mitchison

weaves back and forth between centuries, ideas and changes in the status of women with her eye fixed firmly on the reasons for the present-day existence of women in the home. She cites the nineteenth century, for example, as an age which "marked the beginning of real specialization":

> And, as jobs began to be specialised, and with that increasingly profit-making, so men began to take them for themselves and away from women. Men were even insisting on taking over work which had traditionally been women's. They took away, for instance, midwifery and doctoring, and it was to be another two generations before women had managed to fight their way into the profession of medicine and regain what they had lost. All kinds of things which had been home-made by women, from jam and candles to curtains and overcoats, were now made gloriously in factories by men--or by women treated like male "hands", only worse. (39)

She continues by asking a question comparable to Woolf's in *A Room of One's Own*, on why there are so few great women in history, refiguring, in a sense, the angel in the house. First she considers how young girls were when they married, and how "Once married, they were irretrievably engulfed in the home." Further,

> think of the artistic temperament--always up and down, at the mercy of the thyroid or the pituitary or what-not. Think of the glooms and miseries of the poet or artist, from which he has normally to be rescued by the Kind Heart of a Woman. That should be as possible for the female as for the female poet, and is, at least, rather more possible now, though still difficult enough. But in those days--! And oh, the pressure on women to spend their time in other ways, in greasing the wheels of life for the men who drive it. The disapproval, even from the Queen, Defender of the Faith, wife of Albert, of the un-owned woman! There is still an immense amount of all that; almost every woman has to compromise; but where we moderns bend with more or less grace and insincerity, our mothers and grandmothers broke. (41)

22 Mitchison retreats from present-day speculations to the Spartans, again. Where *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* presents Spartanism as a positive force, akin to socialism in its "brotherhood of man," on reconsideration, however, Mitchison finds "The details of the Eunomia [drastic reforms of the state] [. . .] more familiar to us in 1934 than they were to early historians." "They are indeed disconcertingly familiar," she adds, "for there is a Fascist ring about them" (Mitchison, *The Home* 53). Reminiscent of the society presented in its final extreme in *Swastika Night*, Mitchison recalls that these "reforms were of course violently nationalistic, they aimed at producing the kind of citizen who would live only for nationalist ends" (54). Private ownership was curtailed, and

> Everything, including the home and the family, became a part of the Spartan State. Wives no longer belonged absolutely to their husbands: not that they belonged to themselves now, but to Sparta which demanded of them that they should bear children to become the equivalent of cannon fodder. The women's own personal possessions were cut down too. Above all the boys after the age of seven became the property of

> the State; they were taken out of the home and brought up in bands, living rough and learning to endure pain and hardship and become good soldiers. The little girls were less definitely taken over, but they too had some kind of physical training, mostly in connection with the religious life of the State. No weaklings were allowed to survive. The men were taken out of the home too. They took their main meal together in a military mess, even in peace time. (54-55)

The Spartan state described can be compared with the new Germany, a transformed one where "German women were further on the road to freedom than almost anywhere else." The changeover has been dramatic, focused, as it is, on the re-constituted Teutonic home. Patriarchy is again supreme:

> The state has solidified itself out of the Hegelian abstract into the concrete father god, Wotan, the most sworded and hairy-bellied and prolific of them all. But the immediate representative of the state is the German father, as like Wotan as possible. The German wife is owned both by the state and by her husband. Her job is to fill the cradles and the German home, by her husband and for the state, which will in time use the cradle fillings as cannon fodder. (104-05)

23 Mitchison seems not only to be responding to current events in Germany but to the ideas of Fascism published by Oswald Mosley in his 1932 tract *The Greater Britain*. "The new German woman, the present or future wife or mother in his home, is essentially womanly," she writes, continuing:

> She is large-bosomed and broad-bottomed, so modern women's fashions sit ill on her. She must have home fashions of her own suitable for the attraction of husbands but not lovers. She must not go in for either education or sport, both are unsettling. Lest she should do so in spite of the charming prospects held up before her, her educational possibilities are forcibly being taken from her. Schools and universities are being shut, especially those which practise that dreadfully equalitarian thing, co-education. Instead she is to have a year or so forcible training in domesticity and submission to the idea of a patriarchal state. (105)

Among Mosley's reformation formulae for the "salvation of this land" (Mosley 11) is an accounting for the place of women's work, since

> The great majority of women do not seek, and have no time for, a career in politics. Their interests are consequently neglected, and their nominal representation is accorded to women whose one idea is to escape from the normal sphere of women and to translate themselves into men. That process in the end is never very effective, and the attempt makes such women even less qualified than the average man to deal with the questions of home and of children. Consequently, the representation and organisation for the first time of normal women, on whom the future of the race depends, are a practical political necessity. Fascism, in fact, would treat the wife and mother as one of the main pillars of the State and would rely upon her for the organisation and development of one of the most important aspects of national life. (55-56)

Mitchison considers the construction of the "normal" woman, "on whom the future of the race begins" as a threat to the gains made by women, and after tracing present-day oppressions of women in Italy and Ireland, she writes, "It should be clear by now that militarism and the traditional home go together" (Mitchison, *The Home* 107).

25 The attempt at resolution is an honest exploration of the ownership of women by men, which "has been talked about and written about and legislated about and above all lived about, for some thousands of years" (144). Her resolution recognizes the difficulties between the private and the public in the present day, while proposing a belief in pacifism that renegotiates the space between the private and the public:

> *personally* one must be a complete pacifist, completely gentle and willing to turn the other cheek indefinitely, but *socially*, at present, one must not only be willing to fight for certain things, but also one must prepare the fight (and what one is fighting for is the possibility of a remote time when personal pacifism will be a good enough guide to social conduct). (145)

26 Mitchison's lack of resolution, which informed *The Moral Basis of Politics*, had two contributory factors. One was the text to which she constantly referred in *The Home*, Winifred Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, published in 1934 as a precursor text to *The Home* in the Twentieth Century Library series. Throughout *The Home*, Mitchison avoided territory already considered by Holtby. The other factor was her disconcerting realization that the connection between gender and the oncoming war was as acute as the connection had been after World War I. For all her belief in human progress, it remained scarcely grounded in reality, as she so trenchantly articulated in her polemics against the encyclical letters of the Catholic Church. Where Burdekin revealed her anxieties in the dystopic, Mitchison placed them in the polemic. Neither could offer a solution to the growing threat of Fascism and its dependence on gender constructions and a profound misogyny. It would take Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* to do that.

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