

THE RED VIRGIN - mankind, madness and a woman's place.

THE STORY of the Spanish mother and daughter whom this piece takes as its subject is ordinary in no sense, mediocre in hardly any, and quite extraordinary in all others. No original account of it has appeared in English, with the exception of Havelock Ellis' short note *The Red Virgin*, which was printed in an edition of *The Adelphi* in 1933 (in which edition another piece is by one Eric Blair, to be rather better known in later years under the pseudonym of George Orwell).

The Austrian writer Erich Hackl has also published a book which had been translated into English as *Aurora's Motives*: it is, however, a novelisation. (According to Hackl, a Swiss philosopher also published as early as 1935 a German-language novelisation of the story).

But there is no reference to this mother or this daughter in standard English-language reference sources such as the *Macmillan Dictionary of Women's Biography*. Similarly with *Women's Liberation and Revolution: a bibliography*, *Women's Studies: a checklist of bibliographies*, and the *Bibliography of Feminist Periodicals*. None of these last three even mention Spain, though there is much reference to the likes of Besant, Stopes, Sanger, Frances Wright and Alexandra Kollontai.

In Spanish, however, the story has - unsurprisingly - drawn considerable attention in the last thirty years: and it is on these sources that this short piece draws.

The mother in question was known as Aurora - the Roman goddess of the dawn - and her surname was Rodriguez. Her daughter was called Hildegart ('the garden of reason') who was named after Hildegard of Bingen, the German visionary mystic,

musician and mathematician of the 12th century (who had been raised and educated by a recluse). Aurora Rodriguez was born in 1880, at the end of the nineteenth century (in whose novels, it is jocularly said, the fate of every female character was either marriage, madness or death). Her place of birth was in the north-west Spanish province of Galicia; in El Ferrol (birthplace just 12 years later of the strutting little caudillo of the years to come).

Aurora came from a talented family and, rather than go to school, was educated at home, largely in the library of her father, a progressive lawyer. Among these books were the seeds of the future generously sown: for in this library the young Aurora became familiar with the lives and theories of early utopian socialism (and the long, long shadow of the French Revolution). Among these were Robert Owen of New Lanark fame, and his son Robert Dale Owen of the New Harmony colony in Indiana and editor of the *New Harmony Gazette*. A second was the Dundee-born Frances Wright, an early suffragette in the United States, and co-publisher with Robert Dale Owen of the *Free Enquirer*.

A third was the French thinker Charles Fourier, whose proposals were so scandalous that no less an authority than Marx called him the philosopher of the brothel, and much of whose work was not published in English translation until the 1960s.

Fourier, disgusted at the alienation and exploitation of industrial society, proposed a re-organisation of it on co-operative, communal lines. Prevailing arrangements with regard to marriage, money, property and gender relations would be overturned (as they were in the Asturian miners' revolution of the 1930s) in his communes, which he called phalansteries. A number of these flourished (but ultimately failed) in France, Algeria and the United

States, where there were thirty of them, during the nineteenth century.

Fourier was thought very strange by his contemporaries. Some thought him to be mad, a man who should be locked-up for his ideas (sic). Certainly, the copious writings of this minor civil servant (who was 17 when the Parisian mobile vulgus stormed the Bastille) are often bizarre: difficult at best, impenetrable at worst. But given his influence on Aurora, a synopsis of his thought is appropriate.

According to Fourier, all hitherto-existing human 'progress' had been towards the social condition of 'Civilisation'. But this was a mirage, a self-defeating diversion, leading to a pig-pen of overpopulation, poverty, malice, greed, sorrow, class and gender exploitation - in all, a social and personal psychosis. (Marx himself crossed some of this territory, of course: but it is easy to see how Fourier's work did not recommend itself to the great 'scientist' of socialism!)

For Fourier, the only valid social condition was the one that he called Harmony, which was characterised by two principal - and interdependent - considerations. The first was a free, open and equitable ordering of gender-relations: the second was the phalanstery, the core social unit of Harmony, and the only organisational channel through which the first was made possible. Much later, these would be known as the commune and free-love: though there was to be, notoriously, some disagreement about what each of these was precisely supposed to mean.

Here is Fourier, in any case, on the condition of women. 'As a general proposition: social advances and changes are brought about by virtue of the progress of women towards liberty, and the

decadences of the social order are brought about by virtue of the decrease of liberty of women’.

‘Women in a state of liberty will excel man in all functions of the mind and body which are not attributes of physical strength. Already does man seem to have a premonition of this: he becomes indignant and alarmed when women belie the prejudice which accuses them of inferiority. Women were called to produce ..... liberators, a political Spartacus, geniuses who would devise means for raising their sex from degradation’.

Two further planks of Fourier’s thought concerned marriage and overpopulation (and by extension control of sexual reproduction).

‘The love of ‘Civilisation’ in marriage is, at the end of a few months, or perhaps the second day, often nothing more than pure brutality, chance coupling, induced by the domestic tie, devoid of any illusion of the mind or of the heart; a result very common among the masses where husband and wife, surfeited, morose, quarrelling with each other during the day, become necessarily reconciled upon retiring, because they have not the means to purchase two beds, and contact, the brute spur of the senses, triumphs a moment ..... if this be love, it is a love most material and trivial’.

‘And yet this is the snare upon which philosophy reckons to transform the most gracious of the passions into a source of political dupery; to excite the rapid growth of the population, and stimulate the poor by the sight of their progeny in rags. What a noble role assigned to love, in exchange for the freedom ravished from her! She is made, among the ‘Civilised’, a provider of food for cannon; and among barbarians a persecutor of the weaker half of humanity; these are, under the names of harem and marriage, the honourable

functions which are assigned to love by our pretended lovers of liberty!’

‘Confounded by the vices of their love-polity, they repel every suggestion of estimating the properties of free love. Ignorant and deceitful as to the proper uses of liberty, they desire it to be unlimited in commerce, where crime and roguery everywhere require the curb of law; and they deprive love of all liberty - love, whose vast scope in the field of passion would lead to all virtues, to all wonders. What an unlucky science they make, these ‘Civilised’ theorists: what an opposition to all the desires of nature and truth’.

As to overpopulation and the control of reproduction: Fourier anticipates Malthus, reproductive pharmacologists and the Chinese government of the 21st century by a very long way.

‘Among the inconsistencies and the blunders of modern policy, there is nothing more shocking than the neglect to legislate upon the equilibrium of population, upon the proportion of the number of consumers to the productive forces. In every age, the equilibrium of population has been the stumbling block, or one of the stumbling blocks, of the policies of ‘Civilisation’.

‘The social man lowers himself to the level of insects by bringing into the world a swarm of children who will be reduced to devouring each other through excess of numbers. They will not consume each other bodily like insects, fish and wild beasts; but they will devour each other politically, through rapine, wars, and the perfidies of ‘Civilisation’ ‘.

All this was, it might be thought, strong stuff for a young girl in which to immerse herself. Just how strong it was, however, would not become apparent for some years yet. First, there was to be some

early training in pedagogy, with the abandoned son of an older sister. Aurora, by the age of fourteen, had care of this child who was called Pepito Arriola, and who went on to gain international renown as a pianist. And in her 'twenties, Aurora briefly planned to establish a phalanstery at Alcala de Henares, but soon abandoned it for a grander plan. She no longer cared to reform existing society. Rather she, Aurora, no more the docile and passive instrument of patriarchy and providence, would create a new class of women - would create the first representative of a new class of humanity, a model pioneer of the radiant future to come, the First Free Woman in human history.

This creation could not, of course, despite Aurora's vaulting will and ambition, be entirely single-handed. Aurora therefore advertised widely for the services of 'colaborador fisiol—gico'. She finally chose one in the form of an adventurer who had abandoned the priesthood for the life of a merchant-seaman, and whose assistance was scorned by her as an 'imposici—n de la naturaleza'. Once she had conceived the intended daughter (and Aurora never had any doubt whatsoever that the child was going to be a female one) the father was sent away, and she took herself to Madrid, under cover of whose anonymity she could soon begin her great work in seclusion (rather as Hildegart's namesake had been raised in Germany).

Hildegart's education was to be somewhat accelerated. She began learning to read at seven months and to speak soon afterwards; she walked at eleven months, and by thirty two months could read and write with ease. By the time she was three Hildegart - who had already read quite widely, according to her mother - could play the piano and had learned the use of a typewriter. (As a

scarcely older child, Hildegart would win an adults' touch-typing competition, organised by the Madrid office of the Underwood typewriter company). And thus armed, her studies made rapid progress on all the fronts, in all the theatres, of the combat to which her mother was intent on introducing her.

Before eight, Hildegart had a 'fairly fluent' command of Spanish, French, German and English (to which list she would in due course add a working knowledge of more languages). By the time she was thirteen, she was translating a rare text on the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle while - on attaining the distinction of that age - she also was allowed to enter the legal faculty of Madrid university. At fourteen she won a national essay-competition for a comparative study of the stories of Romeo and Juliet, Abelard and HŹlo•se, and the Lovers of Teruel, and aged fifteen she published a sixty-page monograph on eugenics.

By now, she was a member of the Young Socialists (the youth wing of the PSOE), was active in the Spanish trade-union confederation, and was writing for the Socialist. The editor had published her first ever article without knowing her age: he later said that she was destined to become 'a great figure of world socialism'. Three months later, she was elected by acclamation as vice-president of the Young Socialists. She was still just fifteen years of age.

The following year Hildegart graduated in law and immediately enrolled for a degree in medicine (for law and medicine were deemed to be the most critically important disciplines available for her purposes). That year, the floodgates of her pen (or Underwood) opened with a vengeance, and she published books on birth control and elective paternity (110 pages), sexuality and Spanish women

(258 pages), and the sexual rebellion of youth (336 pages). A year later her 680-page study of Malthus was published; and during the following two years she would produce a torrent of articles, pamphlets and books on an ever-widening range of subjects: among them, the future of the bourgeoisie, endocrinology and delinquency, Marxism ('was Marx wrong?'), women in economic history, and Spanish politics.

In each case a 'fearlessly advanced position' was proposed, according to Havelock Ellis' article in the *Adelphi*, whether in terms of sexual education, marriage, divorce, birth-control, sterilisation, or related controversies of contemporary significance. In each case too, she brought to the positions advanced 'a wide knowledge of what is being done in other countries from the United States to Soviet Russia'. This clearly suggests that Hildegart was familiar with the work and advocacy of the likes of Annie Besant, Marie Stopes, Margaret Sanger and Alexandra Kollontai. (Certainly, she never tired of praising the sexual politics and new morality of the Soviet Union, and hoped to travel to Russia when the possibility arose).

By now she was widely known throughout Spanish public life and was heavily involved in youth and adult political affairs. She was national agent for the Birth Control International Information Centre, as well as secretary of the Spanish branch of the World League for Sexual Reform. (Its chairman, and Hildegart's co-founder of the branch, was the polymathic endocrinologist, historian and linguist Gregorio Marañón).

Hildegart also corresponded with the British writer and advanced social theorist H. G. Wells, and acted for him as translator on his visit to Spain. She was also, clearly, in close contact with Havelock Ellis. Indeed, both Wells and Ellis had urged Hildegart to

move to England, and it is thought that she in fact decided to do so. (A copy of one of her booklets, *Sexo y Amor*, is to be found today in the Ellis Papers in the Medical Library of Yale University, and is inscribed to 'my dear friend and English master Havelock Ellis').

Hildegart also appears to have been in contact with Magnus Hirschfeld, founder of Berlin's Institute of Sexology until it was sacked in May 1933 by sturdy Brownshirts (in the company of a few thousand sturdy university students).

In retrospect, that sacking may be considered as something of an omen: for just one month later Hildegart, aged 18, was to be dead - was to be murdered with four pistol-shots to the head and body, by her mother. (A copy of Ellis' article in the *Adelphi* arrived in Madrid on the day of her death, and Eduardo de Guzman was one of the first to visit her body as it lay in the local morgue). The manner of her death might serve as a metaphor for the fascist nightmare already unrolling in Germany, and which would shortly unroll in blood across the second Spanish republic.

Aurora would later describe the murder of her daughter as a 'crime of reason'. Having voluntarily presented herself to the police, Aurora shortly stood trial. She resolutely spurned legal advice to plead not guilty. She also rejected advice to claim mental imbalance, which - given that conviction was certain - might well have ensured a much lighter sentence than she could otherwise expect.

The murder of her daughter, she insisted, was not a crime of madness but was indeed a crime of reason: and thus was she awarded a custodial sentence of 26 years, 8 months and one day. And she served most of it too: initially in gaol, and then, for the remaining 22 years of her life, in a mental institution in the care of

nuns (!) and under the supervision of the sort of psychiatrists appropriate to a clerical-fascist state (!)

The case-notes of the latter, covering twenty years of attention, were discovered in the 1980s. Naturally enough, they are not easy to interpret coherently. But they appear to illustrate inter alia how Aurora rejected her 'feminine' destiny, which destiny ought to have led her to accept the primacy of the (patriarchal) state and 'manhood' in general. Hildegart had written that 'woman was the ultimate subject of exploitation, the centre of a contradiction even more profound than the struggle between the social classes': while the institution of marriage was a cesspit of exploitation and misery. Aurora appears to have taken a similar view, writing that, 'humanity will never be redeemed till woman is redeemed, for she needs to free herself from slavery' (in which comment something of Fourier can clearly be heard).

But in time detention would break Aurora, this child of her progressive father's bookshelves. The psychiatrists' case-notes inexorably chart her slow withdrawal to depression, despair and a private world of the utopian imagination: perhaps - almost certainly, indeed - to some form of truly tragic madness.

By 1938 she 'feels broken with no hopes for the future. She wants to die soon - she never thought she would die in a place like this'. By 194 she 'asks for justice, wants to leave here before she dies'. Two years later, when asked about her hopes for the future, 'she cries and says 'to die outwith this place, in an unknown, hidden place and far away' '.

And yet again, 'Cries intensely, tries to stop, but can't. Interview cannot continue'.

By 1948 Aurora's eyesight - first treated at the age of six, and perhaps damaged by early industry in her father's library - was too poor for reading. But when she asked for books to be read to her, 'they only laugh. I have been here for fifteen years, today I am old and nearly blind'.

And from that point, she progressively withdrew from any intercourse with the institutional authorities: year by year, the case notes record remorselessly, 'Doesn't want to come to the office, won't have anything to do with us'.

In 1955, Aurora finally found some sort of relief from her long incarceration in the form of a cancer for which she resolutely refused any treatment and which quickly proved fatal. But the spirit of what she and her daughter represented may still be said to live. More than forty years after her death, after all, three of Hildegart's books were re-published in Spain: three books by a young woman whom her first editor Andržs Saborit thought would become 'a great figure of world socialism', and who were she still alive today (and that is just possible) would be this year, 2007, in her early nineties.

In the meantime, the story of Hildegart and her mother Aurora is one that invites research and speculation in a multitude of directions .....

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