

KATHARINE BURDEKIN AND COLLECTIVE SPEECH: POLITICS, CHORUS AND LITURGY

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Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of collective speech (or speaking in unison) in the fiction of Katharine Burdekin (1896-1963), focussing on *The Rebel Passion* (1929), *Proud Man* (1934) and *Swastika Night* (1937) (the latter two novels were initially published under the pseudonym ‘Murray Constantine’). Highlighting Burdekin’s abiding concern with religious rituals, it suggests that the political dimensions of Burdekin’s oeuvre can be profitably read in relation to a set of liturgical debates that go back to the English Reformation. *The Book of Common Prayer*, which features in some way in all three of these novels, proves a profitable site to focus questions about collective speech, its rituals seeming to model a kind of communal collectivity, but one that was imposed by political force. The negative connotations of collective speech are particularly evident in the Nazi liturgy at the heart of *Swastika Night*, which combines elements of the prayer book with features of the Nazi *Thingspiele*. Whereas *Proud Man* seemed to want to counter enforced rituals of collective belonging with a retooled ‘unselfish individualism’, both *Swastika Night* and *The Rebel Passion* seek to mobilise more positive forms of speaking in unison to counter dangerous conformity and authoritarianism. Burdekin even innovates a form of narration that can be referred to as ‘collective interior monologue’, as she explores the relationship between individual consciousness and collective belonging. The paper thus builds on the valuable scholarship of Elizabeth English, Daphne Patai, Glyn Salton-Cox, Adam Stock and Keith Williams, positioning Burdekin as an important and innovative novelist of ideas whose historical, religious and philosophical interests are unusually wide-ranging.

Keywords: Katharine Burdekin; Women’s Writing; Modernism; Political Literature; 1930s Literature; Religion and Literature

What does it mean to speak in unison? British writing of the interwar period came back to the question again and again, partly no doubt because of the obvious analogy that collective speech suggests with political community and concerted political action: urgent concerns at this turbulent time. The extension of the franchise in the United Kingdom, challenges to the hegemony of the Anglican Church, the rise of fascism in Europe, the emergence of a more defiant and more organised socialism and the politics of the Popular Front all suggested questions about the possibilities of speaking together: saying the same words at the same time—and meaning it. Katharine Burdekin’s work is preoccupied with the question of collective speech. Following the vitally important work of Daphne Patai, who was instrumental in recovering this extraordinary writer from obscurity, other scholars, including Elizabeth English,

Glyn Salton-Cox, Adam Stock and Keith Williams, have done much to excavate previously unknown details of her biography, and to read her work (including a number of unpublished novels) in relation to genre; questions around science fiction and dystopia (Williams, Stock), or queer theory (English, Salton-Cox).¹ All of these critics give a prominent position to Burdekin's depictions of gender and sexuality: 'most striking to readers today', Patai writes, 'is Burdekin's diagnosis of the conflict between the sexes'.² The justifiable fascination with Burdekin's representations of gender and sexuality has meant that relatively little work has been done to investigate her wider intellectual interests, including history and religion. This essay takes a step in this direction by exploring the ways in which Burdekin's work evokes, performs and problematises collective speech.

As Steven Connor writes, there has been 'little study of collective voicing, as such and in its own terms yet across the broad range of its manifestations'. Bracketing these under the heading of 'chorality', he proposes for example 'prayer, children's games, formalised learning processes and statements of fealty ('I pledge allegiance to the flag'), along with the chants of protest, demand or celebration found in political and sporting circumstances'.³ He offers a short and brilliant essay on the subject but (for now, at least) has taken the question no further.⁴ This essay wants to supplement the paradigm of the chorus (pointing back to Greek drama where it often represented the collective viewpoint of 'the people' of Athens or Thebes) with that of the liturgy. Both traditions are 'concerned with the establishment of solidarity'⁵ (as Connor notes of choral

1. Elizabeth English, *Lesbian Modernism: Censorship, Sexuality and Genre Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015) pp.31-58; Glyn Salton-Cox, *Queer Communism and the Ministry of Love* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018) pp.113-39; Adam Stock, *Modern Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought: Narratives of World Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019) pp.100-126; Keith Williams, 'Back from the Future: Katharine Burdekin and Science Fiction in the 1930s' in Maroula Joannou (ed.), *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) pp.151-64.

2. Daphne Patai, 'Afterword' in Katharine Burdekin, *Proud Man* (New York, NY: Feminist Press, 1993) pp.319-50, p.323.

3. Steven Connor, 'Choralities', <http://stevenconnor.com/choralities.html> [Accessed 12/9/18]

4. Fred Cummins has produced a valuable body of work on what he tends to call 'joint speech' or 'synchronous speech', though he is perhaps more concerned with the technical means by which joint speech is produced than its cultural import. See for example 'Rhythm as entrainment: The case of synchronous speech', *Journal of Phonetics*, Vol. 37 No. 1, (Jan 2009) pp. 16-28; 'Towards an enactive account of action: speaking and joint speaking as exemplary domains', *Adaptive Behavior*, Vol.21 No.3 (Jun 2013), pp.178-186; 'Joint Speech: The Missing Link Between Speech and Music?' *Percepta: Revista de Cognição Musical*, 1 (2013), pp.17-32. 'The Remarkable Unremarkableness of Joint Speech.' Proceedings of the 10th International Seminar on Speech Production, (2014) pp.73-77.

5. Connor, 'Choralities'.

voicing) but my stress on liturgy helps to pinpoint the distinct politico-religious significance of collective voicing in English history and culture.

Burdekin's dystopia *Swastika Night* (1937) opens with the ritual performance of a Nazi liturgy in the Holy Hitler chapel. 700 years after the establishment of the German empire, Nazism is depicted as a centuries-old religion that abominates Christians and women, celebrates homosexuality, exerts a total control over knowledge by outlawing all books other than technical manuals and the Hitler Bible, and prescribes a devotional practice based on the rote repetition of set prayers, in unison. Burdekin's depiction of this Nazi rite presumably alludes to the Nazi *Thingspiel* movement, a vogue for large-scale collective theatrical spectacle that was hugely popular in the early years of the Third Reich (1933-6), reflecting Goebbels's desire to 'create a theatre of fifty thousand and hundred thousand'.⁶ *Thingspiele* could be enormous: in October 1933, 17,000 actors performed a play by Gustav Goes for a crowd of 60,000; a *Thingspiel* by Heinrich Lersch mobilised a chorus of 3,000.⁷ Large, purpose-built outdoor auditoria were constructed across Germany to accommodate these spectacles. The *Thingspiel* aimed to create a 'unity of performers and spectators' by involving the audience in the choruses and the singing of rousing nationalistic and militaristic songs (though there is some doubt about the extent to which this audience participation really took hold).⁸ Burdekin's depiction of a 'mighty and toneful roaring of male voices', raised in unison in praise of the Nazi Reich, suggests some familiarity with the *Thingspiel* movement, which was discussed in the British press.⁹

Thingspiele, as Erika Fischer-Lichte argues, were 'able to trigger quasi-religious feelings, to be directed towards the nation, towards the fatherland.'¹⁰ This religious aspect was sometimes made explicit by the use of Christian themes, and Wilhelm von Schramm further underlined this religious dimension when he referred to the *Thingspiel* as a 'people's (völkische) liturgy'.¹¹ Burdekin is particularly fascinated by this liturgical aspect, to the extent that the ritual that opens

6. Joseph Goebbels qtd. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) p.128.

7. Henning Eichberg 'The Nazi *Thingspiel*: Theater for the Masses in Fascism and Proletarian Culture', trans. by Robert A. Jones, *New German Critique* 11 (1977), pp. 133-150, p.140.

8. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, p.155.

9. Katharine Burdekin, *Swastika Night* (New York, NY: The Feminist Press) p.5 (subsequent page numbers in body of text). Examples of press reporting of *Thingspiele* include for example, A Correspondent, 'Propaganda in the Theatre', *The Times*, Wednesday, 4/12/1935, p.12 and J.M.D.P., 'Art in Nazi Germany', *The Manchester Guardian*, 16/3/1937, p.11.

10. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, p.126.

11. Wilhelm von Schramm qtd. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, p.128.

the novel is an explicitly religious rite that takes place in a Church (the Holy Hitler Chapel). The assembled masses sing the Creed:

*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! (p.5)*

This passage clearly means to remind readers of the Christian liturgy. Indeed, Burdekin's Nazi Creed is adapted from the Apostles' Creed as we find it in the *Book of Common Prayer*: 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth: And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, Who was conceived by the holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary.'¹² The Apostles' Creed goes back to the 4th century, but the English version that Burdekin used was first standardised in the King's Book of 1543, of which Henry VIII claimed authorship. Cranmer's first *Book of Common Prayer*, published in 1549, simply instructs that '*the minister shal say the Creed and the Lordes praier in englishe, with a loud voice*', but in the 1662 version the full text (as above) is printed, along with an instruction that the Creed may be 'sung, or said' (a concession to high-church tendencies in the Carolian Restoration) 'by the Minister, and the people standing'.¹³ There are other parallels between the Nazi ritual and the Anglican liturgy as set out in the prayer book. For example, the Catechism requires the congregant to recite the Ten Commandments, and in Burdekin's novel the Knight intones the 'fundamental immutable laws of Hitler society' (p.7). The *Book of Common Prayer* was the central text of the English Reformation that defined a new religious practice against Rome. The prayer book and the debates around it are central to a long Reformation that Burdekin's novels evoke, an incomplete project when she wrote her futuristic fictions, and a pervasive feature of the imagined futures she frequently depicts. It is vitally important to the ways in which she thinks about collective voicing.

12. Brian Cummings (ed.), *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.247.

13. Cummings (ed.), *The Book of Common Prayer*, p.247 and see p.759n.

Placing the prayer book at the centre of the Reformation encourages us to question a certain standard view of the transition from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period: namely, the idea that the Medieval Church was collective and communal, and that the Protestant Reformation heralded a new period of private individualism. Various versions of this idea can be found in the work of Elizabeth Eisenstein, Alasdair MacIntyre, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, Max Weber and Ian Watt, to name a few. In the last twenty years or so, scholars of Reformation culture have sought to revise, and even to reverse, this model. Ramie Targoff's *Common Prayer: The Language of Devotion in Early Modern England* (2001) aimed 'to challenge one of the governing premises of our understanding of early modern religious culture: that the private sphere fostered by the Protestant Reformation represented a powerful alternative to the superficial and depersonalized practices of the medieval Catholic Church'.¹⁴ Putting common prayer centrestage, Targoff showed that 'what emerges in the aftermath of the Reformation is less a triumphant embrace of the individual's private and indivisible self than a concerted effort to shape the otherwise uncontrollable and unreliable internal sphere through common acts of devotion.' (p.6) (Targoff also argues that medieval Catholic culture was much more disparate and individualistic in its ritual observances than nostalgic constructions of a so-called organic community would allow.) One of my purposes in tracing debates around the *Book of Common Prayer* into the twentieth century is to explore the effect that the widely-accepted revisionist account of the Reformation might have on our understanding of a modern culture: a Reformation characterised less by the rise of atomistic individualism than by the forcible imposition of set forms of devotion. What would happen to our theories of modernity if we rewrote its founding myth along these lines?

Burdekin's work provides fertile ground for such a project because it engages explicitly with Reformation debates around the prayer book and links these directly to the political question of collective speech in the interwar period. The prayer book plays an important role in Burdekin's 1929 novel *The Rebel Passion*, whose narrator is a 12th Century Norman monk based in Glastonbury called Giraldus.¹⁵ This narrator is given visions of the past, present and future, from

14. Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p.5.

15. Katherine Burdekin, *The Rebel Passion* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1929) (subsequent references give page numbers in brackets). It seems highly likely that Burdekin had in mind Giraldus Cambrensis (c.1146-1220), AKA Gerald of Wales. However *The Rebel Passion*'s present is 'in the seventh year of the reign of King Stephen', i.e. 1142: four years before Giraldus Cambrensis was born. Other historical figures from this milieu

the evolution of man to the 32nd century, in roughly chronological order, while, in the novel's present, he works on a manuscript Mass Book. He is guided through his visions by a spirit guide who plays Virgil to Giraldu's Dante, 'one of the Children of God' (p.24), referred to throughout simply as the Child. The novel allows readers to experience the development of the Protestant Reformation, the English Civil War, the Industrial Revolution and the Great War (among many other things) from the defamiliarising perspective of a medieval narrator.

The schism in the church is a central theme of the novel, and Giraldu is sceptical of the 'heretics' who deny that the blood and body of Christ are literally present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. One feature of the narration is that Giraldu frequently does not know the modern terms for the thing he describes, so the word 'Protestant' is never used: the distinction is between those who say 'it is not there' and those who insist 'it is there'—'it' being the blood and body of Christ during the eucharistic rite. The heroine in the novel's historiography of English Christianity is Elizabeth I, who says in relation to this question of transubstantiation, 'I don't know'. Indeed, Elizabeth's revised *Book of Common Prayer* of 1559 (established as the only legal form of religious observance in another Act of Uniformity that year) deliberately fudged the question: as Alan Jacobs writes, it restored an 'ambiguous language' that 'allowed worshippers to believe that Christ was, in some way, not specifically defined, truly present in the bread and wine'.¹⁶ Or not, depending on the particular preferences of the devotee.

The writing of *The Rebel Passion* coincided with a contentious period in the history of the prayer book, and Burdekin's novel addresses that controversy directly. The authority of the prayer book had suffered a blow during the Great War. As Jacobs explains:

are found in the right place at the right time: for example Henry of Blois was indeed the Abbot of Glastonbury in 1142, and acts as a mentor to Burdekin's fictional Giraldu. Giraldu Cambrensis was an important scholar and, unlike Burdekin's protagonist, an ambitious courtier. If Burdekin's choice of Giraldu as a name for her narrator is intended to provoke comparisons with Giraldu Cambrensis, these might merely serve to position Burdekin's narrator as a certain kind of historian. Giraldu Cambrensis is credited with 'an alert interest in the social patterns and behaviour of other peoples that can only be called ethnographic'. Robert Bartlett, 'Gerald of Wales [Giraldu Cambrensis, Gerald de Barry] (c. 1146–1220x23), author and ecclesiastic.' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2006). Accessed 8 Aug. 2018, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-10769>.

16. Alan Jacobs, *The Book of Common Prayer: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), p.58.

The intrinsically repetitive character of liturgy reinforces the feeling of mindlessness, of saying without thinking, and the prayer book's fixed place in the Establishment connects it with vast, pitiless institutional forces—forces that blithely send young men to their deaths.¹⁷

In 1928—the year before the publication of *The Rebel Passion*—the prayer book of 1662 suffered its first 'real threat of demise' as a high-Church, Anglo-Catholic faction, produced a revised version that reintroduced transubstantiation unambiguously into the eucharistic rite.¹⁸ The new book was voted down by the House of Commons, many of whose members were from non-conformist backgrounds. In Burdekin's novel, Giraldus describes how 'a small and lively section of the heretics who would say—"it is there"—and yet would stay in their own Church and create strife ... produced a new book for the prayers of the heretics' (p.240). After explaining the failure of the new book of 1928, the Child allows Giraldus a vision of the old prayer book:

So they returned to their old book of prayers, and the Child took me into a vision that I might read it. I have forgotten it now, but I remember that it was written in the deep, strong, resonant English that was its perfection, and that the prayers at their semblance of the Mass were very beautiful, neither could I see why any of them wanted to change a word of it. I remember I said to the Child:

"If a man will pray these prayers with earnestness and humility surely he will find our Lord Christ."

And the Child said: "Surely he will." (p.240)

After his initial shock at the heretical questioning of transubstantiation, Giraldus comes to sympathise with the spirit of Elizabethan compromise, and in this passage he comes to the view that the venerable 1662 prayer book that had been in place since the Restoration will serve as a more than adequate guide for a Christian life: 'though it is a heretics' book,' he concludes, 'there must be in it very much good.' (p.241).

17. Jacobs, *The Book of Common Prayer*, pp.157-8.

18. Cummings, 'Introduction', p.xlvii.

Through the visions of *The Rebel Passion* Giraldus comes to sympathise with the Protestant heresy, and indeed becomes wary of deviations from the new Anglican norms, both from high-church Anglo-Catholics (like those behind the attempted 1928 reform) and from Puritan dissenters. Puritans—the most important critics of the *Book of Common Prayer* in the seventeenth century—objected to the whole principle of reciting prayers in unison. John Milton’s *Eikonoklastes* (1649), for example, rejected all set prayers as ‘the servile yoke of liturgy’. The attempt, Milton argued, ‘to imprison and confine by force, into a pinfold of set words, those two most unimprisonable things, our prayers, and that divine spirit of utterance that moves them, is a tyranny’.¹⁹ Giraldus is in general dismissive of the Puritans (whom he calls ‘the joyless people’ in a highly negative account of the Cromwellian protectorate (p.135)), but he finds among them one redeeming figure in John Bunyan, whom the Child commends as ‘a great man, and a noble, and one the world must thank God for.’ (p.135) This is significant because Bunyan was (like Milton) famously critical of set prayers, berating those who were ‘so hot for the forms and not for the power of praying’ (p.657), and rejecting the prayer book entirely in favour of spontaneous and improvised prayer that ‘bubbleth out of the heart’ (p.656).²⁰ Through its encomium on Bunyan, *The Rebel Passion* seems to signal some sympathy for the more individualistic, improvisatory forms of prayer that Puritans like Bunyan valued.

In the final section of *The Rebel Passion*, Giraldus is given a vision of the 32nd-century which the Child presents as an achieved utopia. Christianity has become radically less hierarchical, so that ‘the priesthood, as it used to be, is clean passed away’ (p.271). There is now only one church in the country, Durham Cathedral, and Giraldus makes a pilgrimage there to attend Mass. Nevertheless, in Burdekin’s novel, Giraldus’s description of the liturgy explicitly evokes the Elizabethan compromise:

Their form of words I cannot now remember, but I know that the spirit of the words of the Wise Queen was in it, and most humbly, and with utter adoration of our Lord Christ this people said—‘I do not know.’ (p.304)

19. John Milton, *Eikonoklastes* in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Merrit Y. Hughes, vol.3, 1648-1649 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962), p.504.

20. John Bunyan, *A Discourse on Prayer* in *The Complete Works of John Bunyan with an Introduction by Rev. John P. Gulliver*, Part 4 (Philadelphia, PA: Bradley, Garrettson & Co.: 1872), p.656.

This utopian future is one in which the bloody Reformation debates about the precise ‘form of words’ for set prayers has receded, but Elizabeth’s example remains important in preserving ambiguity around the question of transubstantiation. A set liturgy continues to exist, and retains a clear relationship to Elizabeth’s *Book of Common Prayer*, but the sectarian debates that surround it are over: ‘there are no sects, and no heretics, and all are Christians’, the Child reports. ‘The wound in the Church of Christ is healed’ (p.271).

Despite the continued presence of the prayer book in the Durham rite, the utopia that concludes Giraldus’s visions is clearly more individualistic than the Anglican liturgy that Giraldus encounters earlier on in the novel. The demise of the priesthood seems crucial here: there is evidence of an agreed script for worship, but without it having been imposed by a Church hierarchy. The element of individualism that Giraldus discovers in the utopia of the 32nd-century is also interestingly bound up with the question of print. As Giraldus patiently copies his Mass Book in the novel’s present, he is shown visions of the printing press, and of a culture based on the widespread circulation of printed books among a literate population. *The Rebel Passion* repeatedly underscores the fact that its twelfth-century narrator is looking across the frontier of a media revolution. During Giraldus’s vision of the printing press, the Child points out that its operator ‘can write a thousand books while you are writing half of one’. Giraldus then expresses a concern that if the man ‘writes ill books with his engine it will be as if the devil had spawned, and for every devil there had been in the world before there would now be ten thousand’.²¹ A bad book produced on the printing press could have a much more extensive influence than Giraldus’s own hand-copied Mass Book, he worries. But the Child reassures him:

“I will show you a time when two out of every four books written with this writing-engine shall be trivial, blasphemous and lustful, yet I say to you that the good of this writing-engine by far will exceed its harm, and that it is the most blessed invention of man, and will lead to a great growth of pity, and understanding, and a knowledge of man, his virtues and his imperfections.” (p.124)

The Child looks forward to a poly-centric, literate culture where a wide variety of texts compete in a marketplace of ideas. So, in the long historical trajectory described by *The Rebel Passion*,

21. Katherine Burdekin, *The Rebel Passion* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1929), p.123.

the Reformation culture in which the state imposed set prayers for joint utterance (words praised by both Giraldus and the Child as a good template for a religious life), is only a staging post on the way to something else. Books can be institutionalised in a national church and used as a means to make everyone say the same thing, but there is also the future possibility of a more pluralistic and individualistic high literacy, in which the importance of a single unifying script has receded.

The idea that the Reformation inaugurated a stage of state-enforced collectivity *en route* to a higher individualism is made explicit in *Proud Man* (1934). The narrator of this novel is a visitor to interwar Britain from a distant future in which all sexual differences have disappeared, peace reigns, and human behaviour has reached a degree of perfection such that ethical systems and religious institutions have become obsolete and disappeared. The Person assumes different gendered identities over the course of the novel, and stays with three different individuals—a Priest, a woman novelist and a child murderer—debating with them the institutions and mores of 1930s Britain, and expressing bafflement and disdain.

Proud Man's engagement with the question of collective speech comes primarily in the Person's discussions with the Priest, Andrew. Some of the tension in this section of the novel arises from the fact that the Person initially assumes that Andrew is entirely at one with his church and his profession—but on closer inspection we find that Andrew is rather at odds with them, mouthing along with the various rituals of the church without fully believing what he is saying. Andrew is undergoing a kind of crisis, not in terms of his belief in God, but in terms of his confidence in the collective forms of worship which it is his job to administer. 'It is religion that has set us apart from God', he says (p.104). 'I would rather the *church* were not alive' (p.103). The novel's thinking about institutionalised Christianity is also bound up with the *Book of Common Prayer*, which the Person refers to as Andrew's 'ritual book'.²² When Andrew first meets the Person and begins to wonder what kind of creature he is dealing with, the narrator reports: 'So I know then that he had divined my humanity, but in the words of one of his ritual books, "he was not afraid with any amazement"' (p.100). The quotation is from the very end of the marriage service in the 1662 prayer book: a somewhat obscure phrase which seems to exhort

22. Burdekin, *Proud Man*, p.107. While the Person and Giraldus are different kinds of character in various ways, they function similarly as narrators because they are so far displaced from the world of the story, and the resulting effect of defamiliarisation is underlined by the fact that they frequently lack the specific vocabulary to describe it.

wives not to be too fearful or timid. The fact that the Person quotes these words seems to suggest that they have a resonance that allows them to be repurposed to fit new situations: not a new wife being ritually admonished by a Priest, but a Priest coming to terms with an androgynous time traveller from the future, who might very well provoke fear and amazement. Elsewhere the prayer book is treated with more scepticism, as when the Person reads Andrew's 'ritual book' in order 'to hear in my mind what he was saying in his church' (p.107), and then incredulously tests the extent of his belief in its doctrines. The marriage service is again at issue: 'I said, "You imagine that God joins men and women together in marriage, that old woman up at the farm and that old man were so joined, and if you can imagine that nothing can be too hard for you."' (p.107) Such a belief in a mystical union of two people is all but incomprehensible to the Person. Thus, Andrew learns to see the words of the prayer book from the defamiliarising perspective of the Person. As a result he increasingly detaches himself from these words and from the institutionalised Christianity they represent, eventually leaving the church entirely.

The *Book of Common Prayer* symbolises for Andrew a form of imposed collective speech that stifles individuality. His growing dissatisfaction with the church and with religion branches out into a more generalised rejection of group belonging:

'individually most people are all right. ... But in herds we are horrible. And more and more we do, in our cowardliness, clump ourselves into herds. We're afraid of our own shadows and our own malice, and we must have people to stand between us and them. There is *no* humanity in herds. Each little bit of humanity in the individual dries up and dies directly that individual gets clamped in a herd. Until all the herds are broken up, *all* of them—nations, churches, fascists, communists, trade unions, the B.M.A., the Great White Race, the Nordic Myth, the proletariat, the bourgeoisie, the gangsters, the priesthoods of all religions—until all these herds are scattered there can be no humanity on earth. It's cowardice that drives us into them, and only courage can get us out.'²³

Andrew makes no distinction between good groups and bad, left wing groups and right wing ones: it is the collective in itself that is the root of humankind's problems. He goes on to suggest

23. Katharine Burdekin (Murray Constantine), *Proud Man* (New York, NY: The Feminist Press, 1993), p.147.

that the feeling for ‘*esprit de corps*’ is a specific historical phase that the world will need to be passed through in order for people to become truly human:

‘First you have primitive tribe action which is nearly animal. Then you have selfish individualism which makes every one of us not much better than Sawney Bean. Then you have civilized tribe action to cure the Sawney Beaniness and you get *esprit de corps*. But after that you might have unselfish individualism which would make the whole world one corps. *Esprit du mode*, or *esprit* of humanity. And surely, surely that would be better.’²⁴

The idea that the catalogue of characteristically 1930s collectives listed by Andrew—‘nations, churches, fascists, communists, trade unions’, etc.—constitute a phase of ‘civilised tribe action’ that must be replaced by ‘unselfish individualism’ if we are to become truly human is explicitly endorsed by the Person at the very end of the novel. Based on interactions with ‘subhumans’, the Person concludes that

their possible attainment of humanity depends on how far they can become and remain, no matter what assaults are made on them, individuals. In the mass they have not even three germs of humanity, and while they live, and more important still, *think* as masses, they must remain subhuman or perhaps go back to the innocence and comparative happiness of the beasts.²⁵

Andrew’s ‘ritual book’ represents an inaugural moment in the ‘civilised tribe action’ that began in the Reformation and became typical of modernity. *Proud Man* hopes to remedy an excess of state-mandated collectivity with a dose of ‘unselfish individualism’.

The same scepticism towards what Andrew in *Proud Man* calls ‘civilised tribe action’ clearly underpins Burdekin’s depiction of the Nazi rituals of *Swastika Night*. As I have shown, in that novel, Burdekin links the Nazi attempt to hold a politico-religious community together around a common liturgy is with the English Reformation and its prayer book. Von Hess, a senior Teutonic Knight in the regime who is nevertheless its staunchest critic, explains: “That Creed has

24. Burdekin, *Proud Man*, pp.148-9.

25. Burdekin, *Proud Man*, pp.162.

held this huge empire together for over six hundred years. Nonsense of such endurance value almost ceases to be nonsense.” (p.138) Nazism is understood as a product of the intensification of the forces set in motion by the Reformation, and this notion tilts us towards that more recent scholarly understanding of the Reformation: not the arrival of individualism, but the attempt to enforce a more collective and communal kind of observance through the imposition of a state-backed liturgy.

There is not much hope in *Swastika Night* that the Nazi Empire might be overturned, but the germs of an opposition can be found in the characters’ reaction against the rote repetition of set forms of words, which come to be associated with an overbearing state. Even Hermann, a central character in the novel, but a more obedient Nazi than Von Hess, is a less than enthusiastic participant in the Creed:

Hermann sang with the rest in a mighty and toneful roaring of male voices, but the words of the Creed made no impression on his ear or his brain. They were too familiar ... [,] too homely and dull to excite any particular enthusiasm. (p.5)

Hermann’s half-hearted participation in the Creed speaks of a disaffection that has not—or not yet—solidified into active opposition. It is little more than a residual desire to speak words that have not been set in order by somebody else and mandated by the state. Even so, it might be thought to point toward the possibility of an ‘unselfish individualism’ of the kind debated in *Proud Man*, and in the 32nd-century utopia at the end of *The Rebel Passion*.

One of the key constraints that the dystopian Nazi state of *Swastika Night* places on the independence of the individual voice is the tight control it exercises on literacy. Englishmen are not taught to read unless (like the novel’s chief protagonist, Alfred) they are engineers who will need to read technical manuals; all books are banned except those technical manuals and the Hitler Bible; and women can’t read at all. The women are excluded from the men’s service that Hermann attends, and attend instead a Women’s Worship. Burdekin’s depiction of this rite is characterised by a tension between the set form of the ceremony and the women’s spontaneous outpouring of a grief for their infant sons, who (in this dystopian setting) are removed from their mothers to be raised in an exclusively male society: ‘All together, women fell into a sort of mass grief’, Burdekin’s narrator reports. This cacophony of ‘feminine squeakings and wailings’ (p.10)

is overwritten by an agreed social script, captured by Burdekin in a highly unusual form of narration:

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. (p.10)

In a recent article on collective narrative, Monika Fludernik points out that free indirect style is relatively often used to depict collective thoughts shared by a group.²⁶ Free indirect style retains third person pronouns (while combining them with ‘the indications of time and place appropriate to direct discourse’)²⁷, but in this passage from *Swastika Night*, first person plural pronouns (‘us’) break through into the omniscient third person narration, doing for collective free indirect style what Joyce did for its individual variant in the first half of *Ulysses*. We might label this *collective interior monologue*, a technique perfectly adapted to an exploration of the relationship between the social scripts internalised by a group, and the individual conscience.

The set words that the women speak in unison and the scripts they have internalised exist in tension with the possibility of individual self expression. Like many rites in the *Book of Common Prayer*, the Women’s Worship involves call and response initiated by the Minister—in this case the Knight—but the women’s grief cannot be fully contained by the formal response:

“Are you not blessed above all female animals in being allowed to be the mothers of men?”

He paused. In dreary little scattered whispers came the formal response: “Yes, Lord. Yes, Lord. We are blessed.” But a renewed burst of weeping followed as the women wondered where were the men they had borne. He is twelve now—he is twenty-five and Rudi twenty-one—if Hans is still alive he’s seventy this summer, with a white beard like the Knight. But

26. Monika Fludernik, ‘The Many in Action and Thought: Towards a Poetics of the Collective in Narrative’ in *Narrative*, Volume 25, Number 2, (May 2017), pp.139-163, p.142.

27. Chris Baldick, ‘Free Indirect Style’, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, online edn. (Oxford University Press, 2015) Retrieved 31 May. 2018, from <http://www.oxfordreference.com/ueaezproxy.uea.ac.uk:2048/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-483>.

this last thought was in the mind of a very old and incredibly repulsive hag, far too old to cry.
(p.12)

The formal response is followed by the reassertion of a grief that ‘bubbleth from the heart’, and which tends towards the fragmentation of the speaking group into individuals with their essentially private experiences. The sentence that begins ‘He is twelve now...’ is in a sort of free indirect style, but instead of being focalised either through the group or through one given individual, it is a composite of multiple individual perspectives: different women who lost different sons. The women’s experiences of losing their sons are individual and distinct, and yet bracketed together in a single multi-perspectival sentence that paratactically links these disparate experiences and orients them against the public ritual.

The question about how disparate voices might relate to one another is central to the way in which the novel has been theorised as a genre. What makes the novel novelistic, argued Bakhtin, is its dialogism—its ability to coordinate multiple different voices held in tension: ‘in the novel’, he wrote, ‘double-voicedness sinks its roots into a fundamental, sociolinguistic speech diversity and multi-linguagedness’.²⁸ Where for Bakhtin the unique power of the literary novel is its capacity to make one voice (i.e. that of the narrator) speak as many, and therefore mobilise in some way the linguistic diversity of the community, liturgy is designed to make many voices speak as one. In the context of the Reformation debates to which I have drawn attention, the novel might be thought to have taken the side of Milton and Bunyon, steering away from the ‘servile yoke of liturgy’ to invest its attention on a multiplicity of individualistic forms of expression that ‘bubbleth from the heart’. This Puritan individualism is questioned in *The Rebel Passion* which tends to see the Elizabethan settlement—with its regime of common prayer—as an essential precursor to any move towards greater individual self-expression. The distinction, in *Proud Man*, between selfish and unselfish individualism helps us to understand this ambivalence. In *Swastika Night*, the hopes for a post-Nazi future come from two directions. First, literature: a single copy of a manuscript book survives, passed down the generations of the Von Hess family, and containing key historical facts about the origins of Nazism inaccessible anywhere else. This is potentially the seed of a plural and individualistic culture of the book, in which it could be

28. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp.325-6.

printed, disseminated and debated, set against rival accounts and situated as part of a culture founded on democratic dialogue, like that in the England of the 32nd-century depicted at the end of *The Rebel Passion*.

The second site of potential resistance lies in the possibility of radical new liturgy, to be found in the last vestiges of an English vernacular culture where secret rebellious songs offer a patriotic rejection of German domination:

*God send our warrior-king,
 God send our valiant king,
 God send our king.
 Send him victorious,
 War-worn but glorious
 Long to rule over us,
 God send him soon.*

*Thy choicest arms in store
 On us be pleased to pour
 On churl and thegn,
 Scatter the enemy!
 Death to all Germany!
 England will yet be free
 In that great reign.*

This bastardised reworking of the national anthem provides a secret source of resistance against Nazism and points to the need for new forms of collective speech, sung or spoken in unison. This returns us to the phenomenon of the *Thingspiel*, which raised fundamental interpretive questions about the politics of collective speech. The idea of the *Thingspiel* as a ‘people’s liturgy’ projected the idea that its mass choruses embodied a grassroots collectivity that came from below. Fischer-Lichte points this out as she seeks to account for Goebbels’s decision to ban the *Sprechchor* (speaking chorus) in May 1936, effectively bringing the *Thingspiel* movement to an end. These plays ‘presupposed the community was self-organizing and self-organized, as a

community that can do without a leader’, so perhaps they were inimical to the *Führer* principle?²⁹ The controversial sociologist and historian Henning Eichberg—who was involved in German far right groupings in the 1960s and 70s—claimed that the ‘*Thingspiel* as a manipulative instrument of the Nazi state was only part of the picture’, trying to reposition it as a kind of democratic outpouring that originated in the heart of the demos itself.³⁰ As the history of the English Reformation arguably suggests, one ought to be very wary of any attempt to treat acts of collective speech as the embodied will of the people—though this has become a classic populist move. Collective speech is more often orchestrated and imposed from above.

Burdekin’s invocation of a vernacular English folk culture as a possible site of resistance to Nazism is one possible answer to the question: what would a left-wing, or anti-authoritarian, form of collective speech look like? Burdekin’s earlier work implied that there could be no such thing: in the pacifist vision of a stateless, nationless world occupied by the narrator of *Proud Man* (pub.1934), all collectivities are viewed as ‘herds’ and with suspicion. The apparently earnest quest for a people’s liturgy in *Swastika Night* might then be attributed to a shift in Burdekin’s political positioning: Patai notes that ‘As the threat posed by Hitler’s Germany became ever more palpable, Burdekin, like many other writers of the 1920s, abandoned her earlier pacifism and hoped England would face up to the Nazi threat’.³¹ In her turn towards an exploration of English nationhood, and the search for a new, better liturgy, the Burdekin of *Swastika Night* is close to other figures of the Popular Front, such as the poet Jack Lindsay, who wrote anti-fascist poems for ‘mass declamation’, to be spoken in unison at political meetings. As Salton-Cox argues, this phase of Burdekin’s work fits in with the ‘narrative of autochthonous radicalism’ that enabled the Popular Front to deploy a leftish strain of English nationalism in the fight against fascism (and Salton-Cox links this valorisation of England with a strong homophobic impulse).³² Though they might find it an awkward compromise, liberals, Communists and all the anti-fascist forces were going to have to come together and sing from the same hymn sheet. Burdekin was part of a left that understood the danger of state-imposed forms of political observance, but also felt a need for anti-fascism to harness the liturgical power of collective speech to its own ends.

29. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, p.142.

30. Eichberg, ‘The Nazi *Thingspiel*’, p.137.

31. Patai, ‘Afterword’, *Proud Man*, p.321.

32. Salton-Cox, *Queer Communism*, p.130.

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