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“Seeking light in darkness and harmony in confusion”¹: Death, Memory, and Resistance in Swastika Night by Katharine Burdekin and Kindred by Octavia E. Butler

The theme of the island, when it is not any longer employed as a space to construct an alternative utopian or dystopian space, becomes a metaphor to underline either the condition of isolation of the protagonists or the projection of the negative elements of the present. In critical dystopias², often depicting extreme conditions under totalitarian regimes or founding traumas such as the Shoah or Slavery, the island is substituted by a dislocation of time, where memory is the central element enabling an analysis of the present while envisaging a hope for a different future. Memory in its diverse and controversial aspects involves a critique of the mystifications of official history and it also exposes the persistence of the totalitarian and racist trends as well as gender discriminations in current time.

In this essay I will analyse how foreseeing a dystopic future as in *Swastika Night*, 1937, and time-travelling as in *Kindred*, 1979, enable Katharine Burdekin and Octavia Butler to articulate a critical discourse on memory as mediator between death and resistance. In these dystopias

¹ Burdekin (1937; 1985: 55).

² Critical dystopia is a self-reflexive genre which both thematically and structurally addresses questions connected to the contemporary period, and to the function of art and literature, their imaginative potentialities and mystifying risks. From this perspective, these narratives stimulate and suggest possibilities which mediate between individual and collective, private and public, highlighting at the same time the necessity of agency as an ethical imperative. The significance of critical dystopia lies not merely in its imaginative and critical power, but also in its potentiality to inspire concrete action. (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003). See also Fortunati (2005). Critical dystopia expresses the belief in literature as a cognitive instrument.

that thematise ‘founding traumas’ the manipulation of memory – connected to the appropriation of the body – is a tool to reinforce the totalitarian regimes, while the transmission of a counter-memory is a potent instrument of resistance and subversion. The articulation of the politics of memory with sexual and racial politics in these ‘totalitarian’ societies foregrounds the dialectic between the pessimism of reason and the necessity of hope in order to construct a better future. In this dialectic, envisioning the dystopic future as in *Swastika Night*, or re-visiting the past as in *Kindred* shows memory as an active process between official/collective memories, personal experiences and controversial counter-histories. In this process death and suicide as resistance are connected not only to transmission and heritage, but they also represent an extreme means to denounce the violence of the totalitarian constructions. *Swastika Night* and *Kindred* can also be considered as Bildungsromane whereby the ethic of responsibility involves both narrators and readers in the process of re-vision and deconstruction of the social order. The cult of masculinity (as in Burdekin’s novel) and the rhetoric and violence of the new worlds based on the economic exploitation of human beings (as in *Kindred*) highlight the current politics of sexism and racism.

Memory and death are interconnected with oblivion and effacement, but also with resistance and agency. These intertwined elements bring into light submerged and repressed stories, emphasising how these dystopias call for a re-visioning of the notion of history and memory. In this perspective, death and suicide embody, although in different ways, moments of crisis of the utopian system (of the dominant regime) while they assume a symbolic meaning for the transmission of the counter-memories first repressed and then unveiled in the dystopian world of the oppressed. Consequently, the theme of death that informs both texts shows its double meaning and value: death is connected to violence and trauma, both of the individual and the community, but it also represents a reaction to the totalitarian system and a form of resistance against it *under extreme conditions*. Death is at once sacrifice and subversion. It is not cathartic, but it foregrounds the burden of the traumatic heritage, while denouncing the necessity for these submerged memories to acquire voice and significance. Death thus exposes the epistemic and concrete violence of the counterfeit memory of the dominant system.

In these works written by women discriminations of gender and race are crucial. In *Swastika Night* and *Kindred* the rape of women, which lies at the root of the Nazi Empire and slavery, signals not only violence, but it also serves to repress and annul identity and agency, as well as women's memory of their power to reject, to attract and to desire. Rape represents a metaphorical and violent death of the female and of women's agency and subjectivity. Death is loaded with complex critical meanings, as an extreme form of resistance to and accusation against the dominant symbolic and social order founded on the cult of masculinity and of a single, superior race. Death and suicide reveal the necessity to inherit and to transmit memory, not only for the minority groups repressed in totalitarian regimes, but also for the whole Western history.

Memory is the meeting point between personal emotional experience and collective historical knowledge, affectivity and rationality, between contingency and future projects: remembering is history and imagining together. Marginalized and repressed memory (as in *Kindred*) and dissident memory (as in *Swastika Night*), become a counter-memory that shifts between a process of remembering and oblivion; between re-memorization and reconstruction of one's individual and collective history³. The process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the identity of marginalized groups intertwines with memories of exile, loss, and violence, which have marked historical events and private experiences. It is significant that humanity's traumatic events such as wars, genocides as well as women's social and private traumas share the female – although differently in quantitative terms – as a space of violence, appropriation, and abuse. Counter-memories, as in *Swastika Night* and *Kindred*, encompass violence and death bearing witness to a difficult and traumatic process of re-composition⁴. It is in this sense

³ The relationship between memory and oblivion is crucial not only in contemporary dystopias, but also in postcolonial critical debates and gender studies: the recovery of individual and collective histories, the deconstruction of the possible mystifications of mainstream history run nowadays through the whole Western episteme.

⁴ How memory is transmitted and how to be reconciled with it is crucial in African American, Postcolonial as well as in Shoah studies. This process can become a cohesive force of collective belonging but also a paradigmatic model that challenges totalitarianisms, false national mythologies, and ideological manipulations of memory.

that death and suicide in these works dramatize the heritage of trauma and memory.

If death marks the crisis of utopia, showing the limit of the utopian perfection and happiness through the unveiling of man's finitude, dystopias denounce the ambiguity of dissident sacrifice and the destructivity of the dystopic 'new' world, giving way dangerously to nostalgia as a regressive drive towards the past (death can be seen as a return). Death is thus connected in complex ways to (self) or collective sacrifice, to the theme of the hero and of the scapegoat. Issues already widely discussed in critical studies on utopia, anti-utopias and dystopias, assume in these dystopias more ambivalent and uncanny connotations. The history of slavery marks the past as a place to be deconstructed and re-thought and similarly the history of gender calls for a re-vision of the past.

Burdekin wrote her book before the Shoah and the construction of Nazi concentration camps: it is a prophetic visionary text, elaborating on the seeds of the Nazi creed which was to explode a few years later. In this text the dystopian future is *prophetically* connected to the present. Such time-shifts make reading this book today a displacing experience.

Butler seems to re-write the experience of the middle passage: her journey backward to the past and forward to the present-future symbolizes the journey of the ancestors, while the history of slavery is here portrayed as a *concrete* dystopia. As Hortense Spillers reminds us, the history of slavery is a founding trauma for the African American community and also the repressed, mutilated history of a silenced and oppressed community on whose blood the dominant Western history has constructed itself. Spillers hopes that memory of the past and the critique of slavery and racism will give voice to these counter-memories, re-writing the symbolic order and an "American grammar book" whose words will no longer kill⁵.

⁵ Before Spillers, Burdekin and Butler, amongst other women writers, have fictionalised and given voice to these founding traumas, with special attention to women's experiences, experiences which in turn should enable a deconstruction and a reframing of the symbolic and social order.

The double function of memory

Swastika Night, published in 1937, depicts a Hitlerian empire 700 years after Hitler. The social order of the Nazi Empire is founded on the cancellation of history and memory and their manipulation:

The German of that time were blown up with an insensate pride, a lunatic vanity, for which, of course, there was a great deal of excuse. But they were still afraid. In the heart of the pride lurked a fear, not of anything physical, but of Memory itself. This fear gradually grew into a kind of hysteria (...) which at last reached its expression in the book of one man. (...) This book of von Wied proved that Hitler was a God (...), that women were not part of the human race at all but a kind of ape, and that everything that had been said and done and thought before Hitler descended was the blackest error of subhuman savagery and therefore must be wiped out. (...) All history, all psychology, all philosophy, all art except music, all medical knowledge (...) every book and picture and statue that could remind Germans of old time must be destroyed. (Buredekin 1937, 1985: 79).

In the new regime women are degraded to mere breeding animals, they are reduced to a biological function out of which an entire social identity is constructed (Patai 1985: x-xi). The logic of rape and violence lies at the root of the Nazi Empire, and both women and men are treated as objects to be submitted and subjugated. The Empire governs by seeking to label people as inferior rather than by assimilating them. Men and women are both submitted to power, although in diverse forms and through diverse means. The book shows how fascism is not qualitatively but only quantitatively different from the everyday reality of male dominance, a reality that polarises men and women in terms of gender roles⁶. *Swastika Night* transcends the specifics of Nazi ideology, and militarism in general, and exposes the risks of a wider ‘cult of masculinity’, of a fake but widespread notion of masculinity and femininity (Patai 1985).

Alfred, a British citizen visiting the Hitlerian holy places in Germany, meets a knight, Von Hess, and becomes the depository of

⁶ For a discussion of these issues see Patai (1985) and Baccolini (2000).

an inherited memory that functions as a counter-history challenging the dominant and manipulated official memory. Alfred will preserve that counter-memory, represented by a book, transmit it to his son, and exhale the last breath. The figure of the first rebel against the system is assigned to a predecessor of Von Hess, a knight who dedicated all his life to reconstructing history as it was, to re-writing it as he remembered it against the Official History re-invented by the regime. The text starts with a religious re-iteration of the Nazi creed, based on the separation and inferiorisation of men and women, and minority groups, and follows up with a scene of rape, violence, and death. While the narrative unfolds, not only violence but especially death, (of a woman, a young Nazi boy, Herman and so on) signal the effacement of memory and history while exposing the ambiguity and ambivalence of death as the only means to preserve and transmit memory. The personal history of the Knight shows first his rebellion of disbelief, and his ‘sacrifice’ in order to preserve memory: he renounces his, so called, hitlerian dignity, pretending to be a coward in order to leave the establishment, and dedicates all his life to restore and to re-write memory. He re-writes it in order to transmit it:

“There was history,” said the Knight. “Listen to what he says: ‘*I, Friedrich von Hess, Teutonic Knight of the Holy German Empire, of the Inner Ten, dedicate this book to my eldest son, Arnold von Hess, to him and to his heirs for ever. Keep it inviolate, guard it as you would your honour, for though what I have put down here is but the smallest fragment of the truth of history, yet swear that, to my poor knowledge, it is all true.*’

“He thought, you see,” said the Knight, closing the book, that the time might come when men would again seek passionately for truth, and that this, his little hand-written terribly fragmentary history, might be a faint will-o’-the-wisp light in the darkness. (...)” (Burdekin 1937, 1985: 74).

Burdekin tells us that, having accomplished this task, he committed suicide. Suicide transforms the Knight into a function for the transmission of memory and represents death as an unavoidable means to preserve it. The theme of the hero is here intermingled with the idea of the scapegoat and sacrifice. In this perspective the violence of the counterfeit Nazi

dystopic memory is denounced while the death and the suicide of the heroes remain as the price to be paid for the counter-memory to survive. But suicide also underlines the dedication of the Knight to memory as truth and salvation for the whole humanity.

Significantly, one of the most important issues of the text, women's reduction and the way they come to be constructed as inferior, does not allow a restoration of the past through a nostalgic drive: here nostalgia would be a regressive and risky element since women, in Burdekin's view, have always been entrapped as function of, and within, patriarchal society. Accordingly, men cannot look back to the past (only) with nostalgia: the same logic has entrapped and reduced them as functions of the dominant power. In this light death and suicide are depicted in their ambivalence. On the one hand the heroes employ the same strategies of the regime, on the other, death becomes a necessity to preserve memory, from both an individual and a collective perspective. While Orwell's *1984* analyses the complex relationship between the persecutor and the victim, and how this can become uncanny under extreme conditions, Burdekin studies the strategies of resistance of a man who chooses the burden of memory in order to preserve and transmit it, exposing his difficulties when facing extreme conditions and a lack of agency⁷. The logic of sacrifice and of the scapegoat embodies a double meaning since the hero exposes the dialectic between preservation of the self and resistance to the system. This dialectic is reminiscent of a late-romantic view of the relationship between the individual and society. But death is a consequence of the violence of the Empire, a symbol of the impotence attained by the regime, while suicide duplicates the effacement and annihilation of the individual within the regime. Only memory survives. The dialectic between pessimism and hope, typical of critical dystopia, resides in the transmission of memory. Sacrifice is the redeeming act, an act of counter-religion (in contrast to the cult of Hitler the God).

Hope comes also from another source. Memory is preserved only through the alliance of minorities, such as the community of Christians,

⁷ On the theme of the scapegoat and death as sacrifice see for instance John the Savage's suicide in *Brave New World* by Huxley (1932).

the association of the Brothers, and, hopefully, through the (still to come) awareness of women. Significantly, Christians can help Alfred's son to preserve the book not only because they are the untouchable within the regime, but also, and most symbolically, since they possess memory, transmitted through an oral heritage. They also possess different values from the dominant system that levels the individuals, and on these values Christians have founded and re-enacted their sense of belonging to the community. The text thus articulates the complex relationship between personal memory, collective memories, and counter, minority ones. The double function of memory in *Swastika Night* shows the importance of the narration and re-invention of the past and the need to revisit memory as a dynamic process against History as cristallised mystification. Narrating is salvation, writing (history) and the writing of this dystopia assume the same function embodied by memory⁸.

Envisioning the past: the heritage of memory

Kindred is considered as a Bildungsroman, science fiction, and a critical and concrete dystopia⁹. It is the story of Dana, a young Californian African American who, through time-travelling, goes back to Maryland at the beginning of the 19th century before civil war, during the period of slavery, when slaves had already starting to flee to the North. Her unwilling time-travels are finalized to save her ancestors from death and slavery. The strong bond with Alice, the most important of her ancestors, so similar to her, will be crucial in the narrative. Dana goes to the past every time that Rufus, the white father of Alice's children, is in danger of death and returns back to the present when she herself risks her life. Death and life are intertwined in a symbolic exchange that carries the burden of history, memory of slavery and resistance

⁸ A point of weakness might be the exclusion of women in this transmission: men are the channel through which memory is preserved. Nevertheless Alfred's tender affection for his daughter – something unimaginable in the regime – expresses the hope for a better 'future female'.

⁹ See Crossley (1988); Varsam (2003); Monticelli (2004); Fabi (2005).

against it. Violence does not only come in the form of lynching and lashing, but it is rape that is the foundational violence of the system. Rape, as in *Swastika Night*, signals the multiple function of the female, as the source of work force and economic wealth (since children can be sold as slaves); and as sexual object. Rape, as in *Swastika Night*, is the reduction and subjugation of women, but here it is also the symbol of the subjugation of the whole community. The rape of women, the effacement of women's desire and identity, culminate when Alice, after failing twice to escape, and convinced by Rufus that her children have been sold, takes her own life. Suicide marks the end only apparently. The narrative structure, as well as the plot, hinges upon the relationship between life and death, oppression and salvation through Dana's 'time-travelling' and also through a shift of the narrative point of view.

In the beginning Dana describes the scenes of violence as a spectator, as if she were a witness, trained as she was to read slave narratives, historical documents, and to watch Hollywood movies on racism and slavery. But none of these recollections, neither those in official archives nor those in documents on slavery, help her to survive in the past. Nobody and nothing have taught Dana how to recognise and define the kind of bravery needed in situations of powerlessness¹⁰:

And I began to realize why Kevin and I had fitted so easily into this time. We weren't really in. We were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us. And we were actors. (...) But we were poor actors. (...) We never forgot that we were acting.

This was something I tried to explain to Kevin (...). It suddenly became very important that he understand. (Butler 1979, 1988: 98).

Knowledge and memory are reconciled through direct experience which implies the deconstruction of common beliefs on the resistance, or lack thereof, of the slaves. This process is conveyed through a shift of point of view: from an external one – the one of the omniscient narrator, the reporter, the historian, the traveller in the dystopic elsewhere – to a subjective standpoint. The narration increasingly avoids detailed

¹⁰ See Fabi (2005).

and visual descriptions, which are replaced with the rendering of the emotions, thoughts, and sufferings of the protagonists.

Dana risks rape and death, but also being overwhelmed by a burden of knowledge which symbolises memory's inheritance: the more she learns to survive, the more difficult it becomes to return. In order to inherit memory, Dana must learn to recognise the deep subjective and collective connection between past and present, she must revise the historical stereotypes according to which those who are defeated are either passive subjects or victims. She must learn to recognise forms of resistance and solidarity in extreme conditions (Fabi 2005: 332-35). As the defeated cease to be seen as the victims of history and become counterheroes who resist history, pity becomes admiration, the value of counterhistories and counter-memories of 'marginal' and oppressed groups are restored.

In this perspective Alice's suicide is death and life together, an extreme means of preservation of the self, and the narrative culminates in a reunification of resistance and accusation. It is significant that Alice wears her most beautiful clothes, combs her hair as if she were preparing herself for a religious ceremony. The theme of the sacrificial victim is suggested only to make us aware of the fact that we are misinterpreting the narrative: extreme conditions imply a more complex articulation of an ethic which needs to be negotiated between slavery and personal and collective freedom, official history and personal counter-histories, impotence and resistance. By committing suicide, Alice deprives Rufus of pleasure and potential work force; by meeting her death Alice protects her dignity and exposes her condemnation. Alice is not just the scapegoat nor a mere victim. Through Alice history becomes flesh. Alice is memory that asks to be testified and transmitted through Dana. Her suicide is in fact linked to Dana's return home, something which usually occurs when she is in danger of death. Having experienced and learnt so much about survival and resistance, Dana has to face more and more dangerous and extreme situations in order to return. And this time she cuts her wrists, staging her suicide. Dana and Alice's deaths are intrinsically related: the two women are blood relations, kindred, and united through the blood shed in captivity, which is the trauma and heritage of slavery. It is thanks to Dana's first-hand experience and

re-telling of the past that the subversive meaning of Alice's sacrifice is unveiled. The structure of the novel as (dystopian) Bildungsroman involves also the reader who acquires awareness that the meaning of Alice's story is disclosed and clarified through Dana's experience of slavery and its 'living', embodied memory. Unlike Alfred, in *Swastika Night*, Dana will live bearing the wounds and loss of her experiences: during her very last return to Maryland her arm will be trapped and severed:

I was back at home – in my own house, in my own time. But I was still caught somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of it – or growing into it. From the elbow to the ends of the spot where flesh joined with plaster, stared at it uncomprehending. (...) I pulled my arm toward me, pulled hard. And suddenly, there was an avalanche of pain, red impossible agony! And I screamed and screamed. (Butler 1979, 1988: 261)

Before this very last return, after crying on Alice's corpse, and bearing the sufferings of her story and History, in order not to be raped, Dana will kill Rufus, who had always tried to make her a substitute for Alice. Dana will kill him only when she is sure that Alice's children will be set free. The children's freedom, the reason why she time-travelled to the past, becomes a promise for her future life, and a symbol of the defeat of slavery. Murder and suicide are loaded with symbolic significance. If "the suicide itself, a culturally loaded action and phenomenon, is more than an act of despair and self sacrifice (...) contrary to appearance, it is not a pure act of individual will, but hedged with convention, discourse, tradition, and social compulsion" (Cohen 1993: 19), in this neo slave-narrative, suicide acquires a more complex and poignant historical, political, and symbolic value. Suicide is not a defeat nor self-immolation but extreme resistance against slavery.

There is no space here for the regressive nostalgia of classical dystopias, and this absence points to a difficult and controversial memory problematic to recompose, a counterhistory of the oppressed and of women that it is a heavy albeit necessary inheritance.

In the "Epilogue" Dana and her husband Kevin go to Maryland's historical archives to retrace this lost past. But official memory does not

preserve, it mystifies and crystallises, it hides and represses individual histories and counter-memories:

“I wonder whether the children were allowed to stay together (...)”

“You’ve looked,” he said. “And you’ve found no records. You’ll probably never know.”

I touched the scar Tom Weylin’s boot had left on my face, touched my empty left sleeve. “I know,” I repeated. “Why did I even want to come here. You’d think I would have had enough of the past.”

“You probably needed to come for the same reason I did.” He shrugged. “To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you’re sane.” I looked back at the brick building of the Historical Society, itself a converted early mansion. (...) “We are,” he said. (Butler 1979, 1988: 264).

Dana’s story serves this purpose: her dystopic-utopic journey is a journey to recompose memories between the individual and the community, between facts and imagination. Here Butler reflects upon the function of narrating; like Burdekin, she endows the writing of memory with subversive power against the dominant system. Narrating memory is, as Edouard Glissant suggests, an act of prophetic vision of the past. In this visionary act, death, like the voice of a prophet, represents the voice of accusation and also, paradoxically, of hope.

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