



# **‘A certain detachment’: Muriel Spark’s Experiments with Form**

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

Concentrating on an early period in her fiction-writing career (1953-73), this thesis offers a reassessment of the fiction and critical reception of Muriel Spark. It presents her characteristically concise and meticulously plotted texts as less neatly contained and narrowly didactic than is often alleged to be the case, focusing instead on their deceptively expansive and more equivocal qualities: specific attention is paid to aspects of generic liminality, self-reflexivity, and formal and stylistic experimentation. By taking this approach, I examine how Spark combines a degree of postmodern narrative 'play' with a realist approach to character construction and a serious moral-political vision, in a manner that collapses any sense of opposition between either possibility. It was by drawing upon a range of innovative and self-reflexive narrative strategies that Spark was able to facilitate moments of subversive satire and gendered social critique, while articulating concerns unique to the contemporary world.

An introductory chapter situates my study within the context of work previously undertaken on Spark, challenging the enduring and narrowly-defined 'myth' of the author as a Catholic comic writer whose literary experiments are reducible to a cruel and capricious god-game involving an almighty, omniscient narrator and an ensemble of thinly-drawn caricatures. The chapters that follow examine the alternatives to omniscience explored by Spark, and the rhetorical function of her various narrative experiments. Beginning with an analysis of her self-reflexive ghost stories, I proceed to examine Spark's metafictional approach to matters of gender, identity and free will. A third chapter traces the evolving relationship between Spark's fiction and the style and ethos of the *nouveau roman*, examining how the theories and aesthetics of the 'anti-novel' came to refine the author's satirical and sociopolitical focus. The final chapter explores her fiction's nuanced and highly subversive interrogation of the relationship between epistemological control and narrative perspective.

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\* \* \*

Elements of this thesis have been published, in earlier forms, in journal articles and book chapters. These previous publications are as follows:

“‘Haunted, whether we like it or not’”: The Ghost Stories of Muriel Spark,’ in *British Women Short Story Writers: The New Woman to Now*, ed. by Emma Young and James Bailey (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp.81-95.

Contains a brief discussion of *The Comforters*, and more detailed analyses of ‘Harper and Wilton,’ ‘The Portobello Road,’ ‘The Girl I Left Behind Me’ and ‘Bang-Bang You’re Dead’ – all discussed in greater detail in Chapter One.

‘Life and Death in the Tense Present: Time, Narrative and Doomed Deduction in Muriel Spark’s *The Driver’s Seat*,’ *Peer English*, Iss. 9 (2014)

<<https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/english-association/publications/peer-english/current-contents>>

Contains elements of Chapter Four’s discussion of *The Driver’s Seat*.

“‘Repetition, boredom, despair’”: Muriel Spark and the Eichmann Trial,’ in *Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film*, ed. by Jenni Adams and Sue Vice (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2012), pp.165-84.

Examines *The Mandelbaum Gate*, developed at greater length in Chapter Three.

‘Salutary Scars: The “Disorienting” Fictions of Muriel Spark,’ *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (March 2015), pp.35-52.

Examines *Doctors of Philosophy* and *Not to Disturb* (discussions of both texts are developed at much greater length in Chapter Two) and *The Driver’s Seat* (developed in the final section of Chapter Three). Elements of the introduction to this article are expanded upon in my thesis Introduction.

## References, Abbreviations and Copyright Material

Whenever citing from a primary text, I include an abbreviation of the title and a page reference in parentheses. Listed in chronological order below are the details of each of these texts.

- 'HW' 'Harper and Wilton' [1953/Revised in 1996], in *The Complete Short Stories* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011), pp.243-51.
- TC *The Comforters* [1957] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).
- 'GLBM' 'The Girl I Left Behind Me' [1957], in *The Complete Short Stories* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011), pp.278-83.
- 'PR' 'The Portobello Road' [1958], in *The Complete Short Stories* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011), pp.495-524.
- BPR *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* [1960] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).
- 'BYD' 'Bang-Bang You're Dead' [1961], in *The Complete Short Stories* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011), pp.83-120.
- DP *Doctors of Philosophy: A Play* [1962] (New York: Knopf, 1966).
- MG *The Mandelbaum Gate* [1965] (London: Penguin, 1985).
- PI *The Public Image* [1968] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).
- DS *The Driver's Seat* [1970] (New York: New Directions, 1994).
- ND *Not to Disturb* [1971] (London: Macmillan, 1971).
- HER *The Hothouse by the East River* [1973] (London: Penguin, 1975).

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## Introduction: The Desegregation of Spark

Readers of novels were not yet used to the likes of me, and some will never be.

– Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae* (1992)<sup>1</sup>

### *The Red Scarf; Or, What We Talk about When We Talk about Spark*

In a short essay entitled ‘The Sitter’s Tale’ (1999), Muriel Spark recalls accepting an invitation from the Scottish National Portrait Gallery to have her portrait painted by the artist Sandy Moffat, and her later disappointment at seeing a finished work to which she bore little resemblance. On the painter’s canvas, the author noticed that her ‘light reddish hair’ had become ‘yellow hair with a navy blue parting,’ while the thin lines that patterned her sweater had been ‘made into broad footballer’s stripes.’<sup>2</sup> The artist, Spark surmised, had been less interested in capturing *her* in his painting than the brightly-coloured scarf that she happened to be wearing: ‘He said to me, the picture is called *The Red Scarf*, and that, in fact, is what it is. I was just a model for *The Red Scarf* by Sandy Moffat. It isn’t me at all; the author of my books is just not there.’<sup>3</sup>

For a contemporary Spark scholar – one who has examined the wealth of critical commentary written on the author over the past six decades – Spark’s self-professed struggle to recognise herself in Moffat’s portrait may acquire a certain

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae: A Volume of Autobiography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p.208.

<sup>2</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘The Sitter’s Tale,’ in Penelope Jardine, ed., *The Golden Fleece: Essays* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2014), p.99.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

resonance. Critical responses to Spark, as Patricia Waugh notes, have largely ‘focused on theorising, historicising, or *claiming*’ the author ‘for various identity politics or ethnic, national, religious, and cultural groupings,’<sup>4</sup> while also striving to position her fiction, as Matthew Wickman observes, under ‘classifications like “tradition,” “modernism” or “postmodernism,”’ to the exclusion of all others.<sup>5</sup> This is due in no small part to what Bryan Cheyette terms the ‘abiding doubleness’ that distinguishes both Spark’s life and work. Spark’s fiction, Cheyette explains, bears the influence of ‘the long tradition of English social realism and literary satire,’ yet is also informed by ‘avant-garde movements such as the French *nouveau roman* of Alain Robbe-Grillet and the British “experimentalism” of B. S. Johnson.’<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the author’s ‘hybrid background,’ which is ‘part English, part Scottish, part Protestant, part Jewish,’ as well as her later conversion to Catholicism and expatriate status in Africa, America and Italy at various stages of her life, leaves her open to competing, and often essentialising, identity claims.<sup>7</sup> Any such attempt to stamp Spark or her fiction with a definitive label, Waugh warns, will thus inevitably risk ‘displacing and marginalising what fails to fit the confirmatory bias of the perspective adopted.’<sup>8</sup> At worst, then, a study can become its own version of *The Red Scarf*, its focus tethered so tightly to a singular focal point that whatever falls outside of the narrow, prescriptive line of enquiry applied is distorted, relegated to the background, or expelled entirely from the frame.

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Waugh, ‘Muriel Spark and the Metaphysics of Modernity: Art, Secularisation, and Psychosis,’ in David Herman, ed., *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp.63-93 (p.64, emphasis mine). Examples of such critical approaches will be explored over the course of the present study.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Wickman, ‘Muriel Spark, Modernism and Postmodernism,’ in Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp.63-73 (p.73).

<sup>6</sup> Bryan Cheyette, *Muriel Spark* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2000), p.9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>8</sup> Waugh, ‘Muriel Spark and the Metaphysics of Modernity,’ p.64.



As an alternative to this critical tendency (one which is particularly ironic, given the concern, raised recurrently throughout Spark's oeuvre, with that which eludes and consequently undermines the rigid modes of categorisation to which certain characters or institutions either myopically subscribe or tyrannically enforce),<sup>9</sup> we might follow Marina MacKay in conceptualising Spark as a curiously 'amphibious figure,' whose fiction finds itself situated indeterminately between postwar British literature's 'starkly divided possibilities.'<sup>10</sup> Spark's novels and short stories, MacKay observes, exhibit qualities drawn from both of these apparently polarised 'possibilities' – represented on one side by 'the so-called Angry Young Men, all intent on restoring fiction to a condition of panoramic social documentary,' and on the other by 'the domestic *nouveaux romanciers*' identified by Cheyette above.<sup>11</sup> Echoing the views of Cheyette and MacKay in his introduction to the 2008 *Modern Fiction Studies* special issue on Spark, David Herman claims that the author 'in effect opted out of the two responses to modernism' by taking a productive 'third path' that was all her own:

[Spark's] fiction embraces (or rather extends and radicalises) the modernist emphasis on technique while *also* projecting complex social worlds – worlds in which [...] characters are impinged on by powerful historical and political forces, their psychologies and interactions shaped by entrenched educational and religious institutions, ideologies of gender, and more or less dominant assumptions about the possibilities and limitations of human agency. [...] [I]n other words, her novels encompass tendencies displayed by both antimodernists advocating a midcentury return to realism and by

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<sup>9</sup> Examples are wide-ranging, and several are explored in detail over the course of the present study: *Doctors of Philosophy*'s Leonora Chase, for example, rails against the misogynistic 'definition' imposed upon her by her cousin, Catherine Delfont, and her husband, Charlie, which, she argues, 'excludes other aspects of my personality which are also true' (*DP*, p.61); *The Driver's Seat*'s enigmatic protagonist, Lise, purposefully evades the objectifying impulses of those around her (as well as her own narrator) by transforming her once predictable life into a compelling and impenetrable mystery; *The Mandelbaum Gate*'s Barbara Vaughan fills her travelling companion, Freddy Hamilton, with 'a sense of her dangerousness' when the mention of her Jewish heritage unsettles his reductive characterisation of her as 'a pleasant English spinster' (*MG*, p.17); in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, most famously, the attempts of the titular teacher to control the lives of her pupils by reducing them to manageable 'types' are thwarted by the rebellious instincts of Sandy Stranger (whose very surname signifies her dangerous inscrutability).

<sup>10</sup> Marina MacKay, 'Muriel Spark and the Meaning of Treason,' *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Autumn 2008), pp.505-22 (p.506).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

postmodernist practitioners.<sup>12</sup>

By combining a ‘reflexive focus on narrative form’ with a sustained ‘engagement with the historical contingencies of lived experience,’ Herman observes, Spark’s ‘third path’ involves engaging in a dynamic interplay between various modes of ‘mind-bending formal innovation’ and a ‘nuanced representation of sociohistorical circumstances.’ Her writing practices, he concludes, are thus ‘dependent on the *nonresolution* of this dialectical tension,’ with each text setting ‘a different balancing point for these two sets of concerns.’<sup>13</sup> Whether intentionally or otherwise, Herman’s argument evokes the sentiment (as well as the central metaphor) of David Lodge’s well-known meditation on the state of midcentury fiction, ‘The Novelist at the Crossroads’ (1969). ‘The novelist who has any kind of self-awareness,’ Lodge famously contends, ‘must at least hesitate at the crossroads [between the ‘starkly divided possibilities’ outlined above]; and the solution many novelists have chosen [...] is *to build their hesitation into the novel itself*.’<sup>14</sup> This ‘hesitation’ led to the emergence of what Lodge terms ‘the problematic novel’:

This kind of novel [...] clearly has affinities with both the non-fiction [realist] novel and fabulation [Lodge is here referencing Robert Scholes’s 1967 study of self-reflexive, nonrealistic and supernatural fiction, *The Fabulators*<sup>15</sup>], but it remains distinct precisely because it brings both into play. [...] In the kind of novel I am thinking of [...] the reality principle is never allowed to lapse entirely – indeed, it is often invoked [...] to expose the artificiality of

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<sup>12</sup> David Herman, “‘A Salutory Scar’: Muriel Spark’s Desegregated Art in the Twenty-First Century,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (2008), pp.473-86 (pp.473-4, emphasis in original). Herman, who edited the special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* on Spark, is referring specifically to MacKay’s essay, which is also included in the publication.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.474-5, emphasis mine.

<sup>14</sup> David Lodge, ‘The Novelist at the Crossroads,’ in Malcolm Bradbury, ed., *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), pp.84-110 (p.104, emphasis mine). Lodge lists novels including Evelyn Waugh’s *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957), Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962) as examples of ‘problematic’ texts.

<sup>15</sup> See Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967). In his discussion of midcentury ‘fabulators,’ Scholes examines authors including Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth and John Hawkes.

conventional realistic illusion.<sup>16</sup>

Perceiving Spark as an author who ‘hesitate[s] at the crossroads,’ before embarking on a ‘third path’ of her own devising, offers a valuable means of comprehending a body of fiction which occupies an ambiguous (or indeed ‘amphibious’) position between realism and experimentation, sincerity and self-consciousness, and the quotidian and the otherworldly. As Spark would herself assert, however, these possibilities need not be considered to be diametrically opposed or irreconcilable; her practice of fiction, she insisted, was geared towards *redefining* traditional realism through varied modes of literary innovation rather than abandoning it entirely. ‘I might claim to be the opposite of C. P. Snow in every possible way,’ she remarked in 1971, referencing the attacks made upon the experimental novel by self-proclaimed realists such as Snow, William Cooper and Kingsley Amis during the previous two decades: ‘he thinks he’s a realist: I think *I’m* a realist and he’s a complete fantasist.’<sup>17</sup> So-called ‘realistic novels,’ she maintained in one of her final interviews, ‘are more committed to dogmatic and absolute truth than most other varieties of fiction. I would say that the novels of George Eliot are extremely realistic and rather dogmatic, and more absolute in their tone.’<sup>18</sup> Spark’s reconceptualised model of realism thus functions, as Lodge writes of ‘the problematic novel’ more

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<sup>16</sup> Lodge, ‘The Novelist at the Crossroads,’ p.105.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Toynbee, ‘Interview with Muriel Spark,’ *The Observer Colour Magazine*, 7<sup>th</sup> November 1971, pp.73-4 (p.74). For a comprehensive account of such attacks, see Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), pp.1-22. ‘The idea about experiment being the life-blood of the English novel is one that dies hard,’ wrote Kingsley Amis. His own fiction, in contrast, was made up of ‘believable stories about understandable characters’ that were delivered ‘in a reasonably straightforward style: no tricks, no experimental foolery.’ William Cooper, more virulently, claimed that the experimental novel represented an attack on ‘intellect in general, made by intellectuals so decadent that they no longer mind if intellect persists’ (both quoted in Gasiorek, p.3).

<sup>18</sup> Robert Hosmer, ‘An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark’, *Salmagundi*, Vol. 146/147 (Spring/Summer 2005), pp.127-58 (p.147).

generally, ‘to expose the artificiality of conventional realistic illusion,’<sup>19</sup> by defamiliarising and dismantling the ‘dogmatic and absolute truth’ propagated therein.

An effective reading of Spark’s fiction must therefore attend to the nature and purpose of its disorienting indeterminacy. I borrow ‘disorienting’ from its use in a letter written to Spark in 1986 by her friend and sometime mentor, Christine Brooke-Rose, which bemoaned the typically bemused critical responses to which both authors had grown accustomed.<sup>20</sup> Because she and Spark ‘keep doing something quite different’ from one text to the next, Brooke-Rose reasoned, their work had proved ‘disorienting for critics who like labels,’ so that ‘the only one they can think of is “experimental” (which annoys them), or “French,” “*nouveau roman*” (completely untrue, but that label annoys them too) – I now occasionally get “postmodern” – all nonsense.’<sup>21</sup> Brooke-Rose was not, I would argue, denying the suitability of these terms to her and Spark’s respective fictions (indeed, she has written in detail of their relevance to both authors),<sup>22</sup> but taking issue instead with their clumsy, catch-all application at the hands of critics who begrudged their use to begin with. A more considered critical approach to both authors, her letter suggests, is long overdue.

Although Brooke-Rose adopts ‘disorienting’ to refer to the critical bafflement

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<sup>19</sup> Lodge, ‘The Novelist at the Crossroads,’ p.105.

<sup>20</sup> Brooke-Rose’s exasperated comments were made in regard to the imminent publication of her latest novel, *Xorandor* (1986), and the baffled critical reception that she expected it to generate.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Christine Brooke-Rose to Muriel Spark, 15<sup>th</sup> June 1986, Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10607/85: Correspondence and Related Papers, 1941-91, National Library of Scotland. Brooke-Rose would go on to make similar claims of her fiction’s resistance to easy critical categorisation in her 1991 essay, ‘Stories, Theories and Things,’ from her essay collection of the same name: *Stories, Theories and Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.3-15.

<sup>22</sup> Brooke-Rose wrote reverently and at length of the influence of the *nouveau roman* and postmodernism on her own fiction (see ‘The Real as Unreal: Robbe-Grillet,’ in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981], pp.291-310; ‘The Author is Dead, Long Live the Author,’ in *Invisible Author: Last Essays* [Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2002], pp.130-55) as well as on Spark’s (‘A Writer’s Constraints,’ *Invisible Author*, pp.36-52).

induced by texts that defy easy categorisation, her choice of word bears additional relevance to Spark's own authorial intent. 'Disorient,' derived from the French *désorienter* and defined in the *OED* as 'to turn from the east; to cause to "lose one's bearings"; to put out, disconcert, embarrass,'<sup>23</sup> neatly encapsulates the derisive and unnerving effects that Spark, in her artistic manifesto 'The Desegregation of Art' (1970), recommended that 'effective' writing such as her own ought to possess.<sup>24</sup> In place of the 'literature of sentiment and emotion' which she found to be characteristic of an outdated mode of 'socially conscious art' that 'isn't achieving its ends or illuminating our lives anymore,' Spark advocated for 'a less impulsive generosity, a less indignant representation of social injustice, and a more deliberate cunning, a more derisive undermining of what is wrong.'<sup>25</sup> It is 'the *art of ridicule*,' she proposed, that could 'penetrate to the marrow' and 'paralyse its object,' leaving 'a salutary scar' in its wake:

Our noble aspirations, our sympathies, our elevated feelings should not be inspired merely by visits to an art gallery, a theatre, or by reading a book, but rather the rhetoric of our times should *persuade us to contemplate the ridiculous nature of the reality before us*, and teach us to mock it. We should know ourselves better by now than to be under the illusion that we are all essentially aspiring, affectionate, and loving creatures. We do have these qualities, but we are aggressive, too. And so when I speak of the desegregation of art I mean by this the liberation of our minds from the comfortable cells of lofty sentiment in which they are confined and never really satisfied.<sup>26</sup>

In choosing 'A Salutary Scar' as the title of his introductory essay on the author,

David Herman attests to the pertinence of 'The Desegregation of Art' to future Spark

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<sup>23</sup> 'dis'orient, v.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, <<http://www.oed.com/sheffield.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/54878?redirectedFrom=disorient#eid>> (accessed 20<sup>th</sup> December 2014), emphasis mine.

<sup>24</sup> Muriel Spark, 'The Desegregation of Art,' in Joseph Hynes, ed., *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (New York: Hall, 1992), pp.33-7 (p.34).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35. Such 'generous' depictions of suffering and injustice, Spark believed, allow the reader to 'go to bed feeling less guilty,' having 'undergone the experience of pity for the underdog,' only to 'rise refreshed, more determined than ever to be the overdog': 'wherever there is a cult of the victim, such being human nature, there will be an obliging cult of twenty equivalent victimisers' (p.35).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36, emphasis mine.

studies. In his brief but insightful discussion of the manifesto, Herman proposes that the ‘deliberate cunning’ advocated by Spark is ‘exemplifie[d] in her own fictional methods,’ which ‘call attention to the constructedness of the fictional scenarios being portrayed in order to inhibit readerly immersion and promote instead a critical engagement with those situations and events.’<sup>27</sup> A link is thus forged between the subversive, derisory and ‘aggressive’ intent held by Spark and the experimental and often self-reflexive narrative techniques encountered throughout her fiction; the ‘salutary scar’ announces itself as a mark of *severance*, brought about by strategies which encourage detached scrutiny rather than passive absorption.

This thesis has been written in the conviction that the form and function of Spark’s ‘abiding doubleness’ remain inadequately explored. It contends that there is a great deal more to be said of the author’s development of a mode of fiction that unites a degree of postmodern narrative ‘play’ with a realist approach to character construction and a serious moral-political vision. In the sections that follow, I argue that Spark has been, and continues to be, discussed in limited terms as a rather cruel ‘Catholic comic novelist’ (to quote the enduringly influential description of the author offered by Malcolm Bradbury, with which I engage in greater detail in Chapter Two), whose literary experiments – however complex, outlandish or confrontational – are nevertheless reducible to a narrowly didactic god-game played out between an all-powerful author, ‘indifferent to creation,’ and an ensemble of thinly-drawn caricatures.<sup>28</sup> My thesis attempts to remedy such shortcomings by reconsidering Spark’s self-reflexive approach to matters of narration, characterisation, genre and plot, while attending to the largely unexamined influence of the *nouveau roman* on

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<sup>27</sup> Herman, “‘A Salutary Scar,’” pp.477-8.

<sup>28</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, ‘Muriel Spark’s Fingernails,’ in Joseph Hynes, ed., *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (New York: Hall, 1992), pp.187-93 (p.187).

texts which aspire to the same ‘disorienting’ *detachment* advocated by the author in ‘The Desegregation of Art.’ Before doing so, it is necessary to trace Spark’s beginnings as a fiction-writer, by examining unpublished notes and correspondence (as well as the author’s debut short story) through which her desire for a derisory ‘doubleness’ can be seen to originate and evolve.

**‘An honest creative process’: Refining ‘the arts of pretence and counterfeit’**

I was brought up in Edinburgh during the period described in this novel. But it would be personally embarrassing if anyone should quite wrongfully imagine it to be a literal record of my own happy schooldays.

I think it is well enough known that when I say I write fiction I mean it with all the intensity that I am capable of concentrating on the idea of fiction.

It has always been my intention to practice the arts of pretence and counterfeit on the reader. My fiction does not pretend that it is doing otherwise [...]. And so I should be embarrassed as a writer, also, if anyone should think this novel to be a literal history.

And I hope it bears whatever truth is proper to it, or emerges by chance from an honest creative process.

– Muriel Spark, ‘Author’s Note’ (1961)<sup>29</sup>

The ‘Author’s Note’ quoted above was drafted by Spark as the intended Preface to *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), yet never included in the published text.

Spark’s words, while ostensibly concerned with denying any meaningful similarities between her novel’s lively and often sinister plot and her own ‘happy schooldays’ in 1930s Edinburgh, double as a broader statement of authorial intent that can be applied across her oeuvre. As Spark asserts, ‘practic[ing] the arts of pretence and counterfeit’ in a mode of fiction that ‘does not pretend that it is doing otherwise’ constitutes ‘an

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<sup>29</sup> Muriel Spark, Loose handwritten note entitled ‘Author’s Note,’ in ‘Handwritten notes and draft fragments, 44p. [*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*; 1960-61],’ Muriel Spark Papers, Box 59, Folder 1, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

honest creative process' from which emerges a 'truth [...] proper to it.' Spark, who shortly thereafter described her body of work as 'a pack of lies' that contained within it 'a kind of truth,' was firming up a stance on her own practice of fiction that would be conceptualised more thoroughly in 'The Desegregation of Art.'<sup>30</sup>

Spark knew 'an honest creative process' from a dishonest one. Her wartime work in black propaganda, conducted at Sefton Delmer's Political Intelligence Compound at Milton Bryan in Bedfordshire, saw her combine 'detailed truth with believable lies' in radio broadcasts, seemingly transmitting from within Germany, that were designed to weaken enemy morale by undermining the leadership and authority of the Nazi Party.<sup>31</sup> Destabilising fabrications, in other words, were presented in the form of compelling facts, written to be read on air by 'truly patriotic Germans' who were intent on contributing toward the Nazis' downfall.<sup>32</sup> In her novels, short stories and dramatic works, Spark sought to do the exact opposite; such works are often *overtly* fictional rather than convincingly realistic, yet each is concerned with communicating a certain 'truth [...] proper to it.' In many of these works, the quotidian surface of everyday life finds itself disrupted by extraordinary intrusions in the form of unquiet spirits, heavenly bodies, disembodied voices, maniacal authors, flying saucers, ghostly shadows, vanishing and reappearing characters, oracles and occultists, unfathomable coincidences, wild chronological leaps, and the disorienting metaleptic (or metatheatrical) implication that even the most banal occurrences and

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<sup>30</sup> Frank Kermode, 'The House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists [Interview with Muriel Spark],' *Partisan Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Spring 1963), pp.61-82 (p.78).

<sup>31</sup> Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, p.148. For far more detailed discussions of Spark's wartime work in relation to her fiction-writing, see, *inter alia*: Victoria Stewart, *The Second World War in Contemporary British Fiction: Secret Histories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp.20-54; Adam Piette, 'Muriel Spark and the Politics of the Contemporary,' *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, pp.52-62.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.151.



conversations might in fact be meticulously stage-managed and elaborately scripted. While such intrusions can hardly be said to exist in the service of verisimilitude, they often function rhetorically to enhance rather than diminish the particular *quality* of realism that Spark desired for her work to attain, while supplementing her fiction with an emphasis on multiplicity and play. As Spark would reflect in one of her final interviews, her principle ‘achievement’ as a novelist had been to ‘liberat[e] the novel in many ways,’ by ‘opening doors and windows in the mind, and challeng[ing] fears – especially the most inhibiting fears about what a novel should be.’<sup>33</sup>

Spark’s restless experimentation with narrative form, meanwhile, expresses her need for a sense of correlation between *what* and *how* she writes. This is perhaps unsurprising, given her origins in poetry and continued self-identification as a poet as opposed to a novelist: ‘I think of myself as a narrative poet – I think of my novels as poems,’ reads a brief handwritten note entitled ‘My Contribution to Literary History,’ compiled among the notes and drafts relating to the author’s 1992 autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae*, that are collected in her Edinburgh archive.<sup>34</sup> As Spark recalls in that book, her correspondence with the then Poet Laureate, John Masefield, during the early 1950s coincided with her own writing ‘moving [...] from lyric poetry to narrative verse,’ a transition which marked ‘the start of [her] move in literature towards the short story and then the novel.’<sup>35</sup> Indeed, to consult the unpublished letters sent between the pair is to catch a fascinating glimpse into Spark’s careful reconsideration of the narrative form best suited to her intentions. ‘My main concern,’

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<sup>33</sup> Alan Taylor, ‘The Gospel According to Spark,’ *Sunday Herald*, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2004, p.27.

<sup>34</sup> Muriel Spark, Loose handwritten note entitled ‘My Contribution to Literary History’ [c.1991-92: grouped among notes and drafts for *Curriculum Vitae*] in Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10989/134: Research Notes, National Library of Scotland. For further evidence of Spark’s self-identification as a poet, we need only look at the words that she chose to be etched on her gravestone: ‘MURIEL SPARK / POETA / 1918-2006.’

<sup>35</sup> Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, p.197.

Masefield explained in one letter, ‘has always been to tell stories, and to learn how to do this with effect by word of mouth to living audiences; trying verse because I loved verse, and knew its power upon hearers; trying prose, because the design sometimes imposed it.’<sup>36</sup> Spark responded enthusiastically to Masefield’s malleable approach to form, while attesting to the power and precedence of rhetoric in her own writing:

All you say interests me greatly, especially what you say about giving stories “by word of mouth to living audiences.” That is a very important thing, I think. [...] We have to address a disintegrated world. The world we draw our inspiration from is disintegrated. When we write poems we are trying, in a manner, to write several poems at once and to speak on different levels. Our next job should be to do this and at the same time to make our meanings accessible, and I think this will come about through a rediscovery of form and the dramatic uses of rhetoric.<sup>37</sup>

There is much that is insightful in Spark’s letter, which expresses ideas concerning ‘the dramatic uses of rhetoric,’ and writing for ‘living audiences,’ that the author would theorise in far greater detail in ‘The Desegregation of Art’ two decades later. Spark’s assertion of her need to ‘address a disintegrated world’ is especially intriguing, if ambiguous. Her comment could apply just as readily to the fractured conditions of postmodernity (famously described by Jean-François Lyotard as being defined by an ‘incredulity toward metanarratives,’ and particularly an incredulity toward the ‘grand narrative’ of the Enlightenment and the advancement of knowledge)<sup>38</sup> as to what Adam Piette has discussed at length as the disquieting ‘amnesias, lies and repressions of the postwar [and Cold War] world.’<sup>39</sup> There may well be a more personal significance to such a remark, however. The Edinburgh-born

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<sup>36</sup> Letter from John Masefield to Muriel Spark, 24<sup>th</sup> May 1951, Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10607/89: Original Letters, 1950-72, National Library of Scotland.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Muriel Spark to John Masefield, 26<sup>th</sup> May 1951, from 8 Sussex Mansions, 65 Old Brompton Road, London. Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10607/89, National Library of Scotland.

<sup>38</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.xxiv.

<sup>39</sup> Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War: 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p.20.

daughter of a Jewish father and English mother, who attended a Presbyterian school and who, at the time of writing to Masefield, had escaped an abusive marriage in South Africa, before moving to England, devising convincing untruths in *Political Intelligence*, and then immersing herself among the London literati (as a critic, poet, and as editor of the *Poetry Review*), Spark certainly understood what it was to inhabit a ‘disintegrated world’ of unfixed identity, fabricated reality, and drastically changing personal circumstances and world events. Just as her varied and mobile life could hardly be contained within any singular, unifying narrative, so her artistic practice – her intention, that is, to ‘write several poems at once and to speak on different levels’ – would also come to undermine (or indeed *disintegrate*) any stable conception of selfhood and story.

In seeking in her work to ‘speak on different levels’ in an attempt to ‘address a disintegrated world,’ it is understandable that Spark should also wish to pursue what she describes as ‘a rediscovery of form’ – arriving, as would come to be the case, at a mode of narrative prose which draws upon the ludic, intertextual and metafictional techniques and strategies associated with literary postmodernism. As numerous critics have noted, postmodernist fiction’s characteristic ontological disruptions have the effect of foregrounding the mediated, relative and pluralistic nature of ‘reality’ itself. In her seminal critical study, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984), Patricia Waugh argues that metafictional texts must demonstrate a self-reflexive awareness of their own inability to ‘imitate or “represent” the world’; instead, such texts recognise that they can only represent those ‘discourses which in

turn *construct* that world.’<sup>40</sup> It is because of this, Waugh affirms, that even the most outlandish work of metafiction ‘always implicitly evokes the contexts of everyday life’:<sup>41</sup>

Contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures. The materialist, positivist, and empiricist world-view on which realistic fiction is premised no longer exists. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that more and more novelists have come to question and reject the forms that correspond to this ordered reality (the well-made plot, chronological sequence, the authoritative omniscient author).<sup>42</sup>

‘Metafiction,’ Waugh asserts elsewhere in her study, ‘does not abandon “the real world” for the narcissistic pleasures of the imagination,’ but rather ‘re-examine[s] the conventions of realism in order to discover – through its own self-reflection – a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers.’<sup>43</sup> In the absence of faith in any totalising ‘grand narrative,’ such strategies disrupt the ‘ordered reality’ of conventional realism by placing a marked emphasis on, among other aspects, epistemological impotence over narrative authority, contradiction over consistency, and lasting irresolution over anything approaching a conclusive ending.

A few months after writing to Masfield, Spark embarked on the composition of her first short story, the vibrantly metafictional ‘The Seraph and the Zambesi,’ which went on to win the *Observer*’s 1951 Christmas short story competition (‘a glass of postmodern champagne among the musty realism of the other entries,’ in the words

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<sup>40</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.100, emphasis mine.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

of her biographer, Martin Stannard<sup>44</sup>) and which became, as Spark remarked in *Curriculum Vitae*, ‘the first real turning point of [her] career’ as an author.<sup>45</sup> The story, in which a luminous, six-winged seraph intrudes upon the unremarkable life of Samuel Cramer (the very same poet-protagonist from Charles Baudelaire’s *Fanfarlo* [1847], now the incongruous proprietor of a petrol pump close to the Zambezi River in 1946), juxtaposes elements of the fantastical and the commonplace in a manner which would become a characteristic trait of Spark’s subsequent works. Having long since abandoned his literary career, Cramer’s artistic ambitions now extend only as far as writing and directing a local Nativity play, in which he has claimed for himself the leading role of First Seraph. When the celestial seraph interrupts the performance, Cramer’s artistic failings are thrown into sharp relief. Next to the ‘completed look’ of the heavenly being, whose ‘outline lacked the signs of confusion and ferment which are commonly the signs of living things,’ Cramer is defined witheringly as a spent creative force, and thus a shadow of his former self; his unimaginative and poorly-designed costume, assembled from ‘several thicknesses of mosquito-net,’ is ‘not thick enough to hide his white shorts underneath.’<sup>46</sup> The story ends with the destruction of Cramer’s shoddily-built stage set in a violent inferno whipped up by the seraph’s enormous wings, before the creature glides gracefully along the river and out of sight.

Perhaps unsurprisingly (for reasons detailed in the following section), ‘The Seraph and the Zambesi’ has been viewed predominantly as an eccentric yet didactic meditation on the disastrous consequences of neglecting one’s religious beliefs, as well as a commentary on the ‘degraded status’ of human life and art when witnessed

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<sup>44</sup> Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009), p.124.

<sup>45</sup> Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, p.198.

<sup>46</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘The Seraph and the Zambesi,’ in *The Complete Short Stories* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011), pp.121-31 (p.122).

from the elevated ‘spiritual perspective’ of celestial beings.<sup>47</sup> I would argue that the focus of such criticism is misdirected, however. Cramer, after all, is not a mortal being but an exhausted literary relic, whose powers of imagination are shown to have diminished severely since he appeared on the pages of Baudelaire’s novella a century earlier. The seraph’s extraordinary arrival only emphasises this, by establishing a powerful rhetorical counterpoint to the otherwise unremarkable ‘reality’ of Cramer’s lethargic and creatively stagnant existence in South Africa. The story thus stages the metafictional destruction (and possible revivification) of what John Barth, writing in 1967, describes as ‘the literature of exhausted possibility,’ by having the products of Cramer’s insipid imagination be incinerated, before shifting focus – thrillingly – to the seraph’s fiery flight to a new land.<sup>48</sup> By way of its combination of irony, fantasy, realism and intertextuality, Spark’s defamiliarising wit paves (or indeed *blazes*) fresh avenues of thought, while fulfilling her later-stated aim of ‘writ[ing] fiction [...] with all the intensity that I am capable of concentrating on the idea of fiction.’<sup>49</sup>

As Spark’s first foray into narrative fiction, ‘The Seraph and the Zambesi’ constitutes an act of narrative daring, experimenting as it does with a mode of playful, self-reflexive fictionality in order to articulate a serious statement of artistic intent. In the novels, short stories and dramatic works that followed, Spark continued to pursue what she described to Masefield as a ‘rediscovery of form’ by developing a diverse range of innovative narrative strategies derived from modes of metafiction and metatheatre, the *nouveau roman*, and her own subversive spins on the familiar formal

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<sup>47</sup> Ian Gregson, *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction* (New York: Continuum, 2006), p.6; p.7. For a similar reading of the short story, see Gerard Carruthers, ‘Muriel Spark as Catholic Novelist,’ *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, pp.74-84 (pp.75-6).

<sup>48</sup> John Barth, ‘The Literature of Exhaustion,’ in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp.62-76 (p.64). I engage more thoroughly with Barth’s essay in Chapter One.

<sup>49</sup> Spark, ‘Author’s Note.’

and thematic conventions of genres including the ghost story, crime caper, Wildean social comedy, Gothic melodrama, detective mystery, and ancient tragedy. In these subsequent works, Spark gears her self-described practice of overt ‘pretence and counterfeit’ toward more nuanced instances of satire and social critique, placing particular emphasis on the plight of individuals (women, especially) who find themselves ensnared in self-alienating structures of conformity and control, within which they are forced to occupy roles intended to silence and tame them. Self-reflexive, illusion-breaking narrative techniques are remarkably well-suited to conveying – and undermining – such structures; if, as Patricia Waugh asserts, metafiction can present reality as ‘a series of constructions, artifices [and] impermanent structures,’ then subversive potential exists in texts that stage the construction and dismantling of oppressive realities.<sup>50</sup> Such is the nature of Spark’s ‘honest creative process,’ from which emerges fanciful fictions that carry urgent truths.<sup>51</sup>

With all of this in mind, it must be noted that Spark’s particular ingenuity has not always received the same degree of critical recognition afforded to her contemporaries. In her incisive comparative analysis of the experimental narrative strategies encountered in Spark’s *The Driver’s Seat* and Marguerite Duras’s *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* (1964), for example, Judith Roof concludes by noting that, while Duras ‘wrote works of serious mien within a tradition that venerates authors [including the likes of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute and Michel Butor],’ Spark’s ‘superficially more whimsical offerings landed in English-speaking populations less interested in the idiosyncratic experiments of an expatriate Scot,’ thus

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<sup>50</sup> Waugh, *Metafiction*, p.7.

<sup>51</sup> Spark, ‘Author’s Note.’

denying her a critical reception that ‘takes her textuality seriously.’<sup>52</sup> Roof is correct to identify significant contextual differences in terms of the critical standing of both authors, but her comment overlooks a central component of Spark’s public image and critical reception. The author’s well-documented conversion to Catholicism in 1954, as I shall proceed to discuss, came to dictate the tone of the reviews and readings of her subsequent fictions, including each of her twenty-two novels. The same perceived ‘whimsical[ity]’ identified by Roof can be seen to derive, in fact, from the longstanding critical conception of Spark as an author merrily playing God, whose narratives are seen to revel in a capricious cruelty derived from the relative inconsequentiality of human life. It is to Spark’s disappointingly one-dimensional critical reception that I now turn.

### **‘A light and heartless hand’<sup>53</sup>: Catholicism, Control and the Aesthetics of Cruelty**

‘Here is the recipe for a typical Muriel Spark novel,’ writes Michiko Kakutani at the beginning of her review of the author’s 1996 novel, *Reality and Dreams*:

[T]ake a self-enclosed community (of writers, schoolgirls, nuns, rich people, etc.) that is full of incestuous liaisons and fraternal intrigue; toss in a bombshell (like murder, suicide or betrayal) that will ricochet dangerously around this little world, and add some allusions to the supernatural to ground these melodramatics in an old-fashioned context of good and evil. Serve up with crisp, authoritative prose and present with “a light and heartless hand.”<sup>54</sup>

Kakutani’s ‘recipe,’ which concludes by quoting from the description offered by Fleur Talbot, the narrator-protagonist of *Loitering with Intent* (1981), of her own airily

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<sup>52</sup> Judith Roof, ‘The Future Perfect’s Perfect Future: Spark’s and Duras’s Narrative Drive,’ *Theorising Muriel Spark*, pp.49-66 (p.64, emphasis mine).

<sup>53</sup> Subtitle taken from Fleur Talbot’s description of her manner of writing fiction in Spark’s 1981 novel, *Loitering with Intent* (London: Bodley Head, 1981), p.59.

<sup>54</sup> Michiko Kakutani, ‘Her Serene Tyranny, a Mistress of Mayhem [Review of *Reality and Dreams*],’ *New York Times*, 16<sup>th</sup> May 1997, p.29.



merciless writing style, serves as an accurate indicator of the lens through which critics have tended to view Spark's approach to writing fiction. Given their typical brevity, cloistered and claustrophobic settings, common themes of manipulation, deceit and betrayal, and characteristically 'crisp, authoritative' narrative delivery, Spark's novels – described memorably by John Updike as being 'short, brusque, bleak, harsh and queer'<sup>55</sup> – have unsurprisingly come to be renowned for 'the cruelty mixed with camp, the lightness of touch, the flick of the wrist that lands the lash' that is apparently discernible throughout.<sup>56</sup> Bernard Harrison, for example, identifies an 'air of inconsequentiality [that] stems from Miss Spark's authorial tone of voice, which is characteristically cool, level and uninvolved, and occasionally enigmatically flippant.'<sup>57</sup> The flippancy, or 'lightness,' with which Spark has been said to approach much of her 'bleak, harsh' subject matter has led to accusations of what Merritt Moseley, writing about the author in *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English* (1999), calls an 'Olympian attitude [shown] toward her own characters [which] has not been without its detractors.'<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, even admirers of Spark have tended to temper their praise with similar reservations. 'You start deploring Spark's work, love it as you do,' remarks Jenny Turner in an otherwise affectionate profile of the author in the *London Review of Books*, 'for its unsisterly cruelty [shown toward female characters] and lack of

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<sup>55</sup> John Updike, 'Topnotch Witcheries [Review of *The Abbess of Crewe*],' *The New Yorker*, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1975, pp.76-8 (p.76).

<sup>56</sup> Parul Sehgal, 'What Muriel Spark Saw,' *The New Yorker*, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2014 <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/what-muriel-spark-saw>> (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> October 2014). A discussion of the 'camp' aspects of Spark's approach to fiction, which would exceed the scope of the present study, can be found in Len Gutkin's recent essay, 'Muriel Spark's Camp Metafiction,' *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Winter 2017), pp.53-81.

<sup>57</sup> Bernard Harrison, 'Muriel Spark and Jane Austen,' in Gabriel Josipovici, ed., *The Modern English Novel: The Reader, The Writer, and the Work* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1976), pp.225-51 (p.226).

<sup>58</sup> Merritt Moseley, 'Muriel Spark,' in Lorna Sage, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.592.

empathy with human motivation.<sup>59</sup> Writing about Spark in her critical survey of twentieth century women writers, *Beyond the Lighthouse* (1981), Margaret Crosland concludes that she had mistakenly ‘been looking for depth of character and thought, and had been disappointed at finding none,’ only to realise that the author’s novels ought to be read purely as ‘intellectualised square dances in which there is a semblance of progression but no real development, presumably because none was intended: it would have spoiled the dance.’<sup>60</sup> In a separate study, Richard Todd adopts the adjective ‘crystalline’ from Iris Murdoch’s 1961 essay, ‘Against Dryness,’<sup>61</sup> but amends its meaning so that it ‘suggests [...] not just the small-scale, *but also the hard, the impenetrable*’ qualities of Spark’s typically concise and oblique novels.<sup>62</sup> To appreciate the meticulously choreographed ‘dance’ staged in each of Spark’s ‘crystalline’ novels and short stories, such responses suggest, necessitates navigating one’s attention away from matters of character psychology, or the moral implications of the author’s narrative techniques and treatment of characters (her women, in particular), and learning instead to admire her deft handling of plot, suspense and narrative temporality.

Of each of these elegantly managed components, Spark’s inventive play with time is arguably the most distinctive feature of her writing. Her narratives famously

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<sup>59</sup> Jenny Turner, ‘She Who Can Do No Wrong [Review of *Curriculum Vitae*],’ *London Review of Books*, Vol. 14, No. 15 (6<sup>th</sup> August 1992), pp.8-10 (p.9).

<sup>60</sup> Margaret Crosland, *Beyond the Lighthouse: English Women Novelists in the Twentieth Century* (London: Constable, 1981), p.55.

<sup>61</sup> In ‘Against Dryness,’ Murdoch formulated a distinction between the two types of novels that she believed were being written at the time: the ‘journalistic’ and the ‘crystalline.’ It is important to note, however, that Todd is not engaging with Murdoch’s specific use of ‘crystalline,’ but rather the suitability of the word as a description of what he took to be the concise, perfectly-formed and impenetrable quality of Spark’s fiction. See Iris Murdoch, ‘Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch,’ in Malcolm Bradbury, ed., *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), pp.23-31.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Todd, ‘The Crystalline Novels of Muriel Spark,’ in Hedwig Block and Albert Wertheim, eds., *Essays on the Contemporary British Novel* (München: M. Hueber, 1986), pp.175–92 (p.177, emphasis mine).

flit both analeptically and proleptically from the narrative present to past and future events, with revelations concerning characters' imminent or far-off deaths, illnesses, infamies, betrayals and love affairs strewn throughout the narration of the ongoing plot; readers learn, for instance, that Nicholas Farrington will be martyred by the end of *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), and that *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie's* Mary Macgregor, though still a schoolgirl during the time at which the novel is set, will burn to death in a hotel fire in her twenties. 'It is like a bizarre textual supermarket,' writes Nicholas Royle of the deaths foretold in the morbidly comic and aptly-titled *Memento Mori* (1959), 'in which all characters are required to have an age-tag like a price and sell-by date.'<sup>63</sup> When John Crace composed a pastiche of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* for his 'Digested Classics' series in *The Guardian*, it was the novel's proleptic disclosures of the respective fates of its cast of classmates that he took particular pleasure in lampooning:

"Miss Brodie seems to have been in her prime for a long time," replied Sandy, who was famous even then for her piggy eyes. "That is one of the book's comic conceits," said Monica, who was famous for maths, "so we should all say the word prime as often as possible."

"There are so many comic conceits going on here," said Eunice, who was famous for gymnastics and hadn't even noticed all the arch time-shifts, "that it's becoming a bit laboured. I'd better do a somersault before I get married to a doctor in ten years' time."

"I'd better say prime too, I suppose," said Mary, who was famous for being a silent lump, "as I'm about to get burned to death in a hotel hell-fire of Calvinist indecision in fourteen years' time."<sup>64</sup>

What distinguishes Crace's pastiche from Spark's novel, of course, is the schoolgirls' evident awareness of what their futures hold, as well as the attributes for which they shall become best known. Spark seldom affords her own characters such a privilege,

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<sup>63</sup> Nicholas Royle, 'Memento Mori,' in McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction* (London: Palgrave, 2002), pp.189–203 (p.199).

<sup>64</sup> John Crace, 'Digested Classics: *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* by Muriel Spark,' *The Guardian*, 13<sup>th</sup> December 2008 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/dec/13/prime-of-miss-jean-brodie>> (accessed 3rd July 2018).

and it is because of this aspect of her fiction that she has found herself likened by her critics to a malevolent master-puppeteer, flaunting her powers of omniscience before the reader.<sup>65</sup> For Patricia Waugh, Spark ‘uses the omniscient-author convention not benevolently, to signpost the reader’s way through the text, but to express a disturbing authority whose patterns are not quite so easy to understand.’<sup>66</sup>

While Spark’s peculiar ‘patterns’ may remain unnervingly opaque, the power that she appears to exercise over her characters, displayed most overtly through proleptic asides, has proved all too easy for her critics to conceptualise and comprehend. For a vast number of these critics (Waugh among them),<sup>67</sup> the overt authority of the Sparkian narrator can be interpreted as a relatively uncomplicated analogy for that possessed by an omnipotent and often callous God, which far exceeds the limited powers and perspectives of mere mortals. Ruth Whittaker, for example, contends that ‘the theme of *all* [Spark’s] work’ is ‘the relationship – shown openly or implied – between the secular and the divine, between man’s temporal viewpoint and God’s eternal vision’.<sup>68</sup>

Both God and the novelist create a world which they then people with characters simultaneously free and limited. Sometimes in novels, as in real life, characters resent and fight back at authorial or divine omniscience, and the dynamic relationship between creator and character is integral to Mrs Spark’s plots. [...] God, like the novelist, knows the beginning and the end, and the struggles of his characters to evade their destinies, that is the process of most

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<sup>65</sup> I discuss the critical tendency to liken Spark to a master-puppeteer and her character to marionettes in greater detail in Chapter Two.

<sup>66</sup> Waugh, *Metafiction*, p.74.

<sup>67</sup> ‘For Spark,’ writes Waugh in *Metafiction*, ‘freedom is limited to self-conscious role-playing because in fiction characters are trapped within the novelist’s script, and in “reality” people are part of the book written by the hand of God’ (p.119). Waugh’s theological reading of Sparkian prolepsis is discussed in Chapter Four’s analysis of *The Driver’s Seat*.

<sup>68</sup> Ruth Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), p.1, emphasis mine.

people's lives.<sup>69</sup>

Whittaker's remarks, which appear to reveal rather more about her own beliefs concerning God and the nature of 'real life' than those necessarily held by Spark, offer a useful means of understanding the particular theological framework through which Spark's fictions have predominantly been interpreted. With such a framework set rigidly in place in the minds of critics, each new novel or short story – however experimental in form or diverse in subject matter – came to be perceived as a new variation on an increasingly familiar theme. 'Restrain your groans,' advises Robert Nye in an exasperated early review of *The Driver's Seat*. Spark's latest work, he claims, is the latest in 'a number of novels and stories where the author's function as God's spy has been too apparent.' For Nye, '[Spark's] elbows have been in our ribs a joke too often,' and the reader is yet again 'reminded of her liking for saying that this and that is "comical" (viewed from the presumed standpoint of eternity).'<sup>70</sup> So persuasive is this mode of reading that only this year, in a *Times Literary Supplement* feature commissioned to mark the centenary of Spark's birth, Margaret Drabble assessed the author's fiction in near-identical terms to Nye by conceptualising Spark once again as 'God's spy':

Events play themselves out [in Spark's fiction] as though watched by God from a very great distance and another timescale. *Lord, what fools these*

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<sup>69</sup> Ruth Whittaker, 'Angels Dining at the Ritz: The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark,' in Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer, eds., *The Contemporary English Novel* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), pp.157-79 (pp.162-3).

<sup>70</sup> Robert Nye, 'Another Suicide [Review of *The Driver's Seat*],' *The Observer*, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1970, p.14. A similar interpretation of the novel is offered in a 2010 *Guardian* article by Sam Jordison, written in response to *The Driver's Seat*'s nomination for that year's Lost Man Booker Prize (a special edition of the Man Booker Prize, awarded to a novel published in 1970 and therefore overlooked from that year's awards, due to a rules alteration). Events in this 'distant and cold' novel, bemoaned Jordison, 'seem like the caprice of a cruel God-like narrator,' so that 'Spark doesn't just have her subjects writhing on a petri dish, she's flicking them about for the hell of it': 'Looking Back at the Lost Booker: Muriel Spark,' *The Guardian*, 13<sup>th</sup> May 2010  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/may/13/lost-booker-muriel-spark-drivers-seat>> (accessed 30<sup>th</sup> October 2015).

*mortals be*. The author spies upon her creations, and lets them hurtle towards disaster. Maybe [Spark] sees herself as God's spy, observing with amusement the scurrying antics of a fallen world.<sup>71</sup>

In referencing the contemptuous words of Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, who gazes upon human follies with detached, half-mocking disdain, Drabble gestures toward the implied effects of Spark's apparently God's-eye (or rather 'God's spy') view. Spark's mortal readers, Drabble's allusion suggests, are invited to share a quasi-divine perspective, from which they can comprehend the relative insignificance of their own 'scurrying antics.' Lorna Sage, having arrived at a similar conclusion in *Women in the House of Fiction* (1992), asserts that 'Spark's concerns are with literary theology, and the way contemporary life looks from the improbable perspective of Almighty irony.'<sup>72</sup> Such readings offer a convenient way of comprehending the most unconventional – if not jarring, or outright disturbing – elements of Spark's prose: wild leaps in chronology and perspective; a detached, seemingly disaffected view of death and violence; characters who often appear ontologically diminished, or even puppet-like through the compulsive nature of their actions and their apparent lack of free will. '[Spark's] novels are paradoxically oriented *away* from what is most meaningful and towards a spiritually perverse focus on the ultimately meaningless,' argues Ian Gregson of the author's depictions of human life; '[her characters'] resultant transformation into puppets works both self-reflexively and ontologically.'<sup>73</sup>

To encounter much of the existing scholarship on Spark is thus to be reminded of the address of *The Abbess of Crewe's* megalomaniacal protagonist, Abbess

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<sup>71</sup> Margaret Drabble, 'Snapshots of Muriel Spark,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 26<sup>th</sup> June 2018 <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/muriel-spark-margaret-drabble>> (accessed 27<sup>th</sup> June 2018).

<sup>72</sup> Lorna Sage, *Women in the House of Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p.142.

<sup>73</sup> Gregson, *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction*, p.6; p.7. I engage with Gregson's theological reading of Spark in far greater detail in Chapter Two.

Alexandra, to her enraptured congregation: ““We have entered the sphere, dear Sisters, of mythology.””<sup>74</sup> Central to Spark’s own particular ““mythology,”” as has already been mentioned, is her conversion to Catholicism in 1954, which came to colour the critical reception of *The Comforters*, published three years later, and set the tone for readings of the numerous thematically and stylistically diverse works which would follow over the subsequent five decades. ‘[*The Comforters*] is a book in which you’ve got your myth,’ remarked Frank Kermode to Spark in 1963, ‘but you’ve deliberately made it in a sense a game about novels, haven’t you?’<sup>75</sup> Kermode had good reason to think so. That novel features a protagonist who is herself a Catholic convert, and who is able to overhear an otherworldly voice which appears to dictate a ‘plot’ that she and her acquaintances seem predestined to follow. Perhaps even more pertinent to Kermode were the circumstances that surrounded *The Comforters*’ composition and early promotion. The novel was written in part at a Carmelite priory, to which Spark had retreated while recovering from a period of nervous exhaustion and mental illness,<sup>76</sup> and had been financed by a ‘plight fund’ contributed to by a fellow Catholic convert, Graham Greene.<sup>77</sup> Another notable convert, Evelyn Waugh, joined Greene in supplying a favourable advance notice for the novel (both authors were sent proofs from Spark’s literary agent, Alan Barnsley);<sup>78</sup> at Waugh’s own suggestion, his words of praise were positioned prominently on the first edition’s dust-jacket, as well as on early advertisements.<sup>79</sup> On its eventual publication, therefore, *The*

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<sup>74</sup> Muriel Spark, *The Abbess of Crewe* (New York: New Directions, 1995), p.102.

<sup>75</sup> Kermode, ‘The House of Fiction,’ p.79.

<sup>76</sup> As discussed in greater detail in Chapter One.

<sup>77</sup> As detailed in Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, p.161.

<sup>78</sup> See Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, p.176.

<sup>79</sup> ‘Mrs Spark no doubt wants a phrase to quote on the wrapper and advertisements,’ wrote Waugh to Spark’s literary agent, Alan Barnsley, in 1956. ‘She can report me as saying: “brilliantly original and fascinating”’: Letter from Evelyn Waugh to ‘Mr. Fielding’ [the nom de plume of Alan Barnsley, Spark’s literary agent], 29<sup>th</sup> October 1956, from Piers Court, Strithcombe, Gloucestershire, Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10607/92: Original Letters, 1956-75, National Library of Scotland. Waugh’s

*Comforters*' reputation preceded it, and the terms on which it was to be read seemed already to have been established. Spark, as Kermode put it, '[had] her myth.'

Spark replied to Kermode, however, by insisting that *The Comforters* had *not* been written with the intended purpose of expressing a theologically-informed 'myth' central to her writing practice or attitude towards fiction, but rather to explore a self-reflexive mode of novel-writing suitable to her: 'I was asked to write a novel, and I didn't think much of novels [...]. So I wrote a novel to work out the technique first, to sort of make it all right with myself to write a novel at all.'<sup>80</sup> Despite her unambiguous response, Spark appeared to go unheard; for this 'unremittingly Catholic novelist,' Kermode later concluded, the 'myth' communicated by way of *The Comforters*' novelistic 'game' revolves around the idea that 'making fictions is in a way a presumptuous thing to do, because the novelist is, unlike God, free at the expense of his creatures.' The novelist's presumptuous power, Kermode argues, is undermined when, with a metafictional flourish, 'the characters fight back' by refusing to honour the will of a false deity.<sup>81</sup> With Spark's essential 'myth' so firmly established by early critics such as Kermode, it is little surprise that subsequent scholarship has followed suit by seeking out analogies between the author and God, and/or the text's didactic unravelling of representations of presumptuous authorial power (so as to emphasise the singular power of God, above all imitators). Examples are wide-ranging, from Joseph Hynes's conviction that the proleptic leaps peppered throughout *The Driver's*

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review, and discussion of the novel in his correspondence with Spark's literary agent, are detailed in Chapter One.

<sup>80</sup> Kermode, 'The House of Fiction,' p.79. I explore Spark's remarks to Kermode, as they pertain to her composition of *The Comforters*, in detail in Chapter One.

<sup>81</sup> Frank Kermode, *Continuities* (London: Routledge, 1968), p.203.



*Seat* reflect the ‘conflict between free will and determinism,’<sup>82</sup> to David Lodge’s belief that the ultimately thwarted attempts of Jean Brodie to determine her pupils’ fates ought to be read purely in terms of a clash ‘between the Catholic God who allows free will and the Calvinistic one who doesn’t.’<sup>83</sup> Not unlike one of the troubled female characters who occupy the absent centres of her most experimental novels (*The Driver’s Seat*, *Not to Disturb*, *The Hothouse by the East River*, and the tellingly-titled *The Public Image* – all examined over the course of this study), Spark appears to be confined within the rigid parameters of a narrowly-defined public persona.

It is not my intention to deny the significance of the theological contexts in which Spark’s fiction has predominantly been read. Such readings bear clear relevance to certain texts; in some, such as *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, they are even incorporated into characters’ dialogue, as when Sandy Stranger launches into a memorable tirade against her tyrannical teacher: “‘She thinks she is Providence [...]. She thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end.’”<sup>84</sup> I disagree with Whittaker, however, that the conflicting relationship between the secular/temporal and the divine/eternal ought to be considered ‘the theme of *all* [Spark’s] work.’ I would argue instead that this rigid, prescriptive way of reading Spark has postponed or even precluded more rigorous analysis of the significance of the social and historical contexts and concerns of her fiction, explorations of the relevance of her writing to diverse strands of literary and psychoanalytic theory, as

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<sup>82</sup> Joseph Hynes, ‘Muriel Spark and the Oxymoronic Vision’, in Robert Hosmer, ed., *Contemporary British Women Writers: Texts and Strategies* (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp.161-187 (p.164). So faithful was Hynes to the myth of the author, in fact, that he structured the chapters of his edited collection, *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992), under the headings ‘Opposition, Loyal and Other,’ thus dividing critics by way of their degree of subscription to the received idea of Spark (p.ix).

<sup>83</sup> David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.76.

<sup>84</sup> Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p.129.

well as considerations of how her literary innovations have facilitated instances of gendered social critique that are often far from ‘unsisterly,’ to return to the term applied by Jenny Turner. Spark’s narrative perspectives – which, I shall argue, are multifarious rather than uniform, altering drastically from one text to the next – are concerned intensely with reflecting and subverting the dynamics of power, knowledge and control operating *within* the worlds in which they are set. To begin to explore this possibility, our enduring faith in the unerring omniscience of the Sparkian narrator must first be challenged.

### **Flawed Crystals: Alternatives to Omniscience**

As much of the previous section makes clear, a common fixture of Spark criticism is a degree of commentary, be it disparaging or deferential, on her fiction’s formal economy, structural precision and narrative flair. ‘How do you do it? I am dazzled,’ Evelyn Waugh enthused to Spark of *The Bachelors* on its publication in 1960, before describing the novel as ‘the cleverest & most elegant of all your clever & elegant books.’<sup>85</sup> In a not dissimilar reaction to the author’s final novel, 2004’s *The Finishing School*, Ali Smith wrote admiringly of ‘a work of [...] glittering Sparkian ice,’ and expressed her ‘wonder’ at the paradoxical ‘simplicity and [...] intricacy of the plot, blowaway as gossamer.’<sup>86</sup> Spark’s novels, Bernard Harrison complained elsewhere, ‘seem all surface, and a rather dry, sparsely furnished, though elegantly mannered surface at that,’<sup>87</sup> while John Updike lauded such texts as works which ‘linger in the

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<sup>85</sup> Letter from Evelyn Waugh to Muriel Spark, 11<sup>th</sup> October 1960, from Combe Florey House, Taunton, Somerset, Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10607/91: Original Letters, 1951-77, National Library of Scotland.

<sup>86</sup> Ali Smith, ‘Wave Your Hankie [Review of *The Finishing School*],’ *The Guardian*, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2004 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/mar/20/fiction.murielspark>> (accessed 19th February 2018).

<sup>87</sup> Harrison, ‘Muriel Spark and Jane Austen,’ p.225.

mind as brilliant shards, decisive as smashed glass.’<sup>88</sup> As with Richard Todd’s aforementioned description of Spark’s novels as ‘crystalline’ in their combination of ‘the small-scale’ and ‘the hard, the impenetrable,’ these critical responses tend to pair a degree of reverence for the stylistic sharpness and concision of the text (‘clever & elegant,’ ‘glittering,’ ‘elegantly mannered,’ ‘brilliant shards’), with a pronouncement of its essential intangibility, as well as the critic’s own unbridgeable distance (‘ice,’ ‘gossamer,’ ‘all surface,’ ‘smashed glass’). The implication is that these are works to be admired from afar rather than intimately understood, as though each ought to come prefaced with the instruction: *look, but keep your distance*.

This oddly reverential critical approach is undoubtedly encouraged by the style and structure of the texts themselves, which often appear to delimit the need for extratextual interpretation by foregrounding their own seamless closure and perfect containment. We might note, for instance, the chiasmic structures of the sentences with which many of Spark’s novels and short stories appear to decisively conclude. These include the closing words of *The Driver’s Seat*, ‘fear and pity, pity and fear’ (*DS*, p.107), which seem to smooth the edges of the novel’s disquieting story with an elegant allusion to tragic catharsis,<sup>89</sup> as well as the respective endings of ‘The Seraph and the Zambesi’ and *Reality and Dreams*, which leave their readers ‘among the rocks that look like crocodiles and the crocodiles that look like rocks’<sup>90</sup> and ‘in the tract of no-man’s land between dreams and reality, reality and dreams,’<sup>91</sup> and thus emphatically outside the spaces of the preceding plots. We might think, too, of the fable-like first and last words of *The Girls of Slender Means*, which bookend the text

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<sup>88</sup> Updike, ‘Topnotch Witcheries,’ p.76.

<sup>89</sup> I examine the disturbing significance of this allusion to tragic catharsis in Chapter Three.

<sup>90</sup> Spark, ‘The Seraph and the Zambesi,’ p.131.

<sup>91</sup> Muriel Spark, *Reality and Dreams* (London: Penguin, 1996), p.160.

and bracket off its plot as taking place ‘[l]ong ago in 1945,’<sup>92</sup> or of *Not to Disturb*’s closing image of ‘sunlight [...] laughing on the walls’ (*NTD*, p.94), which appears to dispel the novel’s sinister content as if it were no more than a bad dream. As with Spark’s famous predilection for foreshadowing, such features may be interpreted as manifestations of an authorial desire to control the texts’ meanings and thus keep readers on the other side of the ‘glittering Sparkian ice.’

For many critics, the elegantly managed style and structure of Spark’s writing only underscores its central ‘myth’ and theological motivation. The implication for Todd, for example, is that the more ‘crystalline’ Spark’s fictions appear in their archness, brevity and structural elegance, the stronger the implied presence of ‘an unscrupulous God [...] who can be, and often is, ruthlessly decisive with his characters, and intolerant of hesitancy or lingering emotional involvement.’<sup>93</sup> This needn’t be seen to be the case, however, and more recent analyses have subjected the narrative dynamics of her novels (and their rhetorical effects) to more rigorous and illuminating critical scrutiny. In his 2006 essay, ‘Narrative and Ethics in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*,’ Peter Robert Brown offers a careful reconsideration of that novel’s narration as emanating not from an omniscient, omnipotent God’s-eye view, but the consciousness of an epistemologically limited being, rather like a first-person narrator recast in a third-person role. Despite its frequent use of prolepses, Brown observes the manifold ways in which ‘the narrative’s epistemic authority is qualified’ by details which remain pointedly obscure,<sup>94</sup> and which therefore allow the narrator to be

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<sup>92</sup> Muriel Spark, *The Girls of Slender Means* (London: Penguin, 1966), p.7; p.142.

<sup>93</sup> Todd, ‘The Crystalline Novels of Muriel Spark,’ pp.181-2.

<sup>94</sup> Paddy Lyons, whose reading of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* complements Brown’s, notes how the novel’s narrative is ‘characterised by distinct blind spots, by placed absence of explanatory information,’ so that ‘at no point does the narration ever render the thoughts or feelings of its magnetic central figure, Jean Brodie, whose vivid utterances are given [...] without a commentary attributing to

‘characterised as fallible, even unreliable.’<sup>95</sup> Indeed, far from flaunting any powers of omniscience, these recurrent narrative time-shifts come to foreground ‘the selection, arrangement and labelling of events’ in a manner which emphasises the narrator’s partial and personally invested account of Brodie and her pupils.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, the narrator displays a pointed interest in belittling the actions and appearance one of the characters, Mary Macgregor, over all others, in a manner which mirrors the tyrannical tendencies of the novel’s titular pedagogue. For Brown, the rhetorical effects of the structure and content of the narrative possess powerful ethical implications:

[T]he novel illustrates the ways in which institutional authority and power can produce and legitimate malevolent narratives that place limits on how individuals are interpreted. [...] *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* portrays the ethical and political dangers inherent in narrative and narrating and offers a broad critique of institutionalised power and the narrative authority that such power often assumes. [...] [Spark] involves readers in the victimisation of Mary and, through her irony, enables them to become aware of that involvement. Such awareness can have real moral and political impact, since readers are encouraged to acknowledge their participation in victimisation in the actual world and to reflect on the role that narrative plays in the process and justification of victimisation.<sup>97</sup>

According to Brown’s reading, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is instructive in ways unrelated to the didactic displays of divine omniscience with which Spark’s fiction is so frequently associated. By ‘ironically and satirically depicting the activity of narrating and the often dubious authority on which it rests,’ his essay concludes, the novel encourages readers to ‘resist the pernicious narratives we encounter in real life,’ and to ‘question the power and authority of those who construct them’ in much the

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her any subjective elements. Jean Brodie is purely dramatic, a performance artist [...]. She is constructed on an entirely theatrical basis,’ as if recalled by someone who never encountered her inner life: Paddy Lyons, ‘Muriel Spark’s Break with Romanticism,’ *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, pp.85-97 (p.90).

<sup>95</sup> Peter Robert Brown, “‘There’s Something about Mary’”: Narrative and Ethics in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*,’ *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Summer 2006), pp.228-53 (p.232).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p.233.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p.229.

same way that Sandy Stranger does when she brings about the dramatic downfall of her teacher.<sup>98</sup> Such an interpretation is consistent with Spark's own emphasis, in a 1961 account of the composition of her first few novels, on the importance of 'writ[ing] the narratives from a consistent point of view that's not my own,' so that 'the narrator of *Memento Mori* [a novel concerned with the lives and deaths of a group of feuding septuagenarians], for example, would be an old wise person who knew how these other old people in the story really felt.' Whether 'first or third person,' Spark maintains, 'the narrative [...] belongs to a character [...]. I have to decide what the author of the narrative is like. It's not me, *it's a character*.'<sup>99</sup> In interviews conducted since, Spark would maintain that each novel or short story is narrated consistently from a subjective, localised and often humanly limited perspective; speaking in 1987, for example, she described taking pains to write *The Driver's Seat* purely 'from the point of view of someone who doesn't know what anyone is thinking, but who can see, who can observe.'<sup>100</sup>

A more varied account of Spark's deflationary conception of authorial power, and the readerly wariness that it ought to invite, is provided in Bran Nicol's 2010 essay, 'Reading Spark in the Age of Suspicion.' Examining the self-reflexive approaches to narration encountered in *The Comforters*, *The Driver's Seat* and *Loitering with Intent*, Nicol contends that 'the analogy between this aspect of Spark's writing and the idea of the "God-like" writer, raised frequently in relation to Catholic writers, needs to be reassessed':

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p.247.

<sup>99</sup> Muriel Spark, 'My Conversion,' *Twentieth Century*, Vol. 170 (Autumn 1961), pp.58-63 (p.62, emphasis mine). Despite taking this approach to narration, only three of Spark's twenty-two novels are narrated in the first-person mode: *Robinson*, *Loitering with Intent* and *A Far Cry from Kensington*.

<sup>100</sup> Sarah Frankel, 'An Interview with Muriel Spark,' *Partisan Review*, Vol. 54 (1987), pp.443-57 (p.454). I return to the limitations placed on that novel's narrator in Chapter Four.

Unlike those of her contemporaries, such as Iris Murdoch and Graham Greene, Spark's novels do not offer a sustained meditation on religion or spirituality (even though the topic of Catholicism crops up frequently). *God is not one of her "themes."* Considering her approach to authorship in relation to the idea of God rather than other paradigms of power and control makes sense only [...] in the unsatisfactory terms of "biographical criticism."<sup>101</sup>

While 'the implicit analogy between the author-character relationship and that between God and his creations seem[s] especially pertinent in the case of a writer who believed in God,' argues Nicol, Spark's purportedly 'omniscient' narrator is often revealed to be less analogous to God than to an epistemologically compromised (not to mention potentially malevolent) being – 'a small-scale, prurient, menacing entity, more like a stalker than a deity.'<sup>102</sup> As Nicol demonstrates with reference to the numerous 'inconsistencies, gaps, and contradictions' that he encounters in the aforementioned novels, what emerges in Spark's fiction 'is a vision of the author as "loitering with intent,"' in amongst the texts' various assemblages of characters and plotlines, 'rather than fulfilling any loftier ambition.'<sup>103</sup>

Nicol's proposed model of the Sparkian narrator as a 'small-scale' and somewhat sinister loiterer, while certainly not applicable to all of her novels and short stories, invites the attentive reader to look for revelatory flaws in the author's supposedly 'crystalline' narratives. Those suspicious readers of Spark, Nicol insists, 'realise that they must look behind and beyond what her fiction might be telling or showing us, in search of the meanings lurking beneath.'<sup>104</sup> I am reminded here of the significance of Spark's 1962 essay, 'Edinburgh-Born,' in which the author identifies

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<sup>101</sup> Bran Nicol, 'Reading Spark in the Age of Suspicion,' *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives*, pp.112-28 (pp.112-3, emphasis mine).

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p.116; p.113.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p.123.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p.124.

the word ‘nevertheless’ (a word that she recalls overhearing amid the chatter of the Morningside tearooms she visited as a child) as ‘the core of a thought-pattern’ that she retained ever since. Spark proceeds to relate this ‘thought-pattern’ to Edinburgh’s peculiar geography, perceiving the sheer incongruity of ‘the primitive black crag’ of the Castle Rock ‘rising up in the middle of populated streets of commerce, stately squares and winding closes’ as analogous to ‘the statement of an unmitigated fact preceded by “nevertheless.”’<sup>105</sup> As Joseph Hynes asserts, this ‘nevertheless principle’ came to ‘typif[y] [Spark’s] life, her psychology, and her work,’ in that it demonstrates ‘that *any position taken or point made has another side.*’<sup>106</sup> The same is true of her narratives, in which displays of apparent omniscience and infallibility inevitably contain inconsistencies, blind spots, or obsessive, frustrated or malign motivations.

If Spark’s fiction does not attempt to provide a singular, *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective of human life, then what might constitute or inform the author’s way (or indeed manifold *ways*) of seeing? Brown and Nicol are each correct to identify varying degrees of fallibility and prurience in the narration of Spark’s novels, which can be seen to exhibit a variety of modes of knowledge and perception. An obvious example is *The Comforters*, in which, as Michael Gardiner identifies, the ingenious conceit of a spectral typewriter (known to the protagonist as the Typing Ghost) ‘inaugurates a Sparkian world of telepathy, which runs wormholes through any third-person omniscient narrator.’<sup>107</sup> Elsewhere, techniques derived from the object-oriented prose of the *nouveau roman* have the effect of limiting Spark’s narrators to

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<sup>105</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘Edinburgh-Born,’ in Hynes, ed., *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*, pp.21-3 (p.22).

<sup>106</sup> Joseph Hynes, ‘Introduction,’ in Hynes, ed., *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*, pp.1-18 (p.2), emphasis mine.

<sup>107</sup> Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory Since 1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p.46. I discuss the ghostly dynamics of *The Comforters* in greater detail in Chapter One.



recording surface-level observations of people and things, without access to characters' thoughts and emotions. Even a seemingly unambiguous indicator of omniscience – an awareness of future events, for instance – can serve as a marker of epistemological *impotence* when paired with glaring gaps in the narrator's knowledge. Similarly, the flagrant displays of disregard for the ontological status of the narrated subject, evinced by the narrators of resolutely contemporary texts including *The Public Image* and *Not to Disturb*, may not be evidence of what Hélène Cixous has identified as the author's 'Grimacing Catholicism,'<sup>108</sup> but a more nuanced articulation of what Fredric Jameson famously conceptualised as the 'depthlessness' of postmodern experience.<sup>109</sup> Each of these examples – the ghostly (or perhaps haunted) narrator; the detached observer; the frustrated voyeur; the postmodernist attention to surfaces over depths – is examined in the present study as a valuable alternative to the familiar model of Sparkian omniscience. Before discussing these models in greater detail, it is necessary to consider the position that my research occupies in relation to the evolving critical discourse on Spark.

### **Desegregating Spark: The 1970s to Now**

By paying specific attention to her archival materials and lesser-known texts (including her early short stories, ostensibly 'minor' novels, and her little-known stage play), and considering her fiction's longstanding engagement with the theories and techniques of the *nouveau roman*, as well as the applicability of diverse strands of literary theory to her writing, this thesis seeks to advance the belated attempts of

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<sup>108</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Grimacing Catholicism: Muriel Spark's Macabre Farce,' trans. by Christine Irizzary, in McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark*, pp.207-9 (p.207). Originally published in *Le Monde* 7157, 17<sup>th</sup> January 1968. I examine Cixous's position on Spark's fiction in Chapter Two.

<sup>109</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992). I examine Spark's engagement with postmodern 'depthlessness' in Chapter Two.

critics to expand the terms on which Spark has predominantly been read. Indeed, such attempts did not begin in earnest until 1974, when Peter Kemp's monograph on the author's literary career thus far, entitled simply *Muriel Spark*, paid unprecedented attention to the influence of Robbe-Grillet on her then recent novels, *The Driver's Seat*, *Not to Disturb* and *The Hothouse by the East River*.<sup>110</sup> Kemp's study, which elects to approach each of Spark's novels on its own terms, is thus unique among similar novel-by-novel accounts of the author's oeuvre (all also entitled *Muriel Spark*) by Karl Malkoff (1968), Patricia Stubbs (1973), Allan Massie (1979), Velma Bourgeois Richmond (1984), Alan Bold (1986), Dorothea Walker (1988) and Norman Page (1990), as well as Ruth Whittaker's *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (1984) and Rodney Stenning Edgecombe's *Vocation and Identity in the Fiction of Muriel Spark* (1990), which interpret her novels (to the exclusion of her short stories, poetry, stage play and radio dramas) as variations on the narrow, theologically-informed myth outlined earlier.

The first edited collection on Spark, Alan Bold's *Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision* (1984), attempted to broaden the existing discourse on the author beyond a simple chronological or theological account of her novels. This approach produced valuable scholarship in chapters concerning Spark's earlier career as a literary critic,<sup>111</sup> as well as her relationship to Scottish history and culture.<sup>112</sup> Elsewhere, however, the results of Bold's collection prove disappointing. A commissioned chapter on Spark's poetry, authored by the Scottish poet, Walter Perrie, appears to have been written with the sole intention of belittling her talents, denying

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<sup>110</sup> See Peter Kemp, *Muriel Spark* (London: Elek, 1974), pp.115-55.

<sup>111</sup> See Janet Menzies, 'Muriel Spark: Critic into Novelist,' in Alan Bold, ed., *Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision* (London: Verso Press, 1984), pp.111-31.

<sup>112</sup> See Trevor Royle, 'Spark and Scotland,' in Bold, ed., *Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision*, pp.147-66.

her poetic vision, and disregarding her achievements in this field; her poems, claims Perrie, are notable only for their ‘obscurity and [...] technical ineptitude.’<sup>113</sup> Other attempts to expand Spark scholarship would suffer similar shortcomings. The approach taken in Judy Sproxton’s *The Women of Muriel Spark* (1992), for example, ironically mirrors the various misogynistic and desubjectifying forces at play in the author’s fiction by reducing each of her female characters to a narrowly-defined ‘type,’ without exploring their respective complexities or considering the vital connections that exist between them. Joseph Hynes’s *The Art of the Real: Muriel Spark’s Novels* (1988) is similarly hamstrung by its insistence on applying an inflexibly binaristic model of realism (and antirealism) to Spark’s diverse body of fiction.

The discussion of Spark’s fiction in a number of groundbreaking studies of experimental and postmodern literature published between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, including Patricia Waugh’s *Metafiction*, Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) and Gerardine Meaney’s *(Un)Like Subjects: Women, Theory, Fiction* (1993), would expand – to varying degrees<sup>114</sup> – the terms on which her literary innovations could be read. McHale, for example, interprets *The Comforters* not as a straightforward theological analogy, but rather a ‘postmodernist parodic version of Proust, tracing its heroine’s apprenticeship to the point where she is literally able to write the very text in which she figures as a character,’<sup>115</sup> while Meaney’s uniquely feminist reading of *The Hothouse by the East River* draws upon the work of Julia

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<sup>113</sup> Walter Perrie, ‘Mrs Spark’s Verse,’ in Bold, ed., *Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision*, pp.183-204 (p.185).

<sup>114</sup> As I discuss in my analysis of *The Driver’s Seat* in Chapter Four, Patricia Waugh’s examination of that novel in *Metafiction*, while attentive to the experimental facets of Spark’s narration, falls back upon the familiar analogy between the author and God to account for the novel’s unusual temporal structure.

<sup>115</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York; London: Methuen, 1987), pp.122-3.

Kristeva and Luce Irigaray to claim Spark's deathly protagonist, Elsa Hazlett, as a source of maternal abjection whose body 'impinges on representation.'<sup>116</sup> The nuanced analyses of Spark in studies such as Regina Barreca's *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humour in British Literature* (1994), Judy Little's *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism* (1983) and Elaine Showalter's 'Rethinking the Seventies: Women Writers and Violence' (1981), meanwhile, highlight the pointedly gendered implications of Sparkian satire. For Showalter, *The Driver's Seat's* sinister tale of a woman's purposeful search for her male murderer offers a blackly comic perspective on female agency (or the lack thereof), in which 'Spark gives us the devastated postulates of feminine wisdom: that a woman creates her identity by choosing her clothes, that she creates her history by choosing her man.'<sup>117</sup> Such studies offer a welcome counterpoint to Gayle Greene's critical overview of the history of feminist fiction, *Changing the Story* (1991), which elects to omit any detailed discussion of Spark on the unelaborated grounds that the author's 'metafictional devices – artist figures, speculations on fictionality or the function and morality of art' are not employed 'in a way that is related to gender,' being that they are 'uninformed by feminist consciousness.'<sup>118</sup>

The most decisive shift in critical approaches to Spark arrived in 2001, with the publication of Martin McQuillan's edited collection, *Theorising Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction*. In his bold and often polemical introduction to the essays that follow, McQuillan asserts that 'the task of theorising Muriel Spark [...] is

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<sup>116</sup> Gerardine Meaney, *(Un)Like Subjects: Women, Theory, Fiction* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), p.161.

<sup>117</sup> Elaine Showalter, 'Rethinking the Seventies: Women Writers and Violence,' *Antioch Review*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Spring 1981), pp.156-70 (p.164).

<sup>118</sup> Gayle Greene, *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p.25.

long overdue,’ before criticising the way in which the author is ‘continually reduced by the power of English canonical criticism to the safe domain of the properly “Catholic.”’<sup>119</sup> McQuillan contends that ‘such divisive and rigid categorisation (which takes little account of Spark’s Scottish Presbyterian upbringing and entirely overlooks her avowed Jewish cultural history) leads to doctrinal criticism,’ which entails ‘read[ing] Spark’s novels for moral and theological content’ and thus ‘reading her texts like the penny catechism.’<sup>120</sup> Like the red scarf that pulled attention away from the author in her portrait, such ‘rigid categorisation,’ argues McQuillan, causes ‘everything which might be interesting’ about Spark’s fiction to be ‘squeezed out [...] in the name of a Catholic doctrinal orthodoxy.’<sup>121</sup> The collection’s twelve chapters pay heed to McQuillan’s concerns by utilising strands of literary, psychoanalytic and sociocultural theory to provide a more rounded view of Spark’s fiction: Eleanor Byrne offers an incisive postcolonial reading of the author’s early, African-set short stories, including ‘The Curtain Blown by the Breeze’ (1954) and ‘The Go-Away Bird’ (1958);<sup>122</sup> Susan Sellers draws upon Kristeva’s psychoanalytic study of love (1983’s *Tales of Love*) to dissect the murky marriage at the centre of *The Public Image*;<sup>123</sup> Nicholas Royle’s ingenious interpretation of *Memento Mori* argues persuasively that ‘Spark’s work is pervaded by the telepathic,’ and that ‘the uncanny transmission of thoughts’ staged in this particular novel ‘are bound up with the very nature of fictional narration.’<sup>124</sup> That the content of Royle’s chapter, which investigates telepathy as a conceptual alternative to narrative omniscience, would be developed at length in his

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<sup>119</sup> Martin McQuillan, ‘Introduction: “I Don’t Know Anything About Freud”: Muriel Spark Meets Contemporary Criticism,’ in McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark*, pp.1–31 (p.8; pp.2-3).

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>122</sup> Eleanor Byrne, ‘Muriel Spark Shot in Africa,’ in McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark*, pp.113-26.

<sup>123</sup> Susan Sellers, ‘*Tales of Love*: Narcissism and Idealisation in *The Public Image*,’ in McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark*, pp.35-48.

<sup>124</sup> Royle, ‘*Memento Mori*,’ pp.192-3.

acclaimed 2003 study, *The Uncanny*, underscores the purpose of *Theorising Muriel Spark*; released from the narrow “realm of mythology” that once contained them, the author’s fictions are free to spark new ideas into life.<sup>125</sup> ‘Theory,’ surmises Willy Maley during a Derridean reading of *Not to Disturb*, ‘has in fact much to learn from *Spark*,’ rather than the other way around.<sup>126</sup>

The efforts of McQuillan et al to effect the desegregation of Spark’s art would be taken up afresh by David Herman in 2008. In his edited special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* – later published as a book, *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (2010), featuring additional essays by Patricia Waugh and Bran Nicol – Herman assembled a set of critical responses to Spark which further demythologised the author by recontextualising her fiction and widening the terms on which it can and should be read. Lisa Harrison’s detailed study of Spark’s relationship with *The New Yorker*, for example, examines the author’s contributions to the magazine (as well as her unpublished correspondence with its editors) in order to position her, in the words of Herman, ‘as a major contributor to world literature.’<sup>127</sup> Jonathan Kemp’s analysis of *The Driver’s Seat*, developed in dialogue with the writings of Irigaray, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, explores the novel’s refusal to provide insight into the mind of its protagonist as reflective of its essential *queerness*; the novel is ‘queer,’ asserts Kemp, because it ‘buckl[es] commonsense notions of the self by excavating all psychology; queer, that is, in that it [...] posits the self as some form of discursive

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<sup>125</sup> See Nicholas Royle, ‘The “Telepathy Effect”: Notes Toward a Reconsideration of Narrative Fiction,’ in *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp.256-76.

<sup>126</sup> Willy Maley, ‘Not to Deconstruct? Righting and Deference in *Not to Disturb*,’ in McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark*, pp.170-88 (p.171), emphasis mine.

<sup>127</sup> David Herman, ‘Introduction,’ *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives*, p.7. See Lisa Harrison, “‘The magazine that is considered the best in the world’: Muriel Spark and the *New Yorker*,’ *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives*, pp.39-60.

residue devoid of meaning or interpretable content.’<sup>128</sup> In a reading which echoes Peter Robert Brown’s analysis of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Kemp questions the presumed omniscience of Spark’s narrator by teasing meaning from the lacunae and ambiguities placed within the prose.

In the decade since the publication of the *Modern Fiction Studies* special issue, numerous articles have continued the task of disentangling Spark from the mythology with which she has long been associated. Bearing out Willy Maley’s belief that ‘theory has in fact much to learn from Spark,’ such studies have sought, through close textual analysis of Spark’s fiction, to illuminate concepts drawn from realms as diverse as psychoanalysis, literary theory, and sociocultural and historical analysis. In ‘Muriel Spark’s Postwar Investigations’ (2012), for example, Eluned Summers-Bremner examines how Spark’s early novels *Robinson* (1958) and *Memento Mori* (minimised and pigeonholed in one overview of her fiction as ‘witty theological parables’)<sup>129</sup> artfully reflect the diminishment of postwar Britain’s national imperial status.<sup>130</sup> John Foxwell’s ‘Enacting Hallucinatory Experience in Fiction’ (2016), meanwhile, draws upon research in the fields of cognitive literary studies and audionarratology to assess *The Comforters*’ depictions of voice-hearing as accurately reflective of ‘the phenomenological “reality” of abnormal psychological experience,’

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<sup>128</sup> Jonathan Kemp, “‘Her Lips are Slightly Parted’”: The Ineffability of Erotic Sociality in Muriel Spark’s *The Driver’s Seat*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (2008), pp.544-57 (p.545).

<sup>129</sup> John Glavin, ‘Muriel Spark: Beginning Again,’ in Abby H. P. Werlock, ed., *British Women Writing Fiction* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2000), pp.293-313 (p.298). Between 1957 and 1961, Glavin asserts, Spark was concerned exclusively with writing ‘witty, theological parables of small-scale evil and good set in physically dilapidated, morally shabby postwar London.’

<sup>130</sup> Eluned Summers-Bremner, “‘Another world than this’”: Muriel Spark’s Postwar Investigations,’ *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 42 (2012), pp.151-67. For other recent examples of studies which consider the sociocultural and historical significance of Spark’s fiction, see Lindsey Stonebridge’s *The Judicial Imagination: Writing After Nuremberg* (2011), Victoria Stewart’s *The Second World War in Contemporary British Fiction: Secret Work* (2011), Bryan Cheyette’s *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (2014), and Robert Eaglestone’s *The Broken Voice: Reading Post-Holocaust Literature* (2017).

as opposed to a more abstract theological and/or metafictional ‘truth’ (Spark had been inspired to include such sequences, after all, following her own experience of psychosis, as I discuss in Chapter One).<sup>131</sup> In my own published work, too, I have attempted to expand the existing critical discourse on Spark by focusing on lesser-discussed texts and paying specific attention to the form and function of the experimental narrative techniques utilised in her fiction. By including a detailed analysis of Spark in my co-edited essay collection, *British Women Short Story Writers: The New Woman to Now* (2015), I sought to emphasise the importance of the author’s early short stories to a wider appreciation of her fiction.<sup>132</sup> Elsewhere, my 2015 article, ‘Salutary Scars,’ attempted to evaluate the multiple modes of literary experimentation through which Spark elevates her fiction’s satirical effects,<sup>133</sup> while an earlier essay, ‘Muriel Spark and the Eichmann Trial’ (2012), offered a reading of *The Mandelbaum Gate* that gestured away from the novel’s predominantly theological interpretations to foreground its experimental depiction of postwar political realities.<sup>134</sup>

While McQuillan’s call for scholars to attend to the ‘long overdue’ task of ‘theorising Muriel Spark’ has certainly been heeded in the years since 2001, there remains significant work still to be done. Unlike contemporaries including Christine Brooke-Rose, John Fowles and B. S. Johnson, for example, Spark continues to be

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<sup>131</sup> John Foxwell, ‘Enacting Hallucinatory Experience in Fiction: Metalepsis, Agency, and the Phenomenology of Reading in Muriel Spark’s *The Comforters*,’ *Style*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (2016), pp.139-57 (p.144).

<sup>132</sup> James Bailey, “‘Haunted, whether we like it or not’: The Ghost Stories of Muriel Spark,” in Emma Young and James Bailey, eds., *British Women Short Story Writers: The New Woman to Now* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp.81-95.

<sup>133</sup> James Bailey, ‘Salutary Scars: The “Disorienting” Fictions of Muriel Spark,’ *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (March 2015), pp.35-52.

<sup>134</sup> James Bailey, “‘Repetition, boredom, despair’: Muriel Spark and the Eichmann Trial,” in Jenni Adams and Sue Vice, eds., *Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2012), pp.165-84.



overlooked in much of the critical discourse surrounding experimental literature, and the reasons for this demand further scrutiny.<sup>135</sup> Similarly, Spark's self-acknowledged interest in the *nouveau roman* has been explored predominantly in relation to a narrow selection of overtly experimental novels written by the author in the early 1970s, without consideration of earlier instances of engagement with the 'anti-novel.' Spark's unpublished drafts, manuscripts and research notes, meanwhile, offer an invaluable yet hitherto largely unexamined insight into the composition of some of her most innovative works, revealing in the process an author writing in active engagement with the techniques of literary postmodernism, and devising imaginative alternatives to narrative omniscience. By turning my attention to these and other aspects of Spark's fiction, I seek to advance the project of desegregating Spark from the modes of 'rigid categorisation' and 'doctrinal criticism' outlined by McQuillan.<sup>136</sup>

### **Thesis Aims and Chapter Overviews**

It is my intention in this study to present Spark's fiction as less neatly contained and narrowly didactic than is often alleged to be the case, and to focus instead on its deceptively expansive and decidedly more equivocal qualities. Particular attention is paid throughout to formal and generic liminality, self-reflexivity and stylistic experimentation. In the chapters that follow, I also aim to reassess some of Spark's ostensibly minor fictions as deceptively major ones, to consider crucial convergences between what has been termed her one and only 'big novel' (*The Mandelbaum Gate*) and the 'witty' and 'laconic' phases of writing that lie on either side, and to pay

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<sup>135</sup> As detailed in Chapter Two.

<sup>136</sup> McQuillan, 'Introduction,' p.2.

specific attention to her achievements as a playwright and short story writer.<sup>137</sup> I therefore resist taking the long view of the author's oeuvre, as many other studies have, and concentrate instead on a narrower timeframe, spanning the mid-1950s (the earliest text discussed in detail is the 1953 short story, 'Harper and Wilton') to the publication of her bizarre anti-novel, *The Hothouse by the East River*, in 1973. I consider the latter text, which combines a number of the stylistic and conceptual innovations exhibited in the author's earlier works, to be the apex of Spark's literary experimentation, which fails at every turn to correspond with the enduring myth of its author. Following its publication, Spark would explore comparatively more conventional themes and structures; in the sociopolitical satires that followed immediately thereafter, *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974) and *The Takeover* (1976), she took playful (yet relatively unadventurous) aim at the Watergate scandal and the 1973 oil crisis respectively, while two later novels, 1996's *Reality and Dreams* and 2004's *The Finishing School*, would return to the interpersonal dynamics at play in the film industry and the classroom, the politics of which were investigated more inventively (and with sharper focus) in *The Public Image* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

Focusing on this twenty-year period not only affords me the opportunity to trace formative instances in Spark's development of a mode of writing that sought to reconceptualise realism through a 'rediscovery of form' and a refinement of 'the arts of pretence and counterfeit,' but also allows me to consider how her fiction came to intersect with newly emerging ideas concerning postmodernism, metafiction, metatheatre and the *nouveau roman*. I do not, however, attempt to offer detailed

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<sup>137</sup> As outlined in John Glavin's rigid overview of the phases of Spark's literary career ('Muriel Spark: Beginning Again,' p.298). Glavin considers the novels that preceded *The Mandelbaum Gate* as 'witty theological parables,' whereas the short, sparse novels written immediately after are classified as 'laconic, very short satires,' leaving no room for explorations of the resonances and convergences between them.

analyses of two of Spark's best-known and most highly-regarded novels, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The Girls of Slender Means*, despite their publication within this timeframe. These novels have each attracted a wealth of critical commentary, often to the detriment of other works published within the same period. By contrast, the seven novels, five short stories and single stage play that form the focus of my study have been either underrepresented in Spark scholarship, or examined predominantly in terms of the rigid theological approach delineated earlier. Although necessarily selective, it is my hope that the texts that I have chosen to discuss will provide an insight into some of the more interesting and frequently neglected aspects of Spark's fiction.

This thesis is organised thematically for the purpose of best highlighting what I consider to be some of the most pertinent areas of interest for present and future Spark criticism. By taking a broadly chronological approach to the texts discussed within each chapter, I allow for both the continuities and changes in Spark's fiction to be traced in a coherent manner. My discussion of Spark's relationship with the *nouveau roman* in Chapter Three, for example, analyses three of her novels in the order of their publication, and thus offers an account of the author's evolving engagement with the theories and narrative techniques associated with the so-called 'anti-novel.' In terms of the thesis as a whole, however, I occasionally diverge from a chronological structure by grouping texts together based on the particular focus of each chapter. This allows for the productive, albeit unconventional, pairings of texts such as *Doctors of Philosophy* and *Not to Disturb* in Chapter Two, and *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and *The Mandelbaum Gate* in Chapter Three. Accordingly, my study offers no monolithic conceptual perspective on Spark's fiction, choosing instead to

explore a variety of theoretical and narratological approaches, and drawing upon a particular strand of theory when it most usefully illuminates either a specific text or the contrasts and convergences between texts. By taking this approach, I seek to establish a more complex language or framework for discussing Spark, which, rather than disregarding those features that appear anomalous when placed within the parameters of a single literary tradition, is better suited to accommodating and analysing the tensions and contradictions that may arise through the juxtaposition and interaction of multiple literary ‘codes.’

In Chapter One, I examine the manifestations of the supernatural depicted in Spark’s debut novel, *The Comforters*, as well as in a selection of her early (and otherwise realistic) short stories. In so doing, I discuss some of Spark’s earliest attempts to realise in narrative prose – to quote from her preceding study of John Masefield – ‘how sharp and lucid fantasy can be when it is deliberately intagliated on the surface of realism.’<sup>138</sup> The first half of this chapter concerns what might be classified as the *textual* haunting, whereby the supernatural encounter is treated as an instance of metalepsis – a violation, that is, of the text’s diegetic boundaries, which is in some way analogous to the ghost’s traversal of ontological ones. I concentrate predominantly here on Spark’s composition of *The Comforters*, whose protagonist’s exposure to the amassed voices of the Typing Ghost initiates her critical engagement with the dynamics of the plot she inhabits, thus effecting the metafictional transformation of the novel from the inside out. Through a critical approach which combines detailed archival research with aspects of postmodern narrative theory, I examine how, by (re)constructing her nascent novel around a supernatural conceit,

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<sup>138</sup> Muriel Spark, *John Masefield* (London: Hutchinson, 1992), p.165.

Spark developed a mode of writing which suited her existing ambition to write experimental, self-reflexive fiction. Focusing on Spark's belief in 'treat[ing] the supernatural as if it was part of natural history,' the chapter's second section examines the significance of the ghost story as a vital means of critiquing forms of patriarchal power, along with conventional gender roles and their attendant expectations.<sup>139</sup> The respectively literal and figurative treatment of spectral phenomena in 1957's 'The Girl I Left Behind Me' and 1961's 'Bang-Bang You're Dead' come to articulate the female protagonists' slight and stifling existences. In 1958's 'The Portobello Road,' meanwhile, a female murder victim reflects critically and authoritatively on her carefree yet curtailed life. Like *The Comforters*, each text emerges in dialogue with realist and self-reflexive tendencies, and thus constitutes a formative attempt, on the author's part, to cultivate a literary style located between both discourses.

In seeking to extend the preceding chapter's discussion of Spark's literary liminality, Chapter Two examines how the self-reflexive strategies employed in the author's writing work to facilitate moments of gendered social critique, while also interrogating the wider functioning of power and personal identity in the increasingly mediatised postmodern consumer culture in which they were written. I focus predominantly here on three of Spark's most formally and thematically experimental works: 1962's seldom discussed work of metatheatricality, *Doctors of Philosophy*, 1968's slight and sparsely detailed *The Public Image*, and the elaborately metafictional *Not to Disturb*, published in 1971. In each case, I read Spark's literary innovations alongside her longstanding preoccupation with the tensions that exist between private selves and public performances, with bodies neatly inscribed within oppressive cultural

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<sup>139</sup> James Brooker and Margarita Estévez-Saá, 'Interview with Dame Muriel Spark,' *Women's Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 8 (December 2004), pp.1035-46 (p.1036).

narratives (and those deemed to be deviant for daring to exist outside of them), and with the sinister, violent negation of female subjectivity. Across each of the chapter's three sections, I pay particular attention to aspects of dialogue, narration, setting and characterisation which draw attention to the staged and stilted aspects of seemingly 'natural' existences, and which thus prompt readers to look askance at the narrow roles that Spark's female characters have come to inhabit. In the process, I seek to reassess Spark as not only a writer of experimental fiction, but a *woman* writer whose literary innovations have arguably energised the interrogations of female agency (or the lack thereof) that figure so prominently within her work.

Concentrating on the development of her fiction during the decade spanning 1960 to 1970, Chapter Three traces the evolving relationship between Spark's novels and the style and ethos of the *nouveau roman*. I focus in particular on Spark's inventive appropriation of what she termed 'the drama of exact observation,' as derived from the meticulous, externalised narration characteristic of the work of one of the key practitioners of the *nouveau roman*, Alain Robbe-Grillet.<sup>140</sup> Although critical analysis of Spark's relationship with the anti-novel has largely been restricted to discussions of the series of purportedly 'brief, brittle, [and] nasty' novels written by the author during the early 1970s,<sup>141</sup> I demonstrate that the *nouveau roman* also served as a crucial influence on earlier works including 1960's subversive social satire, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, as well the uncharacteristically expansive sociopolitical novel, *The Mandelbaum Gate*, published in 1965. In my discussion of *Ballad*, I observe how Spark draws playfully upon the apparent depthlessness of Robbe-

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<sup>140</sup> Philip Toynbee, 'Interview with Muriel Spark,' *The Observer Colour Magazine*, 7<sup>th</sup> November 1971, pp.73-4 (p.73).

<sup>141</sup> Robert Nye, 'Gloria Deploras You Strikes Again [Review of *Not to Disturb*],' *The Guardian*, 11<sup>th</sup> November 1971, p.9.

Grillet's prose to depict a community in thrall to the superficial and deadened by habit and convention. The relentless exteriority of Robbe-Grillet's narration, I argue, presented Spark with an ideal means of communicating a Bergsonian form of comedy – one which involves the supposedly vital individual appearing, to humorous or even unsettling degrees, as a mindless automaton or two-dimensional stock character.

In the chapter's second section, I relate Spark's developing interest in the *nouveau roman* to her first-hand experience of the trial of the Holocaust administrator, Adolf Eichmann, in 1961. Examining the representation of the trial as a scene in *The Mandelbaum Gate*, I consider how Spark's inclusion of a reference to 'the anti-novelists' enabled her to evoke something of the 'repetition, boredom, [and] despair' induced by Eichmann's robotic speech and emotional disengagement from the human reality of death and suffering (*MG*, p.177). Political reality, I assert, emerges in this novel as both the subject and agent of Spark's literary practice; the *nouveau roman* offered Spark a means of exposing the artificiality of supposedly natural orders, pursuing the ethical, and evacuating the glass box represented by Eichmann and his horrifyingly detached worldview. In the final part of the chapter, I discuss 1970's *The Driver's Seat* as Spark's most direct – and self-reflexive – encounter with the anti-novel. In this novel, Spark traces the plight of a character placed beneath the desubjectifying gaze of her own *nouveau romancier*, who artfully engineers her tragic death in order to articulate her subjectivity and engage at last with the real. Taken together, the three texts demonstrate that Spark's engagement with theories and aesthetics associated with the *nouveau roman* preceded (and directly *informed*) the

sequence of ‘laconic [...] anti-novels,’ of which *The Driver’s Seat* stands as a prime example.<sup>142</sup>

Chapter Four extends the preceding discussion of *The Driver’s Seat* to offer a thorough reassessment of its largely one-sided critical reception, as well as its nuanced approach to the inextricable relationship between gender, narrative perspective and epistemological power. I argue that the novel – which has been read predominantly as Spark’s most starkly drawn, or ‘crystalline,’ parable of human fallibility versus divine omniscience, as dictated by a pitiless authorial surrogate – is concerned instead with that which escapes and thus destabilises the exacting, investigative and emphatically *male* gaze of its narrator. Through a critical framework which combines commentary on the *nouveau roman*, previously unexamined archival material, studies of metaphysical detective fiction, and theory related to narrative point of view (including that derived from feminist film theory), my chapter shifts focus from existing readings of the protagonist, Lise, as the hopeless object of a godlike narrative viewpoint, and considers her instead as a captivating figure who, even after her death, confronts and commands the epistemologically limited perspective of her hopelessly fascinated narrator-voyeur. Spark’s description of *The Driver’s Seat* as ‘a study, in a way, of self-destruction’ can thus be seen to relate not only to Lise’s determined drive to death, but to the subversive unravelling of the narrating ‘self,’ tormented and undone by the novel’s perennially unknowable subject.<sup>143</sup> A concluding chapter offers a brief examination of Spark’s most outlandish work of metafiction, *The Hothouse by the East River*, as a means of uniting the various, interrelated strands of literary

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<sup>142</sup> Glavin, ‘Muriel Spark: Beginning Again’ p.298.

<sup>143</sup> Ian Gillham, ‘Keeping it Short: Muriel Spark Talks about Her Books to Ian Gillham,’ *The Listener*, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1970, pp.411-3 (p.412).



experimentation, satire, subversion and social critique discussed over the course of the preceding chapters.

The title of this thesis, ‘A certain detachment,’ refers to two uses of the phrase by Spark, which, when taken together, capture something of the ‘abiding doubleness’ that defines her writing. The phrase makes its first appearance in the self-reflexive ghost story, ‘The Portobello Road,’ whose spectral narrator, Needle, announces that her newfound ghostliness has enabled her to ‘perceive and exploit’ all that she encounters in the world ‘with a certain detachment, since it suits with my condition of life’ (‘PR,’ p.499). This revelation, which disrupts the otherwise realistic nature of Needle’s observations and recollections, enforces a powerful sense of estrangement between the reader and the diegetic world, allowing the cold realities of the protagonist’s lived experience to emerge in sharper focus. Almost fifty years later, in one of her final interviews, Spark would return to these exact words when asked to reflect upon the influence of Robbe-Grillet on her fiction. ‘All I have from him,’ she remarked, ‘is a certain detachment.’<sup>144</sup> Although Spark attempts here to minimise or even deny Robbe-Grillet’s role as a source of literary inspiration, her comment provides an accurate description of the mode of defamiliarising dispassionateness that, adapted from his novels, came to transform her writing and its uses of rhetoric. This study reads Spark’s fiction as a sustained attempt to effect ‘a certain detachment’ between reader and text, and by extension between reader and world, for the purpose of achieving what Spark describes in ‘The Desegregation of Art’ as ‘an environment of honesty and self-knowledge, a sense of the absurd and a general looking-lively to

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<sup>144</sup> Robert Hosmer, ‘An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark’, *Salmagundi*, Vol. 146/147 (Spring/Summer 2005), pp.127-58 (p.135).

defend ourselves from the ridiculous oppressions of our time.’<sup>145</sup> My subtitle, ‘Muriel Spark’s Experiments with Form,’ thus refers not only to the innovative techniques at play in her narrative structures and her broader ambition to pursue ‘a rediscovery of form,’ but also to the author’s intense preoccupation with the manifold ways in which people are perceived, controlled and *formed* by individuals and institutions, and the hopeful possibility of breaking the mould altogether. This interplay between the formal and the ethical constitutes the defining characteristic of Sparkian metafiction, and accounts for its ‘abiding doubleness.’

### **‘Everything that wriggles’: A Note on the Archives**

I am a hoarder of two things: documents and trusted friends. The former outweigh the latter in terms of quantity.  
– *Curriculum Vitae*<sup>146</sup>

This thesis is the first non-biographical study to draw extensively upon Spark’s two vast archives of personal correspondence, research materials, manuscripts and notebooks, which are held at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh and the McFarlin Library at the University of Tulsa.<sup>147</sup> The only other text to make such thorough use of these resources is Martin Stannard’s *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (2009), which, given its self-evident biographical focus, pays specific attention to archival material that pertains to the author’s career and personal relationships, including letters to and from her friends and family, associates, editors and publishers.

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<sup>145</sup> Spark, ‘The Desegregation of Art,’ p.36.

<sup>146</sup> Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, p.11.

<sup>147</sup> In Chapter Three, I also draw upon correspondence between Spark and her literary agent, John Smith, from the John Smith archives at the Washington University in St Louis Library.

As a result, Stannard's book focuses rather less closely on those materials, including notebooks, loose fragments and manuscripts, through which developments in Spark's composition of narratives, plots and characters can be meticulously traced and intricately examined. Broadly speaking, the Edinburgh and Tulsa archives present two very different versions of the author, with the contents of the former revealing more about Spark's personal and professional life, and the materials in the latter relating to the research and writing of her novels, short stories, poetry and plays. Whereas the National Library of Scotland teems with letters, contracts, receipts (spanning everything from Spark's acquisition of a racehorse from the stables of Queen Elizabeth to innumerable bills from her hairdresser), cheque stubs, appointment diaries and postcards, for example, the notebooks, research folders and manuscripts that fill the McFarlin Library offer a much more revealing insight into her *fiction*, and have thus been of far greater use to this thesis.

There are, of course, some notable exceptions to this broad distinction. Among the materials listed above, the archive at the National Library of Scotland also holds research materials for novels such as *Memento Mori* and *Not to Disturb* (I consult the latter in detail in Chapter Three), as well as evidence of a number of unfinished creative projects, including drafts of her supernatural comic play, *Warrender Chase* (drafted in 1952, and detailed in Chapter One), and notes for an abandoned historical novel, *Watling Street*, concerning the recollections of a Roman army officer.<sup>148</sup> In

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<sup>148</sup> Spark's papers reveal that she was developing *Watling Street* as early as 1976. In a letter to her friend, a scholar named Guy Strutt, she outlines her plans for the novel: 'I am writing a novel called *Watling Street* starting in Rome about the year 308 A.D., in which a former officer of the Roman army, who had served in Britain, looks back to his 20 years service in Britain which was from about 286 A.D. to 306 A.D. The book continues with present action from Rome between 308 and 320 A.D. interspersed with British reminiscences': Letter from Muriel Spark to G. R. Strutt [Guy Strutt], 28<sup>th</sup> March 1976, from Lungotevere Raffaello Sanzio 9, Rome. Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.11621: Watling Street Notes, National Library of Scotland.

addition to this, further accessions from Spark's home in Tuscany, which include the manuscripts of her later works, as well as further items of personal correspondence, are currently in the process of being catalogued and prepared for public access.<sup>149</sup> I would maintain, however, that the largely unexamined McFarlin Library archive is, by some distance, the more useful resource for scholars of Spark's fiction as opposed to her biography; its importance continues to be overlooked in favour of the materials housed at the National Library of Scotland, I wish to suggest, due in part to the significance of Edinburgh as the place of Spark's birth, the setting of her most famous novel, and the official site of recent celebrations to mark the centenary of her birth.<sup>150</sup> As the following chapters will demonstrate, the McFarlin Library materials have proved to be invaluable to my readings of novels including *The Comforters* and *The Driver's Seat*, while the discovery of the manuscript for an unpublished short story, 'A Dangerous Situation on the Stairs,' complements Chapter Two's reassessment of Spark's fictional approach to the related matters of gender, characterisation and free will.

Perhaps surprisingly, this thesis rarely consults the manuscripts of Spark's novels, and focuses instead on their corresponding notes and research materials. This is due to the uncanny, near-perfect resemblance that these manuscripts bear to their published counterparts, thus revealing very little about their own composition. A scholar consulting the manuscript of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, for example, will struggle to spot any significant differences between the words neatly handwritten on

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<sup>149</sup> See Mike Wade, 'Spark of Life: Personal Archive Reveals "Private" Author Hoped to make Biopic,' *The Times*, 16<sup>th</sup> June 2016 <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/spark-of-life-personal-archive-reveals-private-author-hoped-to-make-biopic-gbpqr5bp9>> (accessed 6<sup>th</sup> July 2018).

<sup>150</sup> At the time of writing, the National Library of Scotland is hosting an exhibition, 'The International Style of Muriel Spark,' in which selected archival material is displayed to the public. Rather tellingly, however, two of the exhibition's main attractions are the manuscripts of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The Driver's Seat* – both on loan from the Tulsa archive.

alternate lines of one of Spark's large, spiral-bound notebooks, and those printed on the pages of the published text. 'I don't correct or rewrite,' Spark remarked of her novel-writing process in a 1993 profile piece for *The New Yorker*, 'because I do all the correcting before I begin, getting it in my mind. And then when I pounce, I pounce.'<sup>151</sup> To 'pounce' with a perfect landing, it was essential for Spark to compile what she described as 'a bundle of notes' beforehand, to which she could refer while writing her novel:

I need a sheet [of notes] for every character: what they say, what they wear, who knows what, who knows whom, and what they do – all cross-referenced. I have a place for everything that wriggles – human beings, dogs, ice cream. Then I can fit it all together.<sup>152</sup>

It is to these various 'bundle[s] of notes,' contained for the most part in the McFarlin Library, that I return throughout the present study. In doing so, I tend to discuss what Spark chose either to omit from, or further develop in, the largely uncorrected manuscripts of her novels. Among the materials discussed over the course of this thesis, for example, is a paragraph-long fragment entitled 'The Parquet Floor,' from which the full manuscript of *The Public Image* can be seen to have emerged, dialogue drafted for (yet, significantly, never used in) *The Driver's Seat*, and the numerous plot sketches which the explicitly metafictional *The Comforters* would conjoin into a tangled skein of competing fictions. As I sifted through the heaps of plot outlines, character profiles, newspaper cuttings and scraps of plot and dialogue contained in Spark's files and boxes, I found the author's description of her various assortments of notes as 'bundle[s]' to be rather too generous; alongside each near-pristine manuscript are several folders and envelopes heavy with hundreds of loose and unnumbered

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<sup>151</sup> Stephen Schiff, 'Muriel Spark Between the Lines,' *The New Yorker* (24<sup>th</sup> May 1993), pp.36-43 (p.42).

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

scraps of paper (an alternative ending for *The Driver's Seat*, from which I quote in Chapter Three, is scrawled across an advertisement for a used car, while a list of character attributes for *The Hothouse by the East River's* Paul Hazlett appears on the back of a coupon for a free hairdryer). When referencing such materials, therefore, I can often refer only to the specific boxes and folders from which they have been found, along with a brief description of the item in question.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> For more information concerning the organisation of the materials consulted at the McFarlin Library, see the University of Tulsa's Archival Catalogue: <<https://utulsa.as.atlas-sys.com/repositories/2/resources/425>> (accessed 19<sup>th</sup> May 2018).

## **‘Haunted, whether we like it or not’: Manifestations of the Supernatural in Spark’s Early Fiction**

You may as well know your ghosts – solid,  
large and cold.

– Muriel Spark, Handwritten note (c.1956-7)<sup>1</sup>

Spark knew her ghosts. The author’s novels, short stories, plays and poems abound with unquiet spirits, haunted settings, spectral narrators, and eerie encounters with supernatural phenomena and disembodied voices. These elements can be traced back to her earliest works; indeed, it was the ghost story, and tales of the uncanny and the unexpected more generally, that preoccupied Spark as she made her first forays into fiction-writing – first in the form of short stories and plays, and later in the development of her debut novel, *The Comforters*, published in 1957. Ghosts take a wide variety of forms in these early works. They appear, for example, as manifestations of fractured psyches and mental illnesses in ‘The Leaf-Sweeper’ (1952) and ‘The Pearly Shadow’ (1955). In the former, the supposedly sane ghost of a sectioned (and still alive) young man makes an annual visit to the home of his aunt for a slice of Christmas cake,<sup>2</sup> while the titular phantom in the latter is the spirit of a psychiatrist whose skin has been rendered ‘translucent and pearly’ after an intentional overdose of barbiturates.<sup>3</sup> The unsettling imbrication of mental deterioration and ghostly haunting also forms the focus of Spark’s 1958 radio play, ‘The Interview,’ in

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel Spark, Loose handwritten note contained in “‘The Girl I Left Behind Me,” Handwritten short story [14pp., c.1956-7],’ Muriel Spark Papers, Box 24, Folder 1, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

<sup>2</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘The Leaf-Sweeper,’ in *The Complete Short Stories* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011), pp.235-42.

<sup>3</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘The Pearly Shadow,’ in *The Complete Short Stories*, pp.293-301 (p.301).

which conversations between the elderly Dame Lettice and her nephew, Roy, are revealed to be either paranormal interactions, senile delusions, or an eerie combination of the two.<sup>4</sup> The festivities of century-old partygoers disturb the sleep of a present-day bedsitter in ‘The Party Through the Wall’ (1957), a radio drama whose seemingly reliable narrator is revealed, ultimately, to be himself a malevolent spirit.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, a plasterer’s apprentice is hectored about his career ambitions by a sniffy apparition in an unfinished draft entitled ‘The Ghost That Was a Terrible Snob’ (c.1955).<sup>6</sup> ‘The House of the Famous Poet’ (1952), meanwhile, is a surreal rumination on posthumous legacy and the anticipation of one’s own death, its initially esoteric concerns with spectral soldiers and ‘abstract funerals’ brought into sharp focus by its wartime setting.<sup>7</sup> ‘Fictional phantoms make for heady literature,’ claimed Spark in a short *Observer* article published in 1956, which concluded that ghosts ‘have melodramatic scope,’ and can therefore ‘be used to upset the reader satisfactorily.’<sup>8</sup>

Spark’s notebooks from this period teem with research into, and imaginative musings on, matters of death and the afterlife. This is nowhere more apparent than in the drafts and working notes for her unfinished play, *Warrender Chase* (the title of which Spark would later assign to Fleur Talbot’s novel-in-progress in 1981’s eerily metafictional tale of life and literature, *Loitering with Intent*). Drafted in 1952, the play is a ludic and frequently absurd meditation on mortality, spectrality, and the

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<sup>4</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘The Interview,’ in *Voices at Play* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), pp.129-49. The play was broadcast on BBC Radio’s Third Programme in 1958.

<sup>5</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘The Party Through the Wall,’ in *Voices at Play*, pp.175-88. The play was broadcast on BBC Radio’s Third Programme in 1957, and revived for BBC Radio Four’s Thirty-Minute Theatre programme in 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Muriel Spark, Handwritten draft fragment entitled ‘The Ghost That Was a Terrible Snob’ [5p., c.1955], ‘Handwritten notes, draft fragments, and draft of “The Ghost That Was a Terrible Snob”’, Muriel Spark Papers, Box 13, Folder 7, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

<sup>7</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘The House of the Famous Poet,’ in *The Complete Short Stories*, pp.338-49 (p.346).

<sup>8</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘Ghosts,’ *The Observer*, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1956, p.7. Spark’s short article included brief reviews of two collections of ghost stories: Shane Leslie’s *Ghost Book* (1956) and Cynthia Asquith’s *The Third Ghost Book* (1955)



significance of one's life's work.<sup>9</sup> The surname of the eponymous protagonist, Spark writes in her notes for a supplementary *précis*, is itself meaningful: 'The theme of hurry, pursuit, is implied [by the surname]. Chase, after his accident, is increasingly anxious to accomplish everything he has started, before his death.'<sup>10</sup> As a result, the convalescent Chase's 'impatience [...] mounts scene by scene in small matters. [...] "Will there be time?" is his cry.'<sup>11</sup> Death is at Chase's heels, however; his interactions are overseen by a figure named 'Apparition,' who punctuates characters' dialogue with a recurrent "'Boo!'"<sup>12</sup> Prospective publishers were, unsurprisingly, baffled. 'I confess I am a little staggered to know that this is the beginning of a tragedy,' replied Emmanuel Wax of ACTAC (Theatrical & Cinematic) Ltd., having been sent a copy of the first of *Warrender Chase*'s three proposed Acts.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps Chase's 'tragedy' is that death catches up with him before his work is done; Spark, like her protagonist, never finished the job, and the play remained uncompleted. In other notebooks, Spark is shown to take death rather more seriously. Her notes for 1959's *Memento Mori* (whose elderly cast of characters are each stalked by a ghostly voice, which perhaps emanates from Death itself) comprise extensive research into aspects of physical and mental decline among geriatrics,<sup>14</sup> which is paired with quotations from sources as

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<sup>9</sup> In his biography of Spark, Martin Stannard describes Spark's unfinished *Warrender Chase* erroneously as 'a novel,' perhaps because it is used as the title of Fleur's novel in *Loitering with Intent* (*Muriel Spark: The Biography* [London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009], p.444).

<sup>10</sup> Muriel Spark, 'Warrender Chase' [notebook of handwritten notes, 1952], p.9, Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.11621: Miscellaneous Notes, Poems, Plays (1954-7), National Library of Scotland. It should be noted that, according to correspondence dates included among these notes, the play was developed in 1952, despite it being grouped among notes for poems and plays spanning 1954-7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>12</sup> Muriel Spark, 'Act 1, Scene 1 of Warrender Chase' [unpaginated draft, 1952], Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.11621: Miscellaneous Notes, Poems, Plays (1954-7), National Library of Scotland.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Emmanuel Wax (ACTAC [Theatrical & Cinematic] Ltd.) to Muriel Spark, 16<sup>th</sup> May 1952, from 33 Haymarket, London. Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.11621: Miscellaneous Notes, Poems, Plays (1954-7), National Library of Scotland.

<sup>14</sup> Spark copies copious notes from, among various other studies, Kenneth Walker's *Commentary on Age* (1952) and Joseph Harold Sheldon's 1948 report, 'The Social Medicine of Old Age.' Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10989: *Memento Mori* Notes and Research [c.1958, unpaginated], National Library of Scotland. In amassing such a great deal of research on old age, Spark comes to bear an ironic resemblance to *Memento Mori*'s Alec Warner, an amateur gerontologist who conducts increasingly

diverse as Shakespeare, Plato, Cicero and Russian folksong, each relating to matters of death, ageing and the hereafter.<sup>15</sup>

There is, as the above examples demonstrate, no shortage of angles from which to approach Spark's interest in, and treatment of, the possibilities presented by the ghost story.<sup>16</sup> The present chapter narrows its focus to two distinct (yet interrelated) manifestations of the supernatural in the author's early fiction. The first concerns what might be called the *textual* haunting, whereby the sight or sound of a ghost is treated as an instance of metalepsis – a violation, that is, of the text's diegetic boundaries, which is in some ways analogous to the ghost's traversal of ontological ones. I concentrate predominantly here on Spark's development of *The Comforters*, in which the protagonist's experience of ghost-hearing enables her to effect the metafictional unravelling of the text to which she belongs. It was by constructing her novel around this conceit, I argue, that Spark made productive use of her own troubling experiences with mental illness and visual hallucinations, and developed a mode of novel-writing which suited her ambition to write experimental, self-conscious fiction. This process of textual haunting can be seen to have been repeated, I proceed to observe, in Spark's drastic revisioning of her 1953 short story, 'Harper and Wilton,' when it was rewritten and republished as a metafictional ghost story in 1996. The chapter's second part, 'Living Ghosts,' examines Spark's unsettling and subversive

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intrusive research into the impacts of old age, before his enormous personal archive is destroyed in a house fire.

<sup>15</sup> Spark includes quotations from, among other sources, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Plato's *The Republic*, and Cicero's *Cato Maior de Senectute (On Old Age)*. See Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10989: *Memento Mori* Notes and Research, National Library of Scotland.

<sup>16</sup> Spark's interest in the ghost story might also be investigated in relation to her lifelong enjoyment of the Scottish border ballads, renowned for their tales of bloody violence and vengeful spirits. The 'steel and bite' of such stories, Spark remarked of her childhood reading habits in *Curriculum Vitae*, 'entered my literary bloodstream, never to depart' (p.98). For a useful discussion of the influence of the border ballad on Spark's fiction, see Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory Since 1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp.55-61.

explorations of the ghostly ‘absent presence’ of women living under patriarchy, and examines the author’s use of the ghost story as a means of critiquing forms of patriarchal power, as well as conventional gender roles and their attendant expectations. Whereas, in ‘The Girl I Left Behind Me’ and ‘Bang-Bang You’re Dead,’ the respectively literal and figurative emergences of ghosts appear as unnerving extensions of female characters’ curtailed and confining existences, ‘The Portobello Road,’ resurrects the dissident voice of a female murder victim to speak from beyond the ending and at last assume a level of narrative autonomy.<sup>17</sup>

‘If it is a wet Saturday I wander up and down the substantial lanes of Woolworth’s as I did when I was young and visible,’ announces Needle, the spectral narrator-protagonist of ‘The Portobello Road.’ ‘There is a pleasurable spread of objects on the counters,’ she adds, ‘which I now perceive and exploit with a certain detachment, since it suits with my condition of life’ (‘PR,’ pp.498-9). This ‘certain detachment’ characterises the shared effect of the literary hauntings examined in the present chapter. In each text, the ontological jolt effected by the ghostly arrival prompts characters and readers alike to look askance at the plots, narratives and social hierarchies presented therein. If this enforced estrangement produces a critical engagement with the dynamics and conventions of plot and characterisation in *The Comforters*, for example, it provokes the suspicious scrutiny of the violent, oppressive structures of patriarchal authority and colonial culture in ‘Bang-Bang You’re Dead.’

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<sup>17</sup> Although ‘Bang-Bang You’re Dead’ was not published until 1961, when it appeared in Spark’s collection of short fiction and radio plays, *Voices at Play*, records of the author’s correspondence with the *New Yorker* reveal that the story was submitted to, and rejected by the publication in 1958 (at the same time that Spark was working on ‘The Girl I Left Behind Me’ and ‘The Portobello Road,’ which contain similar themes). ‘The Portobello Road’ was also turned down by the publication in 1957, despite positive reviews from its editors. For a detailed study of Spark’s relationship with the *New Yorker*, in which several of her short stories were published, and where Spark would later work, see Lisa Harrison, “‘The magazine that is considered the best in the world’: Muriel Spark and the *New Yorker*” in David Herman, ed., *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp.39-60.

In either case, seeing ghosts (or, indeed, seeing *as* ghosts) leads to radically altered perspectives, and thus to new ways of seeing.

### **Border-Crossings: Haunted Texts and Critical Fictions**

In her 2004 poem, 'Author's Ghosts,' Spark imagines authors as spectral beings who return 'nightly to haunt the sleeping shelves / And find the books they wrote,' before making 'final, semi-final touches,' to their old works.<sup>18</sup> 'The author's very touch,' notes the speaker at the poem's end,

is here, there and there,  
Where it wasn't before, and  
What's more, something's missing—  
I could have sworn...<sup>19</sup>

Here, as it draws to a close, Spark's poem enacts the very haunting it earlier described. The ending at which its speaker expected to arrive has vanished, having 'been tampered with' by a meddlesome ghostwriter on another narrative plane.<sup>20</sup> An abrupt shift in tone is detected in its penultimate line, where fanciful speculation gives way to wide-eyed bemusement as the speaker trails off, caught out by unforeseen changes to the text and now unable to proceed. What precedes this line is the poem as its speaker once knew it – something familiar, finished and seemingly self-contained. In unravelling in the manner that it does, 'Author's Ghosts' performs what Gérard Genette calls *metalepsis*: the traversal of the 'shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells [the extradiegetic],' and 'the world of which one

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<sup>18</sup> Muriel Spark, 'Author's Ghosts,' in *All the Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), p.13, ll.2-3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.18-21.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, l.16.

tells [the diegetic].<sup>21</sup> The titular ghosts, mistakenly assumed by the speaker to have been contained within the diegetic realm of the recitable poem, have lived up to their reputation by fostering a disorienting sense of ontological ambiguity. The reader is left to hover indeterminately between both narrative realms, displaced and disoriented by the ghostly textual intervention.

What is especially striking about ‘Author’s Ghosts,’ Spark’s final published work before her death in 2006, is that its twinned themes of ghostly haunting and ontological disruption can be traced back to some of her earliest fictions, including her debut novel. *The Comforters*, to quote the playful description that Spark would offer to her interviewer, Frank Kermode, is ‘a novel about writing a novel, about writing a novel sort of thing.’<sup>22</sup> As she would later reflect in *Curriculum Vitae*, it had been necessary to write in such a way in order to determine her specific abilities as a novelist: ‘I didn’t feel like “a novelist” and before I could square it with my literary conscience to write a novel, I had to work out a novel-writing process peculiar to myself, and moreover, perform this act within the very novel I proposed to write.’<sup>23</sup> The narratorial self-consciousness to which Spark alludes is achieved by way of metaleptic interruptions to the plot by a figure known as the Typing Ghost, whose narration of the novel’s action (heralded by the noisy clanking of typewriter keys) is overheard at various intervals by the protagonist, Caroline Rose. Caroline experiences the ‘haunting’ of the Typing Ghost in moments of solitude and contemplation, the first instance of which proceeds as follows:

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<sup>21</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay on Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), p.236.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Kermode, ‘The House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists,’ *Partisan Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Spring 1963), pp.61-82 (p.79).

<sup>23</sup> Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, p.206.

Caroline thought, “Well, he will ring in the morning.” [...] On the whole she did not think there would be any difficulty with Helena.

Just then she heard the sound of a typewriter. [...] It stopped, and was immediately followed by a voice remarking her own thoughts. It said: *On the whole she did not think there would be any difficulty with Helena.*

There seemed, then, to have been more than one voice: it was recitative, a chanting in unison. It was something like a concurrent series of echoes.

[...]

A typewriter and a chorus of voices. [...] [W]hat worried her were the words they had used, coinciding so exactly with her own thoughts. (*TC*, p.34)

‘[R]emarking,’ as it appears here, takes on a telling duality. Are the ‘recitative’ voices *remarking* Caroline’s thoughts, and thus demonstrating an ability to dictate and determine the contents of her mind? Or, as indicated by their italicised repetition, are Caroline’s ‘*own thoughts*’ being *re-marked* – repositioned and repurposed, that is, as narrative content? If the first of these possibilities suggests the Typing Ghost’s omniscience and creative power, the second points to Caroline as the unwitting source of an emerging text, experiencing her own narrative voice being played back to her. The latter option would make *Caroline* a Typing Ghost in the making, who transforms the content and structure of the novel she inhabits by altering it drastically from the inside out. The two possibilities are not, however, mutually exclusive, and a tussle between them plays out over the course of the novel; as the story progresses, Caroline comes to antagonise the voice by resisting the plot it dictates. “I refuse to have my thoughts and actions controlled by some unknown, possibly sinister being,” she asserts defiantly (*TC*, p.93). ‘It is not easy to dispense with Caroline Rose,’ the Typing Ghost eventually concedes: ‘Caroline among the sleepers turned her mind to the art of the novel, wondering and cogitating, those long hours, and exerting an undue, unreckoned, influence on the narrative from which she is supposed to be absent’ (*TC*, p.154). Unlike ‘the sleepers’ who comprise the novel’s cast of stock characters,

Caroline *Rose* is a restless character-turned-revenant, ascending from her storyworld to wrest authorial control from her creator by altering the fabric of the novel she occupies.

As a conceit, the metaleptic ‘haunting’ of Caroline (and Caroline’s responsive ‘haunting’ of the text she inhabits) offered Spark the means of performing the ‘novel-writing process peculiar to [her]self’ that she had long been seeking, which radically transformed her plans for the novel as a consequence. As her archival materials reveal, one of the first of several working titles for *The Comforters* was *The Loving of Mrs. Hogg*, which refers to a character who would later become a secondary (and self-consciously insubstantial) figure in the published text. Under this earlier title, Spark sketched a number of details concerning the story that she intended to develop. Two intricate and intertwining plot strands were sketched out. The first (marked ‘Sub-plot: diamond smuggling’) is concerned with the elaborate attempts of Louisa Jepp, the grandmother of a budding detective, Laurence Manders, to sneak the jewels procured by her accomplices, Andrew and Mervyn Hogarth, into tins of pickled fish, which would then be delivered to another co-conspirator, Willi Stock.<sup>24</sup> The second revolved around a ‘shuttlecock of blackmails’ initiated by the villainous and self-righteous Georgina Hogg, into which the other characters would find themselves drawn.<sup>25</sup> A *précis* of the latter plot strand is quoted below:

Mrs. Hogg married Mervyn Hogg unaware that he was her half-brother. On discovering the relationship he leaves Mrs Hogg, changes his name to Hogarth and marries Eleanor, committing bigamy.

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<sup>24</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘Sub-plot: diamond smuggling [2pp., c.1955],’ in ‘Handwritten notes and draft fragments in three notebooks and one exercise book (*The Comforters*),’ Muriel Spark Papers, Box 13, Folder 7, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

<sup>25</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘The Loving of Mrs. Hogg [4pp., c.1955],’ in ‘Handwritten notes and draft fragments in three notebooks and one exercise book (*The Comforters*),’ Muriel Spark Papers, Box 13, Folder 7, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

Mrs. Hogg obtains Laurence's letter to Caroline, revealing his grandmother's criminal activities [...]. On the strength of this she tyrannises the Manders by a sort of un-self-acknowledged blackmail. Eleanor's sister, Caroline Rose, is engaged to Laurence Manders.

Caroline enters her "psychotic" state. Discovers the situation, but refuses to act.<sup>26</sup>

Spark added to these notes a list of genres under which her nascent novel might fall:

'detective story, adventure, psychological novel, domestic tale, crime, violence, young love, gothic novel, social satire.'<sup>27</sup> Rather than refining her work to fit more neatly within one or more of these categories, however, *The Comforters* ends up even more convoluted than its author's notebooks already indicate. The published text includes, for example, an additional, bizarre plot strand concerning Willi Stock's obsession with the Black Mass, and fixates on Mervyn Hogarth's suspected status as a diabolist, able to transform at will into a black dog. 'The plot,' wrote Evelyn Waugh in an admiring yet bemused early review, 'thickens to inspissation. [...] It is all rather absurd.'<sup>28</sup>

By making Caroline conscious of the voice(s) of the Typing Ghost, and thus alert to the various machinations of the plots in progress, Spark cuts through the tangled skein of competing (or unconvincingly coalescing) storylines that she had

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Evelyn Waugh, 'Something Fresh,' *Spectator*, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1957, p.32. Waugh's novel, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, had been published in the same year, and drew upon his own experience of hallucinations. In Waugh's novel, however, there is no attempt to represent the hallucination via metafictional techniques; instead, the novel progresses as a psychological thriller, until it becomes clear that hallucinations are the only possible explanation for the protagonist's experiences. 'It so happens that *The Comforters* came to me just as I had finished a story on a similar theme,' Waugh wrote, 'and I was struck by how much more ambitious was Miss Spark's essay and how much better she had accomplished it' (p.32). Writing to Spark's literary agent, Alan Barnsley, after reading proofs of *The Comforters* in 1957, Waugh wrote that 'the mechanics of the hallucinations are well managed. These particularly interested me as I am myself engaged in a similar subject.' Having praised the outlandish and tightly-plotted dynamics with which the novel begins, however, Waugh confessed to finding its 'second half' - in which Caroline's cognisance of her author precipitates the unravelling of the aforementioned plots - disappointingly 'diffuse' (Letter from Evelyn Waugh to 'Mr. Fielding' [the nom de plume of Alan Barnsley], 29<sup>th</sup> October 1956, from Piers Court, Strithcombe, Gloucestershire, Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10607/92: Original Letters, 1956-75, National Library of Scotland).



earlier designed. Spark's notes already indicate Caroline's role as a disruptive force; there, her newly "psychotic" state appears to relate to, or even prompt, her 'refus[al] to act' in the ongoing blackmail saga. Following the intervention of the Typing Ghost in the published novel, Caroline's non-participation assumes a metafictional dimension. Having listened exasperatedly to Laurence's suspicions concerning the criminal activities of his grandmother, for example, she announces her intention "to stand aside and see if the novel has any real form apart from this artificial plot," before admonishing her fiancé for acting, "under the suggestive power of some irresponsible writer," as "an amateur sleuth in a cheap mystery piece" (*TC*, pp.92-3). This spells trouble for the so-called "irresponsible writer." The novel's first chapter, which precedes the introduction of Caroline and her voice-hearing episodes, has worked hard to set its hokey plot in motion. Laurence, introduced by way of a rather convenient description of 'his reputation for being remarkably observant' (*TC*, p.5), grows almost immediately wary of his grandmother; "I may take up detective work one of these days," he announces, "[i]t would be quite my sort of thing" (*TC*, p.11). As a literary scholar (she is mid-way through writing her monograph, *Form in the Modern Novel*), Caroline is more than capable of recognising such conventions when they appear: "I haven't been studying the novel for three years without knowing some of the technical tricks," she remarks sniffily, "[i]n this case it seems to me there's an attempt being made to organise our lives into a convenient slick plot. Is it likely that your grandmother is a gangster?" (*TC*, p.92).

In first sketching Caroline as "psychotic," and then developing her into a character who hears voices shortly after suffering a psychiatric episode (she has just left a retreat at the Pilgrim Centre of St. Philomena in Liverpool, where she had been

recuperating following ‘a time when her brain was like a Guy Fawkes night, ideas cracking off in all directions, dark idiot-figures jumping round a fiery junk-heap in the centre’ [TC, p.34]), Spark drew directly upon her own distressing experiences of hallucinations and psychosis.<sup>29</sup> In *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark links this experience to her use of the amphetamine, Dexedrine, as an appetite-suppressant during an anxious period of intense work and financial precarity in the early months of 1954. The hallucinations, she remarks, first occurred as she attempted to complete a critical study of T. S. Eliot’s play, *The Confidential Clerk* (1953):

As I worked on the Eliot book one night the letters of the words I was reading became confused. They formed anagrams and crosswords. In a way, as long as this sensation lasted, I knew they were hallucinations. [...] It is difficult to convey how absolutely fascinating this involuntary word-game was. I thought at first that there was a code built into Eliot’s work and tried to decipher it. Next, I seemed to realise that this word-game went through other books by other authors.

[...]

My friends [...] were very sympathetic. I was aware of being surrounded by friends.<sup>30</sup>

Spark’s hallucinations, according to Stannard, had left her ‘unable to distinguish inside from outside, fact from fiction, which was at once terrifying and stimulating.’<sup>31</sup> ‘The trouble was,’ Spark wrote in a letter to the Ministry of National Insurance, in which she attempted to account for her failure to claim for National Health benefit during her months of illness, ‘that I [...] lost a grip on reality.’<sup>32</sup> She was, in effect, living through her ‘Author’s Ghosts’ poem half a century before writing it, and finding herself endlessly consumed by an ‘involuntary word-game’ which appeared to

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<sup>29</sup> Spark, too, had sought retreat following her own period of mental illness. As Alan Bold notes, Spark wrote *The Comforters* ‘while living near Allington Castle, Kent, in a cottage owned by the Carmelite Friars of Aylesford Priory’ (*Muriel Spark* [London; New York: Methuen, 1986], p.36). See Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, p.161, for a more detailed account of this period.

<sup>30</sup> Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, p.204.

<sup>31</sup> Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, p.165.

<sup>32</sup> Letter from Muriel Spark to The Manager, Ministry of National Insurance, 21<sup>st</sup> May 1954, from 8 Sussex Mansions, 65 Old Brompton Road, London. Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10607/15: Correspondence 1941-92, National Library of Scotland.

emanate from an ever-changing text. If these hallucinations were to inform (or indeed *transform*) *The Comforters*, however, Spark recognised that they must be amended to accommodate the reader: ‘From the aspect of method, I could see that to create a character who suffered from verbal illusions on the printed page would be clumsy. So I made my character “hear” a typewriter with voices.’<sup>33</sup>

While Spark would eventually recognise her own delusions as just that, Caroline’s auditory hallucinations reveal a profound metafictional *truth*: that her free will is illusory as long as she remains written into what Cairns Craig describes astutely as ‘a typographic world of predetermined types.’<sup>34</sup> The sensation, then, is one of ontological reduction – a dawning realisation of lives that are in fact flimsy plots, and people who are merely characters or *types*. As she continued to work on the manuscript, Spark’s changes to its title reflect the growing significance of such themes to her novel-in-progress. The title, as Stannard notes, was altered gradually from *The Loving of Mrs. Hogg* to ‘*Characters in a Novel*, then *Types and Shadows*, then *Shadow Play*.’<sup>35</sup> The final choice of *The Comforters*, she told her editor at Macmillan, ‘pins down my main theme.’<sup>36</sup> The reason for the title’s suitability can be deduced from the contents of the author’s notebooks, which reveal that her work on the novel coincided with two detailed reviews of the Book of Job, written by Carl Jung and T. H. Robinson respectively. Spark’s commitment to completing these reviews, of which only the former was published, was perhaps a way of compensating for her own failure to submit a monograph on the subject, which had been commissioned by the

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<sup>33</sup> Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, p.207.

<sup>34</sup> Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p.174.

<sup>35</sup> Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, p.169.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Muriel Spark to Alan Maclean, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1956, from 13 Baldwin Crescent, Camberwell, London. Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10607/15: Correspondence 1941-92, National Library of Scotland.

publishers Sheed & Ward in 1953.<sup>37</sup> Both reviews fixate on the same theme: Job's intolerable *comforters*, whose solipsistic behaviour exacerbates their friend's present suffering.<sup>38</sup> 'The harm Satan did to Job seems trivial in comparison with the crushing afflictions which we actually see in progress,' she wrote in the review of Jung's book. 'He appears surrounded,' she continued, 'by a *conspiracy of mediocrity*.'<sup>39</sup> The unpublished review of Robinson's study reiterates this point: while '*the comforters* express themselves on the theory of suffering,' she observed, 'Job speaks as one who suffers, not only from his boils but from them.' Here, Spark places particular emphasis on the 'employ[ment] [of] irony to portray a situation where men speak in the same tongue but in a different sense'; the supposed comfort offered by Job's friends, she asserts, is simply inapplicable to the torment with which Satan tests him.<sup>40</sup>

Job's peculiar malaise is mirrored in *The Comforters* by Caroline's psychological and ontological estrangement from her friends, who appear to be 'isolated,' as Alan Bold observes, 'by their egocentric aberrations' as they 'obsessively pursue their own ends' in accordance with the rapidly thickening plot.<sup>41</sup> Spark had herself recalled being 'surrounded by friends' as she retreated ever further into her own delusional 'word-game,' and this experience perhaps informed her

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<sup>37</sup> As documented in Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, p.143.

<sup>38</sup> I am focusing, in the present study, on a rather narrow aspect of the Book of Job, as it pertains to Caroline's relationship to the Typing Ghost in *The Comforters*. For a thorough analysis of the influence of the Book of Job on Spark's use and theorisation of narrative, see Bryce Christensen, "'The latter end of job": The Gift of Narrative in Muriel Spark's *The Only Problem* and *The Comforters*,' *Renascence*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2002), pp.136-47.

<sup>39</sup> Muriel Spark, 'The Mystery of Job's Suffering: Jung's New Interpretation Examined [Review of Carl Jung's *Answer to Job*]' *The Church of England Newspaper*, 15<sup>th</sup> April 1955, p.7, emphasis mine. A full draft and research notes for this review are contained in Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.11621: Miscellaneous Notes, Poems, Plays (1954-7), National Library of Scotland.

<sup>40</sup> Muriel Spark, 'Unpublished review of *Job and His Friends* (1954) by T. H. Robinson [4pp., c.1955],' Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.11621: Miscellaneous Notes, Poems, Plays (1954-7), National Library of Scotland, emphasis mine.

<sup>41</sup> Alan Bold, *Muriel Spark* (London; New York: Methuen, 1986), p.39.

depiction of the ‘crushing afflictions’ endured by Caroline.<sup>42</sup> The ‘conspiracy of mediocrity’ to which Caroline is exposed takes the form of the novel’s hackneyed detective and diamond-smuggling plots, as well as its assorted strands of bigamy, blackmail and diabolism, and the numerous contrivances that unite them; Caroline’s ‘sense of being written into the novel,’ the reader learns, ‘was painful’ (*TC*, p.181). In a drafted passage, Spark has Caroline articulate this pain with a sense of clarity that is unmatched in the published text:

Caroline: I have the feeling that someone is writing the story of our lives – some author on another plane of existence. Sometimes I think it’s a man, sometimes a woman, but whoever he is, he haunts me. The author records everything that’s important about us. A novel. Why do I come into it? I’m not a person of action. I’m an intellectual, a person of ideas.<sup>43</sup>

Caroline ‘come[s] into it,’ as she puts it, precisely *because* she is ‘a person of ideas’ as opposed to ‘a person of action.’ Her intellectual ability, creative imagination and intricate, scholarly understanding of narrative form affords her a supernatural insight into the workings of the plot, and this brings an attendant frustration when the perceptive powers of her friends fail to match her own. The sense of irony that Spark identified in the Book of Job is evident here, as the consolations of the comforters possess painful metafictional implications for Caroline. “‘She is a character’” (*TC*, p.46), says Baron Stock of Louisa Jepp, in an attempt to explain away her eccentricities and prevent the smuggling scheme from coming to light. “‘She’s not all there’” (*TC*, p.167), remarks Laurence’s mother, Helena, of Georgina Hogg, whom she suspects of being mentally unstable. For Caroline, such comments only confirm the ontological diminishment she already fears; Louisa, a wildly unconvincing

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<sup>42</sup> Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, p.204.

<sup>43</sup> Muriel Spark, Loose draft fragment, ‘Handwritten notes and fragments (*The Comforters*) [40 pieces, pages unnumbered, c.1955],’ Muriel Spark Papers, Box 13, Folder 6, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

gangster, is ““a charac-ter,”” while Georgina, who ‘simply disappear[s]’ into thin air whenever left alone, owing to the fact she ‘has no private life whatsoever’ or any purpose other than that of villainous ‘gargoyle,’ is ontologically insubstantial rather than mentally unwell (*TC*, p.142). Once haunted by the otherworldly voice of her Typing Ghost, Caroline now begins to perceive her own life as a ghost world, stalked by flickering figures and thinly-drawn caricatures.

Hogg, to draw upon the famous distinction between ‘round’ and ‘flat’ characters outlined in E. M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), undoubtedly falls into the latter category, ‘constructed’ as she is ‘around a single idea or quality.’<sup>44</sup> A repulsively dogmatic orthodox Catholic, she is known only for her ‘chronic righteousness,’ and a ‘fanatical moral intrusiveness, so near to an utterly primitive mania’ (*TC*, p.29; p.105); like the characters of Beckett or Scheherazade, who speak to ward off their own extinction, she continues to tyrannise Caroline and her friends so as not to vanish for good.<sup>45</sup> In this sense, however, she is something of an outlier. The other characters appear less like maniacal caricatures, who might evaporate if left alone, than beings still in the process of being absorbed, to varying degrees, into their

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<sup>44</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), p.103. ‘Round’ characters, on the other hand, emerge ‘when there is more than one factor to them’ (p.103); ‘the test of a round character,’ Forster argues, ‘is whether it is capable of surprising us in some convincing way. [...] It has the incalculability of life about it’ (p.118). Forster’s broad distinctions have faced sustained criticism; In *How Fiction Works* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), for example, James Wood proposes a ‘better division – though not perfect either – [...] between transparencies (relatively simple characters) and opacities (relative degrees of *mysteriousness*). Many of the most absorbing accounts of motive, from Hamlet to Stavrogin to the subjects of W. G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants*, are studies in *mystery*’ (p.100, emphasis mine).

<sup>45</sup> Clues to the insubstantiality of Georgina Hogg are littered throughout the novel. Mervyn Hogarth is the first to notice this when, having ‘mounted the stairs towards [the bedroom currently occupied by Hogg], he heard the swift scamper of mice, as if that part of the house was uninhabited’ (*TC*, p.140). Similarly, when Hogg visits Caroline at home, ‘Caroline got the impression that nobody was there, but then she immediately saw the woman standing heavily in the doorway and recognised the indecent smile of Mrs Hogg’ (*TC*, p.118). Due to her insubstantiality as a character, Hogg assumes some of the characteristics often associated with the similarly insubstantial spectre (the ability to appear or disappear at will, for example). Spark would play upon the relationship between the insubstantiality of thinly-drawn characters and ghosts alike in her revised version of ‘Harper and Wilton,’ as the present chapter will shortly discuss.

respective roles and plots – and growing ever flatter as a result. Caroline has noticed this in Laurence’s gradual transformation into an “‘amateur sleuth,’” for instance, and identifies similar distortions in her old friend, Eleanor Hogarth: ‘it was impossible to distinguish between Eleanor and the personality which possessed her [...] as well as try to distinguish between the sea and the water in it. [...] Her assumed personalities were beginning to cling; soon one of them would stick, grotesque and ineradicable’ (*TC*, p.76).<sup>46</sup> One of the novel’s most arresting examples is that of Baron Stock (known instead as Willi Stock in Spark’s earliest notes), a bookseller whose fanatical obsession with researching and discussing diabolism has transformed him into a rather *barren, stock* character, devoid of any other aspects of personality or temperament. In a passage that Spark chose not to include in the published text – intended to appear when Caroline seeks refuge at the Baron’s home, following her first encounter with the voice of the Typing Ghost – the protagonist watches in bemusement as her old friend grows increasingly insubstantial:

He seemed hardly human. He was, for that moment, nothing more than the books he had read, so that in citing them, he turned over the pages of himself. He was an egg that hatched an egg; a system of thought about a system of thought; or, at the most eloquent, a fermented grape that had got itself drunk.

Caroline regretted that she was not in the mood to get some private fun out of the performance; it was the only way in which a human person could possibly benefit by it.<sup>47</sup>

In this extraordinary sequence, the Baron becomes so preoccupied with his outlandish theories that he sinks into them without trace. The metaphors of the

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<sup>46</sup> Caroline’s fear that one of Eleanor’s ‘assumed personalities’ would become ‘ineradicable’ appears to be compounded when, while in a nightclub, she ‘caught her view of Eleanor’s head, *described* against one of the black squares of velvet in the background, just like a framed portrait, indistinct, in need of some touching-up’ (*TC*, p.73, emphasis mine). Few images could better illustrate E. M. Forster’s idea of a ‘flat’ character.

<sup>47</sup> Muriel Spark, Loose draft fragment, ‘Handwritten notes and fragments (*The Comforters*) [40 pieces, pages unnumbered, c.1955],’ Muriel Spark Papers, Box 13, Folder 6, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

drunken grape and the egg-hatching egg point to infinite regress – a vertiginous proliferation of further fictions and delusions, which in turn indicates that any ‘original’ or ‘authentic’ self has become irretrievable. The sequence thus complicates longstanding readings of *The Comforters*, which ‘has typically been described,’ notes Michael Gardiner, rather too simply ‘as a story of a heroine “trapped within a novel.”’<sup>48</sup> In place of any clear distinction between reality/fiction, life/role or person/character, however, examples including the extract quoted above suggest an ontological diminishment (or ‘flattening’) *by degrees*; indeed, the respective behaviours of the Baron, Laurence and Eleanor indicate a gradual descent *into* fiction, whereas Caroline’s critical awareness of both the conventions of storytelling and the voice of the Typing Ghost suggests a steady *ascent* towards ontological richness – an aspect emphasised by Spark’s tautological reference to her as a ‘human person.’ Caroline’s recent exposure to the Typing Ghost has, presumably, prompted her to perceive the Baron in this newly-suspicious light: ““Is the world a lunatic asylum,”” she asks him, ““are we all courteous maniacs discreetly making allowances for everyone else’s derangement?”” (*TC*, p.44). To be seduced by obsession or dogma, or to entertain or participate in the ““derangement[s]”” of others, Caroline’s words suggest, is to risk descending into a state of ontological instability, which finds its limit in the ““not all there”” Georgina Hogg. It is for this reason that Caroline believes she might still salvage her relationship with Laurence, if he could only be persuaded to abandon his sleuthing and concede instead to her suspicious ““logic””:

“Will you be able to make an occasional concession to the logic of my madness?” she asked him. “Because that will be necessary between us. Otherwise, we shall be really separated.” She was terrified of being entirely separated from Laurence.

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory Since 1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p.46.



“Haven’t I always tried to enter your world?”  
“Yes, but this is a very remote world I’m in now.” (TC, p.85)

In his analysis of *The Comforters*’ self-reflexive treatment of authorial power, ontological levels, and the dynamics and tyrannies of plot and character, Bran Nicol contends that, far from exposing Caroline’s insignificance in relation to the plot dictated by her god-like author, the novel in fact ‘contributes to the diminishing of the aura of the novelist, a key effect of the work of metafictional writers in the postwar period.’<sup>49</sup> More specifically, Nicol identifies Spark’s ‘deflationary conception of authorship’ as ‘unmistakably the product of what Nathalie Sarraute once called the “age of suspicion,”’ in that it emerges from ‘the cultural moment when the traditional realist forms of writing became regarded incredulously by both reader and writer, following the lessons they had absorbed about the complexity of human psychology from Freud and modernist writers like Proust, Kafka and Joyce.’<sup>50</sup> As a result, the ‘automatic investment of faith in the realist writer that typifies the nineteenth-century novel’ shifts to a dynamic whereby ‘author and reader establish a more productive relationship based on mutual suspicion,’ and in which ‘the reader is reminded of the constructed, artificial quality of the text.’<sup>51</sup> Nicol is referring specifically to the title essay of Sarraute’s 1963 collection, *The Age of Suspicion*, which claims as outmoded (and, crucially, *mistrusted*), the over-determined and elaborate plot typically encountered in the nineteenth-century novel, ‘which winds itself around the character like wrappings,’ and thus affects her or him with a ‘mummy-like stiffness.’<sup>52</sup> Without the faith of either their author or reader, ‘which permitted them to stand upright with

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<sup>49</sup> Bran Nicol, ‘Reading Spark in the Age of Suspicion,’ in David Herman, ed., *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp.112-28 (p.123).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.126.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, ‘The Age of Suspicion,’ in *The Age of Suspicion: Essays on the Novel*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: George Braziller, 1963), pp.51-74 (p.61).

the burden of the entire story resting on their broad shoulders,’ characters ‘may now seem to vacillate and fall apart.’<sup>53</sup>

With its depiction of plots that coalesce and coagulate until they become absurd and implausible, a villain who disappears without trace when her services to the story are no longer required, and other characters who allow themselves to ossify gradually into rigid and reductive roles, *The Comforters* appears to encapsulate Sarraute’s claims for the novel’s new age. Indeed, Caroline’s announcement that work on her monograph has stalled due to her “‘difficulty with the chapter on realism’” (*TC*, p.57) even evokes Sarraute’s later description of the realist novel as ‘a faith that is waning.’<sup>54</sup> The reader, too, comes to share this Sarrautean suspicion; like Caroline, who casts a wary eye over aspects of dialogue and plot that she has already overheard in the form of utterances from the Typing Ghost, the reader is placed at arm’s length from the diegetic world, having been made privy to its inner workings:

[Laurence’s] mother told him repeatedly, “I’ve told you repeatedly.” (*TC*, p.5)

Sir Edwin Manders had been in retreat for two weeks.

“Edwin has been in retreat for two weeks,” said Helena. (*TC*, p.134)

In instances such as these, the reader becomes not only wary but also profoundly *wary* of the diegetic world, where speech and story appear to lumber artlessly onwards. This weariness evokes a text with which *The Comforters* shares an even greater affinity, perhaps, than it does to ‘The Age of Suspicion’: John Barth’s 1967 essay, ‘The Literature of Exhaustion.’ Barth suggests that conventional means of literary representation have reached a critical point of ‘used-upness,’ and cites Jorge

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.55.

Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov and Samuel Beckett as examples of authors whose works, though their self-reflexive playfulness, offer welcome renewal.<sup>55</sup> Barth describes Borges's short story, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*' (1939), in which the hero comes to compose 'a number of pages which coincided – word for word and line for line' with those of Miguel de Cervantes's novel,<sup>56</sup> as a text which 'confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work.'<sup>57</sup> Borges, writes Barth, has written 'a remarkable and original work of literature, the implicit theme of which is the difficulty [...] of writing original works of literature.'<sup>58</sup>

As with the texts praised by Barth, *The Comforters* both thematises and transcends its own 'used-upness.' Spark achieves this primarily through Caroline's transformation from struggling literary critic into an accomplished novelist in her own right (the implication being, of course, that her scholarly awareness of hackneyed plots and 'intellectual dead end[s]' will lead her to produce the kind of revivifying 'new human work' described by Barth).<sup>59</sup> As the novel nears its end, Caroline begins to ruminate both critically and creatively on all that she has experienced:

Caroline had been reflecting recently on the case of Laurence and his fantastic belief that his grandmother had for years been the leader of a gang of diamond-smugglers. She had considered, also, the case of the Baron and his fantastic belief in the magical powers of Mervyn Hogarth. [...] Caroline found the true facts everywhere beclouded. She was aware that the book in which she was involved was still in progress. Now, when she speculated on the story, she did

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<sup>55</sup> John Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion,' in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp.62-76 (p.64).

<sup>56</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,' in *Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin, 2000), pp.33-44 (p.37).

<sup>57</sup> Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion,' pp.69-70.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.69.

<sup>59</sup> More specifically, Caroline's new novel could qualify as 'literature of replenishment,' to quote from the title of Barth's 1980 essay of the same name. The chief qualities of such literature, as outlined by Barth in 'The Literature of Exhaustion,' are 'expertise and artistry as well as bright aesthetic ideas and/or inspiration' (p.66).

so privately, noting the facts as they accumulated. By now, she possessed a large number of notes, transcribed from the voices, and these she studied carefully. [...] [S]he was impatient for the story to come to an end, knowing that the narrative could never become coherent to her until she was at last outside it, and at the same time consummately inside it. (*TC*, pp.165-6)

Shortly thereafter, Caroline announces to her friends that she will soon depart to write a novel about “‘Characters in a novel’” (*TC*, p.186). Her notes are later discovered by ‘the character called Laurence Manders,’ who proceeds to berate her in a letter for ‘misrepresent[ing] all of us,’ before changing his mind, tearing up the paper, and throwing its tattered remains into the wind. The novel ends, however, with the paradoxical revelation that Laurence ‘did not then foresee his later wonder, with a curious rejoicing, how the letter had got into the book’ (*TC*, pp.187-8). How has the destroyed letter been read? And why would Laurence rejoice at seeing his accusatory words revived and reprinted? This paradox can be interpreted, I wish to suggest, in terms of Caroline and Laurence’s transition between ontological realms – or, to return to Genette, from ‘the world of which one tells’ to ‘the world in which one tells.’ Caroline has persuaded Laurence, over the course of the novel, to abandon his subscription to the phony detective plot in order to enter what she calls her own “‘very remote world,’” and thus to develop from comforter to *confidant*. The ending indicates that Laurence has finally and successfully done so; while ‘the character called Laurence Manders’ cannot abide the truths encountered in Caroline’s notes, the mention of his ‘later wonder’ suggests a newly-altered state, which is not simply emotional, but ontological. Similarly, the contents of his old letter, despite being destroyed, have nevertheless been accessed and *re-marked* by Caroline, now the author of a novel about “‘characters in a novel.’”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Caroline has, in fact, already demonstrated an uncanny capability to discern the contents of Laurence’s letters. At the beginning of the novel, she and Laurence send one another identically-worded telegrams. Although Caroline initially regards the experience as ‘horrible’ (*TC*, p.41), it can

‘It is always a joyful thing when a novelist breaks the obvious rules of fiction and gets away with it,’ wrote Spark in a 1959 *Observer* article, two years after the publication of *The Comforters*.<sup>61</sup> Spark’s gradual development of that novel – from the details sketched under ‘Sub-plot: diamond smuggling’ and ‘The Loving of Mrs. Hogg,’ to the metafictional unravelling of the plots and characters outlined therein – can itself be read as a sustained exercise in rule-breaking, in which the event of haunting acts as a central component. Such a reading conflicts with the longstanding interpretation of *The Comforters* as a text which, according to Randall Stevenson, ‘uses[s] artistic control as a figuration of irresistible divine will,’<sup>62</sup> by suggesting instead that the authorial figure is, as Nicol asserts, ‘*more spectral than divine*, not to mention fallible and ultimately defeated.’<sup>63</sup> The relationship between spectral haunting and the ontological instability and self-reflexivity often encountered in, and frequently associated with, postmodern literature is examined at length in Allan Lloyd Smith’s 1996 essay, ‘Postmodernism/Gothicism’. ‘The quality of indeterminacy which [...] is the stock in trade of the Gothic mode,’ writes Smith, ‘is surely the very *raison d’être* of the postmodern’:

In the Gothic, indeterminism is a narrative necessity, providing the essential properties of mystery and suspense [...]. For the postmodern, indeterminism is

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now be understood – much like her awareness of the voice of the Typing Ghost – in terms of her nascent authorial ability.

<sup>61</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘Breaking the Novelist’s Rules,’ *The Observer*, 21<sup>st</sup> June 1959, p.18. The article is a review piece, in which Spark discusses a number of novels published that year, including John Rosenberg’s *A Company of Strangers*, Joan O’Donovan’s *The Visited*, and Russell Foreman’s *Long Pig*.

<sup>62</sup> Randall Stevenson, ‘The Postwar Contexts of Spark’s Writing,’ in Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp.98-109 (p.100). See, *inter alia*: Alan Bold, *Muriel Spark*, pp.34-40; Ruth Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p.11; Maria Francesca Fackler, ‘Imagining Female Authorship After 1945: Lessing’s and Spark’s Portraits of the Artist *Manqué*,’ in Robert DeMaria Jr., Heesok Chang and Samantha Zacher, eds., *A Companion to British Literature, Volume IV: Victorian and Twentieth-Century Literature 1837-2000* (Chichester, Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp.367-84 (pp.375-7).

<sup>63</sup> Nicol, ‘Reading Spark in the Age of Suspicion,’ p.113, emphasis mine.

an intellectual inevitability, following from the working through of modernist aesthetics towards a valorising of partial orders in opposition to comprehensive structures and orderings, and the oft-diagnosed breakdown of metanarratives. [...] In both [models] we confront the embattled, deconstructed self, without [...] any coherent psychology of the kind observable in both the Enlightenment or modernist traditions.<sup>64</sup>

Spark would arrive upon a similar connection when, having been asked by Martin McQuillan to articulate what she took postmodernism to mean, she responded: 'I think that it means that there is another dimension which is a bit creepy, supernatural, [...] not necessarily consequential. I always think that causality is not chronology.'<sup>65</sup>

Spark's answer – while far from a definite, or indeed definitive, description of postmodernism – doubles as a description of the ghost story, which, much like postmodern literature, can be said to be characterised by a deconstructive (and consequently 'creepy' or 'supernatural') disruption of temporal linearity and ontological stability.<sup>66</sup>

If, as I have argued, Spark's development of *The Comforters* entailed the suspicious 'haunting' of her own novel-in-progress (as opposed to the author's development of a fiction informed by god-like omniscience or 'irresistible divine will'), then a similar process can be identified in her drastic revisioning of her 1953 short story, 'Harper and Wilton,' as a disorientingly metafictional ghost story when it was republished in 1996. In its original form, 'Harper and Wilton' is an anaemic, farcical tale of an eponymous pair of Edwardian Suffragettes, and the lecherous, cross-eyed young man who stares incessantly into the adjacent windows of their

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<sup>64</sup> Allan Lloyd Smith, 'Postmodernism/Gothicism,' in Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith, eds., *Modern Gothic: A Reader* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp.6-19 (p.7).

<sup>65</sup> Martin McQuillan, "'The Same Informed Air': An Interview with Muriel Spark,' in McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction* (London: Palgrave, 2002), pp.210-29 (p.216).

<sup>66</sup> We might be reminded here of Jacques Derrida's description of the ghost, which 'de-synchronises. It recalls us to anachrony': *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of the Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.7.

boarding house bedrooms. Thrown by the stranger's lustful squint, each woman suspects the other of being the complicit object of his desire, with Wilton accusing Harper of "encouraging the advances of a strange man" and Harper complaining to the Secretary of the Suffrage Committee that Wilton has "lately behaved in a manner prejudicial to our Cause" ('HW,' p.248).<sup>67</sup> Wilton, now intent on incriminating her former friend in retaliation, leaves the man a letter written on Harper's headed notepaper, inviting him to Harper's room later that night. When the young man climbs a drainpipe to reach Harper's window, a chaotic fight ensues. Harper and Wilton – squabbling loudly and continuing to blame one another for the stranger's advances – are arrested for disturbing the peace and each sentenced to a month's imprisonment. As such details demonstrate, 'Harper and Wilton' is contrived and cartoonish, its protagonists crudely drawn and its resolution hurried and unsatisfying; the stranger's unnerving advances go unchallenged and unpunished, while the women's noisy dispute only confirms the prejudices of the arresting constable, who is left sighing (as much to the intended reader as to himself, perhaps), "Suffragettes, eh?" ('HW,' p.249).

Over forty years later, Spark would resurrect 'Harper and Wilton' to stage the metaleptic haunting of its dramatised author by her disgruntled creations. Published in a limited edition run by Colophon Press in 1996, and later anthologised in the 2011 *Complete Short Stories* collection, the modified version includes the original story in its entirety in the form of an embedded narrative, which the author finds herself compelled to revisit when the Suffragettes return to accost her. In its revised (and indeed *revived*) form, therefore, 'Harper and Wilton' takes on the form of a ghost

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<sup>67</sup> Even when referring to the original, 1953 version of 'Harper and Wilton,' I quote from Spark's 1996 revision. This is because, as the present chapter will shortly discuss, Spark includes the original short story in its entirety in the revised version.

story. Its narrator, now attempting to complete a novel while residing temporarily at a house in Hampshire, finds herself troubled by a ‘feeling of chilling weirdness,’ and a sensation of ‘oddness around the house’ (‘HW,’ p.244). She attributes this to the behaviour of Joe, the resident gardener, who spends his days staring cross-eyed at the bedroom windows of the house. Unable to determine which of these rooms so intrigues Joe, or why he should be fixated on either one in the first place, the narrator returns to her work only to be unsettled by distant female voices, before being approached by two women, ‘dressed in Edwardian-type long skirts and shawls, with their hair knotted up severely’ (‘HW,’ p.245). Wilton announces that she and Harper have returned to their author because she had “‘cast [their] story away’” without providing a satisfactory ending; “‘Now you’ve got to give us substance,’” she threatens, “‘otherwise we’ll haunt you’” (‘HW,’ p.246). The pair’s lack of “‘substance’” functions punningly here, with the word referring simultaneously to the women’s flimsy characterisation and their consequent presence as ghostly tormentors.

As far as the narrator is concerned, ‘Harper and Wilton’ was an inconsequential draft from ‘many, many years ago, some time in the 1950s,’ whose characters she ‘had certainly had some fun with’ (‘HW,’ p.246), but hasn’t since thought of. She is, then, the kind of “‘irresponsible writer’” identified by Caroline Rose, whose cognisant creations are left to endure the misery of existing in a mediocre work of fiction. The implications here are rather more sinister than in *The Comforters*, however; the young man, says Wilton, “‘has given us no peace’” ever since his author created him: “‘[he] follows us everywhere. Don’t you know this is a crime?’”. Harper concurs that the man “‘is molesting us’” and that “‘it was he who should have gone to prison, not us’” (‘HW,’ p.251). Given his unnerving fixation on the bedroom windows



of the Hampshire residence, the revelation that the man to whom Harper and Wilton refer is in fact Joe is hardly surprising. The narrator has, to her presumed horror, created a sexual harasser as a component in a featherweight comedy of errors, who has terrorised both women ever since. In their quest for “‘substance,’” Harper and Wilton demand that their author take their plight seriously by elevating their story beyond the level of farce, rewriting it ‘in the light of current correctness’ so that they ‘were vindicated and it was the squint-eyed student who was taken to the police.’ When their creator complies, Harper and Wilton, ‘evidently satisfied,’ announce their departure, while Joe is at last arrested (‘HW,’ p.251).

In its revised form, ‘Harper and Wilton’ draws upon conventions familiar to the ghost story – including an eerie house, a procession of strange noises, and the appearance of vengeful revenants – to reflect critically and self-consciously on the short story’s previous, unsatisfactory incarnation, as well as the possibility of its productive rejuvenation. In so doing, Spark stages the haunting of *herself* as author-narrator by old characters who now double as suspicious readers, critical of their creator’s past work and keen for it to be amended. More intriguing still is the author-narrator’s role as revenant; it is *she*, after all, who has come to reside at a house so similar to the one she once imagined (an environment she shares with Joe, who also turns out to be her fictional creation). Instead of presenting a singular metaleptic crossing from its embedded story to the realm occupied by its narrator, ‘Harper and Wilton’ thus depicts a pattern of mutual metaleptic pursuit, whereby characters ‘ascend’ to haunt their creator, who herself ‘descends,’ albeit unwittingly, to revisit and revivify the storyworld she created and abandoned long ago.<sup>68</sup> We might interpret

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<sup>68</sup> ‘Created and Abandoned’ is, incidentally, the title of a 1979 poem by Spark, which concerns the

this unusual dynamic in terms of Barth's work on literatures of exhaustion and replenishment. What Spark dramatises in 'Harper and Wilton,' that is, is her own attempt to return to 'confron[t] an intellectual dead end' by allowing previously flattened, closed-off caricatures a right to return and reply.<sup>69</sup> She does so by 'break[ing] the obvious rules of fiction,' as she puts it, by way of metaleptic intrusions that are presented as ghostly, yet entirely enlivening, visitations. It is not incidental, then, that 'Harper and Wilton' should end with a description of Joe, having returned from the police station, '[getting] on with his weeding of the garden' ('HW,' p.251). Similarly, the revised short story performs a clearing out of dead matter to make space for itself as a worthy addition to Spark's (haunted) house of fiction.

### **Living Ghosts: Narrative Agency, (Anti-)Realism, and Spectral Selves**

In both *The Comforters* and the revised 'Harper and Wilton,' Spark forges a crucial link between the metaleptic traversal of what Genette terms the 'sacred frontier' between diegetic and extradiegetic levels, and the eerily indeterminate position of ghosts, who cross the threshold between life and the afterlife. In his seminal critical study, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale identifies this same sense of deathliness as an inherent feature of the 'self-reflective, self-conscious texts' that he associates with postmodernism:

Insofar as postmodernist fiction foregrounds ontological themes and ontological structure, we might say that it is *always* about death. [...] In a sense, every ontological boundary is an analogue or metaphor for death; so foregrounding ontological boundaries is a means of foregrounding death, of

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'limbo'd' status of 'characters / in a story one has started to write and set aside,' and the responsibility their author might owe them. The poem concludes: 'I hope you're not looking for me / night after night, not waiting for me to come back. / I feel a definite responsibility for your welfare. / Are you all right?' (Muriel Spark, 'Created and Abandoned,' in *All the Poems*, p.74, ll.12-13; ll.15-18).

<sup>69</sup> Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion,' pp.69-70.

making death, the unthinkable, available to the imagination if only in a displaced way. [...] Texts about themselves, self-reflective, self-conscious texts, are also, as if inevitably, about death, precisely because they are about ontological boundaries and the transgression of ontological boundaries.<sup>70</sup>

If, as McHale asserts, any text which foregrounds the traversal of ontological boundaries inevitably evokes death, then a text which deals directly with death and the afterlife – one which features a posthumous narrator, for example – is ideally suited to techniques associated with textual self-consciousness. For such narrators, who were once living characters occupying the diegetic realm of the story ('the world of which one tells'), the journey to the afterlife constitutes a metaleptic crossing to an extradiegetic level ('the world in which one tells'), from which the world of the living can be observed and narrated with a simultaneous sense of intimacy and estrangement.

This interplay between intimacy and estrangement is a characteristic feature of 1958's 'The Portobello Road.' The short story is narrated by Needle, the ghost of a murdered young woman, who announces early on in the text that she 'departed this life nearly five years ago,' but 'did not altogether depart this world. There were those odd things to be done which one's executors can never do properly. Papers to be looked over' ('PR,' p.498). Occupying a liminal position 'not altogether' rooted in the diegetic realm of the living, Needle can review her life as though it were a completed text to be 'looked over' and narrated as she sees fit: 'I did not live to write about life as I wanted to do,' she explains, 'possibly that is why I am inspired to do so now in these peculiar circumstances' ('PR,' p.501). Like the revenant versions of Harper and Wilton, now intent on transcending their shared status as petty-minded caricatures by articulating the disturbing truth of their victimisation, Needle seeks not only to

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<sup>70</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York; London: Methuen, 1987), p.231.

confront her killer, but to dictate the terms on which her story is told – an act which shall emancipate her from the narratives that defined her in both life and death. Needle’s talk of ‘[p]apers to be looked over’ holds a secondary, literal meaning, however; in the five years since her death, she has come to be remembered as the victim of what the newspapers named ‘The Haystack Murder’ (‘PR,’ p.520), after the place from which her corpse was eventually retrieved. The grim fate suffered by Needle, who acquired her nickname after pricking her thumb on a needle ‘one day in [her] young youth at high summer, lolling with [...] companions upon a haystack’ (‘PR,’ p.495), has since become fertile ground for bad jokes: ‘when my body was found,’ she recalls disdainfully, ‘the evening papers said, “Needle is found: in haystack!”’ (‘PR,’ p.520).

‘The Portobello Road’ is thus a short story *about* a short story, concerning as it does a life cut short, a sense of potential remaining unfulfilled, and a reputation reduced to a tiresome punchline. Its narrator’s longstanding belief that she is somehow ‘set apart from the common run’ (‘PR,’ p.495), a suspicion apparently confirmed by her chance discovery of the needle in her ‘young youth,’ comes to bolster her ‘ambition [...] to write about life, which first [she] had to see’ (‘PR,’ p.500). This formative instance exists in uneasy tension, however, with the stifling (and increasingly sinister) influence of her friend George. While Needle believes that her extraordinary find ‘attested the fact [of her uniqueness and independence] to [her] whole public: George, Kathleen and Skinny’ (‘PR,’ p.495), George responds by gathering the four friends for a photograph. This seemingly innocent gesture comes to define the terms of George’s relationship to the group, and to Needle specifically; ‘desperately afraid of neglect,’ he proceeds to supply each of the friends with a copy

of the image, announcing that they ““must stick together”” as they leave Scotland to embark upon their respective careers (‘PR,’ p.500). Consequently, the ‘small red river’ that Needle interprets as thrilling, conclusive evidence of her ‘difference from the rest’ (‘PR,’ p.495; p.524) is reconfigured, in George’s photograph, as a blood oath that will forever bind her to her peers. For Susan Sontag (whose work I discuss in greater detail in the following chapter), photography constitutes ‘a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still,’ so that while ‘one can’t possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by) images.’<sup>71</sup>

George is equally possessive of and ‘possessed *by*’ his idealised image of the group, and is thus incensed when Needle, who threads whimsically between careers and continents in the years that follow, fails to adhere to her assigned role as his faithful friend. ““You aren’t bound by anyone,”” he will complain to her years later, while unhappily (and secretly) married in South Africa: ““You come and go as you please. Something always turns up for you. You’re free, and you don’t know your luck”” (‘PR,’ pp.507-8). His disclosure of the marriage only to her, Needle realises, constitutes an attempt to ‘enforce some sort of bond’ of secrecy between the pair (‘PR,’ p.511), which is tested when he proposes to Kathleen some years later. When Needle insists that she will bring his bigamy to light, George proceeds to kill her in a manner that symbolises a chilling reversal of the moment at which she became aware of both her individuality and narrative agency:

He looked as if he would murder me and he did. He stuffed hay into my mouth until it could hold no more, kneeling on my body to keep it still, holding both my wrists tight in his huge left hand. I saw the red full lines of his mouth and the white slit of his teeth last thing on earth. Not another soul passed by as he pressed my body into the stack, as he made a deep nest for me, tearing up the

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<sup>71</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1977), p.163.

hay to make a groove the length of my corpse, and finally pulling the warm dry stuff in a mound over the concealment, so natural-looking in a broken haystack. ('PR,' p.520).

By suffocating and silencing Needle, George attempts to eradicate the dissident female voice and thus uphold an oppressive 'master' narrative that is designed to ensnare Kathleen within a deceitful marriage plot. In burying his victim, George's use of Needle's corpse as a means of penetrating the haystack is connotative of an act of rape, in which the dead female body is appropriated, horrifyingly, as a phallic instrument to be 'pressed' forcefully 'into the stack.' Needle's nickname, which once signified her uniqueness and free will, now suggests the violent, phallic mastery (and subsequent erasure) of a woman judged dangerous and deviant for being 'set apart' from the dominant order. We might read the murder as an unnerving extension of George's practice of photography. In both cases, what is 'recalcitrant, inaccessible' is forcibly made to 'stand still.'

Were 'The Portobello Road' to have recounted Needle's short life without including her posthumous narration, it might well have read as a cautionary and deeply conservative tale, warning women of the dangers of speaking freely and straying too far from their place among 'the common run.' Instead, the existence of a narrative afterlife offers Needle a second chance to fulfil her authorial ambition by allowing her to ascend to a diegetic plane from which her voice can at last be heard. The unique narrative capabilities of a posthumous narrator are explored at length in Alice Bennett's 2012 study, *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction*. The posthumous perspective, Bennett observes, poses a distinct challenge to the binaristic model of narrative possibilities proposed in studies including Richard Walsh's 'Who is the Narrator?' (1997), which contends that 'the narrator is always either a character

who narrates, or the author,' leaving 'no indeterminate position' between the two: 'The author of a fiction can adopt one of two strategies: to narrate a representation or to represent a narration.'<sup>72</sup> As Bennett argues, 'narration from the afterlife forces this categorisation to the surface by combining the characteristics of authorial omniscience with those of a fictional character narrator, as well as affecting the relationship between the levels of diegesis within the text.'<sup>73</sup> These dual possibilities are afforded to Needle, who is able to recount her lived experience as a character narrator might, while also witnessing, as if omnisciently, a number of subsequent events including her own post-mortem and the imprisonment of 'the poor byre-hand' ('PR,' p.520) falsely convicted of killing her.

Needle is not only a posthumous narrator, however, but a *revenant* one, and is thus eager to return to play an active role in the diegetic realm from which she was expelled. It is perhaps fitting, then, that she should choose to greet George during his and Kathleen's visit to the Portobello Road Market, appearing from among the displays of second-hand 'combs and hankies, cotton gloves, flimsy flowering scarves, writing-paper and crayons' ('PR,' p.499) that make up the detritus of past lives, and thus presenting herself as a remainder and *reminder* of the woman he killed. 'As I spoke,' Needle notes, 'a degree of visibility set in' ('PR,' p.500), allowing her to be seen by her murderer and consequently undoing the violent erasure that she suffered at his hands; 'the voices of the dead,' as Bennett asserts, 'de-sacralise closure and its revelations by adding supplementary time beyond the end and refusing to keep silent

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<sup>72</sup> Richard Walsh, 'Who is the Narrator?', *Poetics Today*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Winter 1997), pp.495-513 (p.505), quoted in Alice Bennett, *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction* (Houndmills; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.128.

<sup>73</sup> Bennett, *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction*, p.128.

about what could fall outside any given plot.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, it is now *George* who is plunged into a state of deathly silence. Needle's seemingly offhand remark that George's 'new bristly maize-coloured beard and moustache' causes him to look 'as if he had a mouthful of hay' ('PR,' p.522) is therefore far from incidental; by describing her newly silent murderer with reference to the material he used to suffocate *her*, she gleefully acknowledges the reversal of agency effected by her return.<sup>75</sup> Tormented by the ghostly encounter, George returns obsessively to the market, confesses to his crime and, taken to be psychotic and delusional, is persuaded to emigrate in order to recuperate. 'George has recovered somewhere in Canada,' remarks Needle with characteristic detachment at the story's conclusion, 'but of course he will never be the old George again' ('PR,' p.524). Needle's narrative afterlife has allowed her to return to prick her killer's conscience and at last enjoy a measure of retribution.

As evinced by Needle's defiant enjoyment of her newfound narrative agency, as well as the recalcitrant return of Harper and Wilton, the ghost trope is no mere metafictional stunt, but a valuable means of reinstating a dissident voice that has been unjustly silenced. The dynamics of the ghost story, recognised by Nickianne Moody as a mode of writing 'particularly concerned with *injustice*,' which 'actively reverses patriarchally preferred interpretations of events and hierarchies of knowledge' when adopted by women writers in particular, can thus be seen to have provided Spark with an effective means of subverting supposedly stable structures of patriarchal

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<sup>74</sup> Alice Bennett, 'Unquiet Spirits: Death Writing in Contemporary Fiction,' *Textual Practice*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2009), pp.463-79 (p.471), emphasis mine.

<sup>75</sup> The sudden powerlessness of the haunted men in ghost stories (and, indeed, the *reversal* of power between men and women that this might effect) is acknowledged by Jennifer Uglow, who observes that 'the experience of seeing a ghost pushes men into conventional female roles: timid, nervous and helpless' ('Introduction,' in Richard Dalby, ed., *The Virago Book of Victorian Ghost Stories* [London: Virago, 1988], pp.xi-xvii [p.xvii]).



authority.<sup>76</sup> This is perhaps unsurprising; as Moody discusses, the ghost story has historically presented women writers with the freedom to formulate inventive critiques of patriarchal oppression and the stifling rigidity of gender roles, as exemplified in texts such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), Clothilde Graves's 'The Spirit Elopement' (1915), Ellen Glasgow's 'The Shadowy Third' (1923) and Edith Wharton's 'Miss Mary Pask' (1925), along with more recent examples including Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992), Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* (1993) and Ali Smith's 'The Hanging Girl' (1999).<sup>77</sup> Far from being a fanciful addition to an otherwise realistic tale, the supernatural manifestation announces itself as a disruptive countertext to an oppressive reality, and an entirely necessary means of conveying truths that could not have otherwise been spoken. Spark shared this view: 'I treat the supernatural as if it was part of natural history,' she remarked in 2004. 'If I write a ghost story it wouldn't come under the heading of a ghost story necessarily because I treat it as if it was a natural thing.'<sup>78</sup>

Spark's 'natural' treatment of the ghost story is nowhere more apparent than in 'The Girl I Left Behind Me,' first published in a 1957 issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. Its narrator, an unnamed office worker who appears to have been lifted from a work of kitchen-sink realism, recounts the end of a wearisome yet seemingly uneventful day at work, including apparently inconsequential details regarding her bus journey home, the grievances of her manager, Mr Mark Letter, and the banal goings-

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<sup>76</sup> Nickianne Moody, 'Visible Margins: Women Writers and the English Ghost Story,' in Sarah Sceats and Gail Cunningham, eds., *Image and Power: Women in Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1996), pp.77-90 (p.78).

<sup>77</sup> For a detailed discussion of other more recent examples, see Lucie Armitt, *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp.102-29. For a more general overview of the pertinence of the ghost story to women writers, see Emma Young and James Bailey, 'Introduction,' in Young and Bailey, eds., *British Women Short Story Writers: The New Woman to Now* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp.32-49 (p.44).

<sup>78</sup> James Brooker and Margarita Estévez-Saá, 'Interview with Dame Muriel Spark,' *Women's Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 8 (December 2004), pp.1035-46 (p.1036).

on at her boarding house lodgings. Her mood is one of despondency as she recalls feeling ‘particularly anonymous among the homegoers’ on having boarded the bus, ‘depressed’ when another passenger ‘looked away’ from her ‘without response,’ and later ‘desolate’ after being ignored by her landlady (‘GLBM,’ pp.278-9). Her thoughts turn frequently to Mr Letter, whom she had last witnessed in a trance-like state, clutching his necktie and whistling the folk tune with which the story shares its title. It is only when she returns to the office, convinced of there being something ‘left unfinished’ to which she must urgently attend, that the narrator discovers her own body, ‘lying strangled on the floor’ (‘GLBM,’ p.280; p.283). The ‘trick’ played by Spark, then, is to reveal her narrator’s seemingly unimportant observations as vital clues to her murder and present spectrality, which appear to account for her sense of isolation and invisibility, as well as the unsettling behaviour of Mr Letter.

It is perhaps because of this shocking yet seemingly near resolution that ‘The Girl I Left Behind Me’ is cited by Alice Bennett as an example of a text in which ‘the dead narrator is essentially a punchline,’ whose posthumous presence ‘shuts down possibilities rather than opening them up.’<sup>79</sup> Rather than eliminate possibilities, however, the ‘punchline’ revelation of the narrator’s death raises further questions concerning her silent, passive presence while still alive. Indeed, what is perhaps even more unsettling than the narrator’s murder is her subsequent failure to recognise that it happened. ‘No one [...] took any notice of me,’ she remarks of her commute from work, ‘of course, why should they?’ (‘GLBM,’ p.278). The implication produced here is that the narrator’s present, spectral state is not entirely unlike her past, living one.

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<sup>79</sup> Bennett, *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction*, pp.18-9. Bennett includes ‘The Portobello Road’ as another example of such a text; this is surprising, given the short story’s inclusion of a posthumous narrator who articulates the truth of her existence by ‘refusing to keep silent about what could fall outside any given plot’ (Bennett, ‘Unquiet Spirits,’ p.471).

The story is thus an example of what Aviva Briefel, in her study of films including Charles Vidor's *The Spy* (1929; a.k.a. *The Bridge*), Herk Harvey's *Carnival of Souls* (1962), Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) and Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2001), terms 'spectral incognisance' – a ghost story 'subgenre' which 'represents death as an event that can be overlooked.' Such narratives, Briefel argues, 'are predicated on the idea that dying is not only a corporeal failure, but also a cognitive act: those who overlook their deaths are not really dead. Instead, they lead a liminal existence scattered with clues signalling their passing,' and 'can only transition into real death once they have interpreted these clues properly.'<sup>80</sup> Spark's narrator manages to overlook *her* death not because it is too traumatic to recall (as is the case for the once murderous and suicidal ghostly mother in *The Others*, or the still-traumatised Vietnam veteran/fatality in *Jacob's Ladder*, for example), but rather because, having grown so radically detached from her body over a prolonged period of time, the violence inflicted upon it merely fails to register.

'The Girl I Left Behind Me' can thus be read as a ghost story regardless of its protagonist's death and present spectrality, suggesting as it does a slow and sinister process of self-alienation which was set in place long before her murder.<sup>81</sup> Quite how this came to be is never made explicit over the course of the story (one of Spark's shortest at only five pages in length), yet the narrator's recollection of her interactions with Mr Letter acquire an unnerving resonance when read in light of the ending. Read

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<sup>80</sup> Aviva Briefel, 'What Some Ghosts Don't Know: Spectral Incognisance in the Horror Film,' *Narrative*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp.95-108 (pp.96-7).

<sup>81</sup> 'You don't know how repulsive and loathsome is the ghost of a living man,' proclaims the narrator of Spark's 1952 short story, 'The Leaf-Sweeper' (*The Complete Short Stories*, p.241). As the following chapters in the present study will discuss, Spark would go on to develop narratives in which living characters are treated as though already dead (such as Baron and Baroness Klopstock in *Not to Disturb*), and where dead ones, Paul Hazlett in *The Hothouse by the East River*, believe themselves erroneously to still be alive.

retroactively, for example, what the narrator had described as Letter's frequent 'dreamy states' and 'lapses into lassitude' ('GLBM,' p.278) reveal themselves to be periods of murderous contemplation, while his incessant whistling of the story's eponymous folk tune takes on a similarly chilling sense of foreboding. These and other habitual practices, including fits of anxiety-inducing mania in the workplace, leave the protagonist perennially apprehensive and timorously silent, her mood and behaviour manipulated to such an extent that she becomes a stranger to herself and those around her. As his name alone indicates, Mark Letter occupies a position of patriarchal authority and representational control. He is the Letter of the law, whose overbearing influence haunts the narrator's existence ('when his tune barrelled round my head long after I had left the office,' she remarks of his habitual whistling, 'it was like taking Mr Letter home' ['GLBM,' p.278]), and whose deliberate attempts to overwhelm his employee with swathes of dead letters in the form of endless 'needless telegrams,' dictated 'by fits' through 'his chattering mouth' of rotten teeth ('GLBM,' p.279), deny her the opportunity to write, or indeed think, outside of his control.<sup>82</sup> Only this can account for the narrator's overwhelming sense of joy upon discovering her strangled corpse at the end of the story, which she 'embraced [...] like a lover' ('GLBM,' p.283). While Spark's story ends at this point, one senses that the titular 'Girl' has only just begun to speak for herself.

'Again and again, with almost shocking repetitiveness,' writes Jennifer Uglow in her introduction to *The Virago Book of Victorian Ghost Stories* (1988), ghost stories written by women have 'attack[ed] the symbolic and actual domination of the

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<sup>82</sup> A note of resistance is detected, however, in the narrator's sense of humour: 'I found only one thing amusing about it; that was when he would say, as he gave instructions for dealing with each item, "Mark letter urgent." I thought that rather funny coming from Mark Letter, and I often thought of him, as he was in those moods, as Mark Letter Urgent' ('GLBM,' p.279).

father, the husband, the lover, the doctor, the cruel emperor – the men of power.’<sup>83</sup>

‘The Girl I Left Behind Me’ can be seen to continue this tradition by employing the ghost trope to make plain the abuses of Mr Letter and to depict what Diana Wallace describes as ‘the “ghosting” of women within patriarchy.’<sup>84</sup> The ghost story, Wallace asserts, ‘has allowed women writers special kinds of freedom, not only to include the fantastic and the supernatural, but also to offer critiques of male power and sexuality which are often more radical than those in more realist genres.’<sup>85</sup> Rather than being summoned from the dead by séances or spells (or haunting the text via metaleptic border-crossings, as explored earlier), Spark’s *living ghosts* are characters whose sense of vitality and free will has been occluded by manipulative relationships, deadening routines and inhibitive social conventions. Such is the theme of ‘Bang-Bang You’re Dead,’ perhaps Spark’s most personal short story, in which the prospect of becoming one’s own ghost lurks as an ever-present threat. The story was inspired in part by an incident that occurred during Spark’s life in Southern Rhodesia in the late 1930s, in which her former schoolfriend and fellow expatriate, Nita McEwan, was murdered by her jealous and controlling husband. As Spark recalled, the incident became all the more unsettling due to the uncanny resemblance the two women shared:

I was staying at the same place as the girl when I heard two screams, a bang and then another bang. In the morning I was told my friend had been killed by her husband. Her shot her and then himself. The next morning when I entered the communal dining room, a woman screamed and fainted, thinking I was a

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<sup>83</sup> Uglow, ‘Introduction,’ p.xii. Examples are numerous, ranging from Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), in which the ghost trope is used to support the short story’s critique of patriarchal oppression, to the repudiation of so-called ‘male rationality’ in the modernist ghost stories of May Sinclair and Edith Nesbit, which valorise the perspectives of ‘female outsiders such as spinsters and mistresses, who validate their own oddity or power through their uncanny capacity to see, hear or feel what others cannot’ (Emma Liggins, ‘Beyond the Haunted House? Modernist Women’s Ghost Stories and the Troubling of Modernity,’ *British Women Short Story Writers*, pp.32-49 (p.44).

<sup>84</sup> Diana Wallace, ‘Uncanny Stories: The Ghost Story as Female Gothic,’ *Gothic Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (May 2004), pp.57-68 (p.60).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p.57.

ghost, because I looked so similar to the shot girl. There were quite a lot of shooting affairs at that time. It was quite savage.<sup>86</sup>

For Spark, who had also been suffering for some time in an abusive marriage, Nita's murder appeared to foreshadow her own – a feeling compounded by the friends' physical similarities and Spark's consequent, ghostly appearance to the fainting woman.<sup>87</sup> The presageful incident became the starting point for the story of Sybil Greeves, whose long and fraught relationship with her own near-double, Désirée Weston, plays out as a series of simulated, symbolic and literal deaths, and finally as a ghostly interaction.

'Bang-Bang You're Dead' employs as a framing device a social gathering attended by Sybil, who entertains her host and fellow guests by showing home movies of her life in South Africa eighteen years earlier. The films, which paint a rosy picture of colonial life, including footage depicting Sybil's apparent friendship with Désirée, an old acquaintance to whom she shares a distinct physical resemblance, are placed in uneasy juxtaposition with flashbacks revealing the reality of their relationship in both childhood and early adulthood. As children in 1920s England, one such flashback reveals, the girls would stage imaginary gunfights, or 'shooting games,' during which (and 'contrary to the rules'), 'Désirée continually shot Sybil dead [...] whenever she felt like it.' Despite disapproving of her friend's unruly conduct, the nine-year-old Sybil 'obediently' plays along, endlessly 'resurrect[ing] herself' to endure a 'repeated daily massacre' in uneasy compliance with Désirée's newly invented rules ('BYD,'

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<sup>86</sup> Geordie Greig, 'The Dame's Fortunes [Interview],' *The Sunday Times*, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1996, pp.8-9 (p.9).

<sup>87</sup> In his biography of Spark, Martin Stannard writes that Nita McEwan's murder 'seemed like an omen' for the author's fate should she remain in her own abusive marriage to Sidney Oswald Spark (*Muriel Spark: The Biography*, p.50). 'S.O.S.', notes Stannard, was Spark's 'wry name' for her violent husband – a tacit admission, perhaps, of the danger that she felt that he posed to her (*Ibid.*, p.61).

pp.88-9). The games, though seemingly innocent, set an eerie pattern for Sybil's later life and her continued, submissive relationship to Désirée when the pair are reunited in South Africa years later. Against her better judgement, Sybil goes 'in obedience' to the home of Désirée and her husband, Barry Weston, where she feels compelled to participate in 'a game for three players,' in which, 'according to the rules, she was to be in love, unconsciously, with Barry, and tortured by the contemplation of Désirée's married bliss' ('BYD,' p.106). Much like her compulsion to participate in the 'shooting games' as a child, the adult Sybil is drawn repeatedly, as if by a 'magnetic field' ('BYD,' p.101), to occupy a role intended to silence, tame and humiliate her.

In keeping with her name, Désirée stands as a patriarchal construct, a depthless object of male desire designed to torment Sybil by goading her into complying with a heteronormative script of gender and sexuality.<sup>88</sup> This 'script' is imbued with the particular expectations placed upon the white woman settler; 'in the colony,' Spark recalls in *Curriculum Vitae*, 'there was one white woman to three white men, which led to violent situations – sometimes to murder.'<sup>89</sup> This gender imbalance, Spark explains, produced a hostile environment of febrile suspicion and deadly violence, within which men were killed by their sexual competitors, while women were killed by paranoid partners or jealous admirers. A similar imbalance exists in the colony depicted in Spark's short story, and contributes toward what Eleanor Byrne describes as a rigid and dangerous 'framework of desire and disavowal,' within which 'the white woman's body has a forceful ideological role to play.'<sup>90</sup> The logic of such a

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<sup>88</sup> "'Get yourself a boyfriend,'" Désirée tells Sybil, during one of Sybil's visits to the Westons' home. "'You're wasting your best years,'" Barry concurs ('BYD,' p.104).

<sup>89</sup> Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, p.126.

<sup>90</sup> Eleanor Byrne, 'Muriel Spark Shot in Africa,' in Martin McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction* (London: Palgrave, 2002), pp.113-26 (p.119). As Byrne observes of the white women settlers depicted in Spark's various African-set short stories – including 'Bang-Bang

framework becomes as deranged as the skewed rules of Désirée's childhood 'shooting game,' as Sybil's obligatory performance of desire becomes a 'repeated daily massacre' in its own right ('BYD,' p.86). Despite possessing a 'superior' intellect to her companions, and a 'brain [...] like a blade' ('BYD,' p.87), Sybil remains hopelessly drawn to the commanding influence of her double, restlessly pursuing passionless affairs with a variety of men, including one David Carter (ironically, the manager of a passion fruit plantation). Treating the affairs as an 'attempt [...] to do the right thing,' Sybil 'worked herself as in a frenzy of self-discipline, into a state of carnal excitement' over each new encounter, which she achieved 'only by an effortful sealing-off of all her critical faculties.' As if in an act of protest, however, her body succumbs to a bout of tropical flu, leaving her suffering a 'twilight of the senses' on a bed 'overhung with a white mosquito net like something bridal' ('BYD,' pp.97-8). With its conflated imagery of marital customs and abject horror – the honeymoon suite and the sickbed; the bridal veil and the ghostly white sheet; the virgin bride and the vulnerable, feverish body – the period of illness becomes a grim omen for Sybil's fate should she bow to convention and pursue marriage. To do so, her sick body warns her, would be an act of self-destruction, a deadly *ghosting* of her real self from which there is no way back. Sybil's sickness thus appears as an initial stage in the sinister process of woman's corporeal estrangement within patriarchy (and, specifically, colonial life), which reaches its chilling completion in 'The Girl I Left Behind Me.'

As in the Freudian model of the uncanny, where the double operates as 'the

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You're Dead,' 'The Curtain Blown by the Breeze' (1954) and 'The Go-Away Bird' (1958) – 'many [...] demonstrate a distaste for any ideological commitment to colonial culture,' and 'return continually to the question of their own conflictual negotiations with, and attempts to transgress, the confines of the strongly defined, indeed often menacingly policed, roles available to white women in the colonies' (p.118).



uncanny harbinger of death,<sup>91</sup> Désirée represents the imminent, ghostly future that awaits Sybil should she go against her better judgement and adhere to what Byrne describes as ‘the overbearing sexual logic of the colony.’<sup>92</sup> Possessing a suitably sybilline awareness of such a fate, Sybil attempts to repudiate the twisted ‘logic’ of colonial life by refusing to marry David, and in doing so initiates a sequence of events that culminate in her double’s death.<sup>93</sup> Incensed at Sybil’s rejection of his proposal (“‘it’s your duty to me as a man,’” he angrily insists [‘BYD,’ p.114]), David forces his way into the Westons’ home and, mistaking Désirée for his former lover in the dim light, shoots her dead before killing himself. The scene rests, finally, on Sybil, who ‘rose from Désirée’s body’ (‘BYD,’ p.118) like a spirit might from a corpse. The impression produced here is disturbingly ambiguous, suggesting on the one hand that Sybil has finally rid herself of the ties that bind her to her double, yet on the other that she will live on as *Désirée*’s ghost, condemned to exist forever in her image. The reality, in fact, lies somewhere in between; as she entertains the gathering of party guests many years later, Sybil is shown to be caught once again in a tired performance of female subservience, offering tactful half-truths about her life in South Africa, while agreeing politely to replay the film reels despite the discomfort they evidently bring her. ‘Am I a woman,’ she asks herself at the story’s close, ‘or an intellectual monster?’ (‘BYD,’ p.120). Sybil’s question, which betrays her unflattering estimation of either possibility (and her treatment of the two as though they are mutually exclusive), reveals Désirée’s lasting influence. In an earlier scene, Désirée remarks sourly that “‘Sybil’s too intellectual, that’s her trouble’” and that she “‘should either

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<sup>91</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’ [1919], in James Strachey, ed., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 17* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp.218-52 (p.235).

<sup>92</sup> Byrne, ‘Muriel Spark Shot in Africa,’ p.119.

<sup>93</sup> Sibyls, or sibylla, were female ‘seers’ or prophetesses, predominantly associated with the foretelling of doom-laden futures, whose existence can be traced back to the eighth century BC, and whose influence is the result of later Judaeo-Christian oracles who bear the same name.

marry or enter a convent,”” and later balks at Sybil’s suggestion that she shouldn’t have to ““fit into a tidy category”” of womanhood (‘BYD,’ p.104).<sup>94</sup> As Sybil obligingly replaces the reel and allows Désirée’s spectral projected image to flood into the present and once again obscure her own, it becomes unclear as to which woman is dead and which is alive.<sup>95</sup>

### **Conclusion: Seeing (as) Ghosts**

‘I have often found,’ noted Spark in a brief *pensée* written in 2003, ‘that the supernatural is a good factor for intensifying the vision of a story. It gives an extra dimension.’<sup>96</sup> Given the preceding analysis of the disorienting (and, in the latter examples, deeply disturbing) manifestations of the supernatural in Spark’s early fiction, the author’s comment seems almost comical in its understatement. The ‘extra dimension’ to which Spark refers constitutes, in fact, a radically different way of perceiving plots, characters, patterns of behaviour and structures of power. In *The Comforters*, Caroline’s uncanny awareness of the Typing Ghost comes to drastically alter her relation to, and participation in, the plot that threatens to minimise and envelop her; in a similar way, Spark’s decision to introduce the supernatural and metafictional voice of the Typing Ghost would transform her own novel-in-progress by bringing it closer to the ‘novel about writing a novel, about writing a novel’ that she wished to create.<sup>97</sup> As the revised ‘Harper and Wilton’ demonstrates, the effects of

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<sup>94</sup> Sybil’s surname, Greeves, reflects what is for her an intolerable *in betweenness* – a grieving, that is, for a contented existence inside either ““tidy category.””

<sup>95</sup> To return once more to Genette, the intrusion of Désirée’s projected image from ‘the world of which [‘Bang-Bang You’re Dead’] tells’ into ‘the world in which’ the narrator and Sybil recount the past might constitute a rather commonplace form of metalepsis, whereby figures from the enclosed ‘text’ of the home movie spill out into the present-day reality occupied by Sybil, to haunt her once again.

<sup>96</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘*Pensée: The Supernatural*,’ in Penelope Jardine, ed., *The Golden Fleece: Essays* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2014), p.161.

<sup>97</sup> Kermode, ‘The House of Fiction,’ p.79.

such a haunting can be highly subversive; the revenant characters, doubling as critical readers, transform the original text from the inside out by demanding that their voices are heard and that their victimiser is punished.

Matters of retribution and self-expression form the twin focus of ‘The Portobello Road,’ whose narrator – rather like the returning Harper and Wilton – is intent on dictating the terms on which her story is told, while effecting change within the diegetic world (an ability that is unique, as I have argued, to the revenant narrator, who straddles diegetic realms as well as ontological ones). Such a quality can be seen to complicate the influential description of Spark, proposed by Malcolm Bradbury, as a writer of ‘end-directed’ fictions, from which ‘the beginning, which creates expectation and freedom, and the middle, which substantiates and qualifies it, seem absent,’ so that characters ‘arise at the last, *from* the last; what has withered is a world of motive, purpose, aspiration.’<sup>98</sup> While it is true that Spark’s fictions often foreground their own conclusions (be it through proleptic revelations of the end, or a ghost’s narration of the story of a life already lived), this does not negate motive but rather *enhances* it by ‘adding supplementary time beyond the end,’ as Alice Bennett writes of the spectral narrator, during which further action can be taken.<sup>99</sup>

Spark’s ghosts, observes Susan Owens in *The Ghost: A Cultural History* (2017), ‘are not showy or macabre; neither are they deep elemental forces, nor comforting historical presences. They are *everyday apparitions*.’<sup>100</sup> They serve the

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<sup>98</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, ‘Muriel Spark’s Fingernails,’ in Joseph Hynes, ed., *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (New York: Hall, 1992), pp.187-93 (pp.189-90).

<sup>99</sup> Bennett, ‘Unquiet Spirits,’ p.471.

<sup>100</sup> Susan Owens, *The Ghost: A Cultural History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2017), p.248, emphasis mine. Owens is referring specifically here to the ghosts in ‘The Portobello Road’ and ‘The Girl I Left Behind Me.’ The ‘everyday’ nature of Spark’s ghosts is also observed by Janice Galloway, who notes

purpose, as Spark notes above, ‘of intensifying the vision of a story.’ Like the bellowing ‘Apparition’ in the unfinished *Warrender Chase*, whose presence heightens the protagonist’s panicked need to complete his ongoing work and thus emphasises the play’s dominant themes of mortality, productivity and posthumous legacy, Spark’s ‘everyday apparitions’ are often introduced in service of their texts’ preexisting concerns. That the narrator of ‘The Girl I Left Behind Me’ is speaking posthumously only underscores her antecedent estrangement and alienation; indeed, she is so inured to Mr Letter’s recurrent aggressions as to be incognisant of her eventual murder at his hands. Similarly, Sybil’s struggle to adapt to the gendered expectations of colonial life in ‘Bang-Bang You’re Dead’ is intensified by the unsettling presence of Désirée – herself an eerie doppelgänger, whose every interaction with the protagonist comes loaded with the threat of death (be it physical, social or intellectual), and who continues to haunt Sybil as a ghostly, flickering projection many years later. In both stories, gendered divisions are reconceptualised in relation to the supernatural, so that ghostliness is presented as the consequence of curtailed freedoms and limited lives – forbidding realities that are every bit as ‘solid, large and cold’ as the ghosts that Spark described in her handwritten note.

When asked in a 2003 interview whether her interest in writing ghost stories reflected a personal belief in the supernatural, Spark responded with a measure of caution:

Yes, I do [believe in ghosts]. But not in the sense that one could possibly describe it. I have never seen a ghost. I have never had a real psychic experience that I felt a ghost in the room although I am sensitive to atmospheres, vibes as they call it. [...] Ghosts exist and we are haunted, whether we like it or not in the sense that it can only be expressed by a

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that they often appear ‘on buses or in office-blocks [...] or in doctors’ surgeries’ (‘The Smaller Bigger Picture’ [Introduction], in Muriel Spark, *The Complete Short Stories*, pp.vii-xiv [p.xiii]).

physical presence, or a ghost [...]. I don't see any other way in which you can express this actuality, and I can't deny the actuality simply because there is no other way to express it.<sup>101</sup>

For Spark, then, the distinct 'physical presence' of the ghost serves as a necessary means of articulating the otherwise inexpressible, undeniable 'actuality' of being haunted. The present chapter has sought to examine various examples of these hauntings – from texts that reflect warily (or indeed wearily) upon their own claustrophobic contrivances, to characters who are prompted to scan the contours of their similarly stifling existences with mounting suspicion. The estrangement effected by the ghostly arrival would come to characterise Spark's unique mode of metafiction, where, as the following chapter proceeds to discuss, the surprising and often surreal effects of metaleptic frame-breaking allow the author to examine similar curtailments to the lives and freedoms of her female characters.

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<sup>101</sup> Jeanne Devoize and Pamela Valette, 'Muriel Spark – b.1918 [Interview],' *Journal of the Short Story in English*, Vol. 41 (Autumn 2003), pp.243-54 (p.247).

## **‘The role in which you’ve cast me’: Reassessing the Myth of Spark**

W. Gordon Smith: There is something very theatrical about your treatment of characters, your assembly of them.

Muriel Spark: Yes, I like to get them all on stage and moving.

– BBC *Scope* interview (1971)<sup>1</sup>

Leonora: I have a definite sense of being *watched*. [...] A definite sense of being observed and listened to by an audience. [...] An invisible audience. Somewhere outside. Looking at all of us and waiting to see what’s going to happen.

Annie: Leonora, this is thrilling. All my life I’ve had a feeling of being looked at by an audience. That’s why I always take care to be suitably dressed.

– *Doctors of Philosophy* (p.63)

### **Paring Her Fingernails: Spark and Her Critics**

In my 2015 article, ‘Salutary Scars,’ written for a special issue of *Contemporary Women’s Writing* devoted to women’s experimental prose and poetry, I examined the vexed position occupied by Spark in relation to the existing critical discourse on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Although her fiction has been discussed in a number of groundbreaking literary studies, including Patricia Waugh’s *Metafiction*, Gerardine Meaney’s *(Un)Like Subjects* and Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction*, I observed that Spark is all too often excluded from critical overviews of experimental fiction – including that written specifically by women. Unlike a number of her contemporaries, such as

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Muriel Spark [television interview with W. Gordon Smith],’ *Scope* (BBC, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1971).

<sup>2</sup> James Bailey, ‘Salutary Scars: The “Disorienting” Fictions of Muriel Spark,’ *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (March 2015), pp.35-52 (pp.35-9).

Christine Brooke-Rose, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, John Fowles, John Barth, and B. S. Johnson, Spark goes entirely unmentioned in the recent *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012), for example, despite the text's inclusion of detailed sections on metafiction, metalepsis and postmodernism, into which discussions of her fiction would fit comfortably. The *Routledge Companion* also contains a single and all too brief chapter on experimental literature written by women, in which Ellen G. Friedman is tasked with covering *l'écriture féminine*, modernist women's writing, and the work of contemporary feminist authors in little more than ten pages.<sup>3</sup> Much of Friedman's chapter stems from the content of her coedited collection (with Miriam Fuchs), *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (1989), an expansive and highly important volume of essays committed to 'outlining [...] three generations and eight decades of the tradition of women's experimental fiction,' in which, however, Spark's name is nowhere to be found.<sup>4</sup> Despite the efforts of both collections to outline, evaluate and historicise modes of experimental writing (including, for Friedman and Fuchs, the largely undervalued work of women),<sup>5</sup> the apparent ease with which Spark's contributions can be neglected is doubly significant: why is Spark so often overlooked and underestimated, not only as a writer of complex, experimental fiction, but as a *woman* writer whose literary innovations have arguably energised the interrogations of female agency (or the lack thereof) that figure so prominently within her work?

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<sup>3</sup> Ellen G. Friedman 'Sexing the Text: Women's Avant-Garde Writing in the Twentieth Century,' in Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, and Brian McHale, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp.154-67.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, 'Contexts and Communities: An Introduction to Women's Experimental Fiction in English,' in Friedman and Fuchs, eds., *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp.3-45 (p.41). As in the *Routledge Companion*, a number of Spark's female contemporaries (including Christine Brooke-Rose, Marguerite Duras, Joyce Carol Oates and Eva Figes) are discussed in this study.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this subject, which would exceed the scope of the present study, see Kaye Mitchell, 'Introduction: The Gender Politics of Experiment,' *Contemporary Women's Writing*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (March 2015), pp.1-15.

The answer to both questions, as I suggested in my Introduction, lies at least in part with the outdated yet abiding notion of Spark as an author engaging in a cruel and capricious god-game with an assemblage of anaemic caricatures.<sup>6</sup> This was the idea proposed persuasively in Malcolm Bradbury's influential 1972 essay, 'Muriel Spark's Fingernails,' in which Spark finds herself grouped among the 'Catholic novelists of detachment, like Joyce, whose godlike writer is indifferent to creation, paring his fingernails' above his handiwork.<sup>7</sup> Although a number of critics have since contested Bradbury's reductive characterisation of Spark (observing that, despite self-identifying as Catholic, her fictions do not gesture unequivocally toward a Judeo-Christian or specifically Catholic interpretive framework),<sup>8</sup> the dominant perception of her authorial identity as being akin to that of an indifferent, 'godlike' manipulator has proved difficult to dislodge.<sup>9</sup> A relatively recent example of Bradbury's lasting influence is encountered in Ian Gregson's chapter, 'Muriel Spark's Puppets of Thwarted Authority,' from his 2006 study, *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction*. Without referring directly to Bradbury, Gregson adopts a near-identical critical stance, by drawing upon Spark's Catholicism to liken the author to a master-puppeteer who remains entirely apathetic to the fates of the lifeless marionettes at her disposal:

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<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, 'Muriel Spark's Fingernails,' in Joseph Hynes, ed., *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (New York: Hall, 1992), pp.187-93 (p.187).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Bradbury is referring here to the description of the artist in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916): 'The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails' (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.181.

<sup>8</sup> See, *inter alia*, Martin McQuillan, 'Introduction: "I Don't Know Anything about Freud": Muriel Spark Meets Contemporary Criticism,' in McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction* (London: Palgrave, 2002), pp.1-31; Bran Nicol, 'Reading Spark in the Age of Suspicion,' in David Herman, ed., *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp.112-28.

<sup>9</sup> When presented with Bradbury's conception of the Sparkian author by her interviewer, Martin McQuillan, Spark rejected it without hesitation: 'No! [...] No, no I don't think so. I don't think I like that [idea] very much. However, perhaps that's the impression I give': Martin McQuillan, "'The Same Informed Air": An Interview with Muriel Spark,' *Theorising Muriel Spark*, pp.210-29 (p.218).



[Spark's] satire arises from the calculated contempt with which she displays her subject-matter. [...] Spark's satirical vision is directed not so much at specific targets but at human beings as a species. From her Catholic perspective the merely human and worldly is inevitably flat and two-dimensional because the richest and most complex truths lie elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

Paring her fingernails dispassionately above a 'flat and two-dimensional' world populated by similarly paper-thin figures, Spark is accused of toying mercilessly with a cast of 'authorial puppets,' who 'evoke, not the branching roads of the humanist self, but the cul-de-sac of caricature.'<sup>11</sup> Adopting a binaristic approach not unlike that proposed by Ihab Hassan, who equates modernism with 'form (conjunctive, closed)' and postmodernism with 'antiform (disjunctive, open),'<sup>12</sup> Gregson affirms that 'what is *unpostmodern* about [Spark's] novels [...] is their refusal of open-endedness, their compact definitiveness.'<sup>13</sup> In this hermetically-sealed, 'unpostmodern' world of caricatures, it is the Sparkian woman who fares worst of all; in *The Public Image*, for example, Gregson contends that the narrative's 'caricatural effects' come to 'evoke its heroine's complete emptiness' by exposing and ridiculing her for being 'all lustrous surface' and nothing more. 'There is no grieving over any [...] loss of ontological richness,' he argues, as 'the protagonist is remorselessly revealed to be entirely shallow.'<sup>14</sup> The young women in *The Girls of Slender Means* and the schoolgirls in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* do little better, with Gregson comparing each group to a set of vapid ventriloquist's dummies, spouting endless streams of 'mechanically repeated phrases' without any evidence of independent

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<sup>10</sup> Ian Gregson, *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction* (New York: Continuum, 2006), p.102.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104; p.107.

<sup>12</sup> Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), pp.91-2.

<sup>13</sup> Gregson, *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction*, p.105, emphasis mine.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

thought.<sup>15</sup> Such a reading is hardly unique. References to characters as puppets, dolls and dummies abound throughout Spark criticism, both old and new: Peter Kemp compares Jean Brodie's pupils to 'marionettes, devoid of free will and individual value';<sup>16</sup> Graham Hough likens the characters in *Loitering with Intent* to 'mere gesticulating puppets';<sup>17</sup> Michiko Kakutani refers to the cast of *Reality and Dreams* as a pack of 'cardboard crackpots, pulled hither and thither like puppets by their serenely tyrannical creator';<sup>18</sup> Allan Massie describes *The Bachelors*' titular protagonists as 'no more than wax dolls';<sup>19</sup> Parul Sehgal, more recently, compares Spark's characters to a set of 'poor puppets' who find themselves 'torture[d] [...] voluptuously' at every turn.<sup>20</sup> Gregson's special focus on the vapidness of female characters is even used to support a claim for Spark as 'the least feminist of women writers,' who treats her women as literary dolls – that is, as hollow, lifeless, and endlessly expendable.<sup>21</sup>

Although Gregson's stance is perhaps an extreme one, the longstanding critical conception of Spark as a purely satirical writer of closed-off, caricature-filled fictions, whose authorial cruelty is especially evident in her (mis)treatment of female characters, might go some way towards explaining her recurrent omission from various discourses on experimental writing (and particularly that authored by women). By returning continuously to the familiar analogy between the author and God as the ultimate hinterland of interpretation, such criticism precludes considerations of how

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.107.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Kemp, *Muriel Spark* (London: Elek, 1974), p.81.

<sup>17</sup> Graham Hough, 'Heartlessness is Not Enough [Review of *Loitering with Intent*],' *London Review of Books*, 21<sup>st</sup> May 1981, pp.14-15 (p.14).

<sup>18</sup> Michiko Kakutani, 'Her Serene Tyranny, a Mistress of Mayhem [Review of *Reality and Dreams*],' *New York Times*, 16<sup>th</sup> May 1997, p.29.

<sup>19</sup> Allan Massie, *Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Ramsay Head, 1979), p.41.

<sup>20</sup> Parul Sehgal, 'What Muriel Spark Saw,' *The New Yorker*, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2014  
<<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/what-muriel-spark-saw>> (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> October 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Gregson, *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction*, p.107.

Spark's literary innovations might facilitate more nuanced instances of gendered social critique, or interrogate the functioning of power and personal identity in the increasingly mediatised postmodern consumer culture in which they were written. Indeed, what such criticism so often overlooks is Spark's concern with how real lives – and specifically *women's* lives – can play out as dull or even deadly fictions, and how human vitality and personal autonomy might be diminished or destroyed entirely by oppressive relationships and tightly-scripted public performances; Annabel Christopher in *The Public Image*, a famous film star whose scriptwriter husband (along with a coterie of directors, press agents, photographers and journalists) has manipulated numerous aspects of her image, identity and reputation, can be described as 'all lustrous surface' precisely because this is all that she has been allowed to be. Similarly, the 'mechanically repeated phrases' that reverberate throughout the communal settings depicted in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The Girls of Slender Means* and *The Abbess of Crewe* come to reflect the often sinister structures of control and conformity at play within each text.<sup>22</sup> Spark thus finds herself unjustly excluded from Gregson's incisive wider discussion of 'the significance of caricatural effects in [postwar] fiction' as they pertain to matters of gender and sexuality, institutional control, and 'postmodern conceptions of the self,' despite the appropriateness of each of these subjects to her fiction.<sup>23</sup> Gregson's detailed reading of the 'powerful male manipulateness' at play in Joyce Carol Oates's fictional account of the life and death of Marilyn Monroe, *Blonde* (2000), for example, is equally relevant to the mediatised

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<sup>22</sup> One need only think, for example, of Selina Redwood's repeated recitation, in *The Girls of Slender Means*, of the components necessary for 'the maintenance of poise in the working woman,' which echoes along the hallways and landings the May of Teck Club like a code of conduct for its exclusively female residents: 'Poise is perfect balance, an equanimity of body and mind, complete composure whatever the social scene. Elegant dress, immaculate grooming, and perfect deportment all contribute to the attainment of self-confidence' (*The Girls of Slender Means* [New York: Knopf, 1963], p.57, emphasis in original).

<sup>23</sup> Gregson, *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction*, p.3.

commodification of Annabel Christopher,<sup>24</sup> while his analysis of the ‘institutions [...] responsible for turning what might have been individuals into two-dimensional characters, in fact into caricatures’ in the allegorical fictions of Joseph Heller could also have been applied to the cloistered communities governed by Jean Brodie or Abbess Alexandra.<sup>25</sup>

Seeking to resolve this oversight, the present chapter offers detailed readings of a selection of Spark’s most formally and thematically experimental works: her rarely discussed work of metatheatre, *Doctors of Philosophy*, the sparsely detailed and seemingly superficial *The Public Image*, and the outlandishly metafictional and pointedly postmodern *Not to Disturb*. Alongside these texts, I also discuss ‘A Dangerous Situation on the Stairs,’ a short story discovered in the author’s archive at the McFarlin Library in Tulsa (and included in the Appendix). In each case, Spark’s literary innovations are read alongside her longstanding preoccupation with the tensions that exist between private selves and public performances, with bodies neatly inscribed within oppressive cultural narratives (and those deemed to be deviant for daring to exist outside of them), and with the violent, sinister erasure of female subjectivity. As evinced by the ‘realist’ approach to the ghost story adopted in ‘Bang-Bang You’re Dead’ and ‘The Girl I Left Behind Me,’ Spark’s fictional experiments have the propensity to articulate her longstanding concern with what Adam Piette describes, with reference to the limitations placed upon the respective freedoms of *The Mandelbaum Gate*’s Barbara Vaughan and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*’s Sandy

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.95.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.31.

Stranger, as ‘the confinement of a scripted identity.’<sup>26</sup> In the texts that I have chosen to discuss, Spark makes this especially evident through aspects of dialogue, narration, setting and plot which draw attention to the staged and stilted aspects of seemingly ‘natural’ existences. Through my analysis of these examples, I propose that perceiving characters such as Annabel not as lifeless puppets but rather as living *performers*, who forgo personal freedom to enact fictions in life (whether consciously, unwittingly, or even unwillingly), might enable a valuable reconsideration of Spark’s experimental fiction and its inventive approach to matters of gender, identity and free will.

### **Making a Scene: Theatrical Self-(Un)Awareness and ‘Flimsy’ Realism in *Doctors of Philosophy* and ‘A Dangerous Situation on the Stairs’**

Paraphrasing Jean-François Lyotard’s famous definition of the postmodern,<sup>27</sup> Bran Nicol characterises much post-war writing as being ‘shaped in some way by an incredulity towards realism – a state of mind [...] convinced that the act of representation cannot be performed as unselfconsciously and wholeheartedly as it was in the nineteenth century.’<sup>28</sup> Spark, as the previous chapter discussed, came to share this sense of incredulity, even having Caroline Rose overhear her own author’s typewriter while struggling to complete a chapter of literary criticism on realism in the modern novel. As evinced by her aforementioned disdain for the attacks made upon experimental fiction by the likes of C. P. Snow, William Cooper and Kingsley Amis during the 1950s and 60s, Spark was keen to draw away from the standardised,

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<sup>26</sup> Adam Piette, ‘Muriel Spark and the Politics of the Contemporary,’ in Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp.52-62 (p.56).

<sup>27</sup> ‘I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives,’ announces Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.xxiii.

<sup>28</sup> Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.19.

myopic and stable conceptions of realism (and thus reality) endorsed by such self-proclaimed realists. Instead, she wished to gesture toward a model of reality that is relative and unsettled, and which carries the ever-present possibility of revealing, as the final words of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* promise, ‘another world than this’ (*BPR*, p.143).

Few narrative techniques better communicate this literary and existential possibility than metalepsis – a process, as outlined earlier with reference to Genette, which involves the violation of a text’s diegetic boundaries, and which dramatises by extension the obfuscation of the border between reality and fiction. However playful or outlandish the effects of metalepsis might appear, studies including Debra Malina’s *Breaking the Frame* (2002) have recognised the device’s potential to articulate serious truths about our own construction as subjects and the fictions we come to live by. Malina observes how, ‘because it traverses an ontological hierarchy, metalepsis has the power to endow subjects with greater or lesser degrees of “reality” – in effect, to promote them into subjectivity and demote them from it.’<sup>29</sup> This, in turn, ‘bears a *mimetic* relation to subject-construction processes in our own world, and [...] may be made to reach through the final frontier, the boundary between fictional text and extratextual reader, the effect *our* construction as subjects.’<sup>30</sup> ‘Paradoxically,’ observes Adam Katz of the relationship of metalepsis to mimesis, ‘the rigorous enactment and exploration of the artificiality of narrative boundaries is closer to experience than traditional, “realistic” narration,’ because ““experience” is nothing more than ongoing constitution, probing, testing, transgression and reconstitution of the boundaries separating and relating subjects to one another and their common

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<sup>29</sup> Debra Malina, *Breaking the Frame: Metalepsis and the Construction of the Subject* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2002), p.4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

world.’<sup>31</sup>

The ability of metalepsis to either ‘promote’ or ‘demote’ a character’s ontological status, and thus to reproduce mimetically the processes of subject construction and desubjectification operating in the world *outside* of the text, is especially relevant to Spark’s fiction and its own particular ‘incredulity towards realism.’ In her play, *Doctors of Philosophy*, Spark stages and deconstructs the shared, insular reality of Charlie Delfont, a leading economist, and his wife Catherine, herself a once brilliant scholar of Assyrian palaeography who has since sacrificed an academic career for marriage and motherhood. Visiting their London home during the university vacation is Catherine’s cousin, Dr Leonora Chase, a successful academic and the Fellow of an Oxford college. The women had been friends while studying for their doctorates some years earlier, but Catherine has since grown resentful of Leonora’s career and dismissive of women who prioritise their own intellectual development over marital subservience. ‘I like to please men,’ she announces proudly to her cousin, ‘do you think it pleases a man when he looks into a woman’s eyes and sees a reflection of the British Museum Reading Room?’ (*DP*, p.15). For Spark, who described *Doctors of Philosophy* specifically as a ‘woman’s play,’<sup>32</sup> this was to be no disengaged puppet show, but rather a sustained exploration of ‘women’s problems, whether they got married or didn’t get married – the problems [of] being intellectual and not being married and being married and intellectual, and [then] what do you do with your intellect?’<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Adam Katz, ‘Narrative Thinking and Experiential Knowledge: The Example of Ronald Sukenick,’ *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Fall 2005), pp.189-212 (p.190).

<sup>32</sup> Sarah Frankel, ‘An Interview with Muriel Spark,’ *Partisan Review*, Vol. 54 (1987), pp.443-57 (p.448).

<sup>33</sup> Sarah Smith, ‘Columbia Talks with Muriel Spark,’ *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, No. 30 (Autumn 1998), pp.199-214 (p.213).

Although dismissed by theatre critics during its short-lived London run,<sup>34</sup> and largely neglected from critical studies of the author – overlooked, perhaps, as a frivolous digression written between two of her best-known novels, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The Girls of Slender Means*, which was entirely at odds with a London theatre scene in thrall to Angry Young Men<sup>35</sup> – *Doctors of Philosophy* offers a valuable model of Sparkian metalepsis that can be applied to, and traced across, the author’s prose. The play begins in the Delfonts’ living room, where Charlie and Catherine are discussing Leonora’s decision to retire early to bed rather than admire their home’s prized view of the Regent’s Canal. ‘I thought she might like to look at the water as it isn’t term-time,’ Catherine complains to Charlie, ‘I quite see that during term a thing like the Regent’s Canal would be an idea to Leonora, it would be a geographical and historical and sociological idea, but during vacation I do think Leonora ought to take a look at reality’ (*DP*, p.1). Catherine’s apparently sincere belief that offering Leonora a rare ‘look at reality’ outside of the academic term constitutes an altruistic act is, from the audience’s extradiegetic perspective, rich in dramatic irony. From the stage set that comprises their plush surroundings to the imaginary canal that they gaze upon each evening, the stage-managed lives of Charlie and Catherine – whose surname is likely a sly reference to the renowned theatrical impresario, Lord Bernard Delfont – could hardly be further from the ‘reality’ in which

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<sup>34</sup> Although the play ran for only a couple of weeks at London’s New Arts Theatre Club during October 1963 (where it was directed by Donald McWhinnie) and was never again performed in Britain, it enjoyed a successful revival in Stockholm the following year. As Martin Stannard details in his biography of the author, the revival played ‘to packed houses there and elsewhere in Scandinavia for the rest of the year’ (Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography* [London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009], p.303).

<sup>35</sup> I am referring, of course, to ‘Angry Young Men,’ a term first used by the Press Office of the Royal Court Theatre to promote John Osborne’s 1956 play, *Look Back in Anger* (as detailed in Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], pp.45-78), but which came to describe a number of contemporary realist novelists including John Braine, Kingsley Amis and Alan Sillitoe.



they believe and to which they wish to expose Leonora.

That the Delfonts exist within a realm of pure artifice is foregrounded by the presence of their ‘*daily help*’ (DP, p.v), a housekeeper tellingly named Mrs S. Here Spark places her authorial surrogate within a long theatrical tradition of the knowing yet peripheral servant, from the sagacious butlers of Wildean social comedies to then recent examples such as Miss Bennett in Agatha Christie’s *The Unexpected Guest* (1958) and Crestwell in Noël Coward’s *Relative Values* (1951). As an authorial presence within the play as well as an agent of metalepsis – occupying the liminal space between audience and stage – Mrs S. can be witnessed shaking, dismantling and rearranging the various fixtures and fittings of the set, playfully interrogating the narrow margins of the Delfonts’ reality in the process. In a manner plainly at odds with Ian Gregson’s conception of Spark’s characters as ‘authorial puppets’ placed at the mercy of their creator, Charlie and Catherine are shown to have narrowed their *own* horizons by retreating ever further into a life of smug solipsism. Mrs S. mocks them for this without them ever realising, even reading aloud from a feature on Catherine published in a local lifestyle magazine, *Life and Looks*, to underscore her pride and delusion:

Mrs S: This is the home, situated near Regent’s Park, of the celebrated economist, Charles Delfont and his charming wife [...]. Mrs Delfont, before her marriage a scholar in her own right, told *Life and Looks* that she has found it perfectly easy to reconcile her capacity for intellectualism with the duties of wife and mother. “After all,” she said with a serene smile, “higher education broadens the horizons.” (DP, p.21)

*Life and Looks* could well serve as an alternative title for *Doctors of Philosophy*, concerned as it is with real lives subsumed beneath layers of pretension

and artifice in a dangerous hothouse of fictions. The play was staged only a year before the publication of Lionel Abel's seminal collection of essays, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (1963), which introduced 'metatheatre' as a concept relating to 'theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalised.'<sup>36</sup> Whereas Abel associates such 'theatricalised' existences with the individual's dawning self-awareness – arguing that 'the persons appearing on stage [...] knew they were dramatic before the playwright took note of them. What dramatised them originally? Myth, legend, past literature, *they themselves*' – Spark's play suggests the opposite, presenting characters such as Leonora, who appear to drift unconsciously into predetermined dramatic roles.<sup>37</sup> The audience is first introduced to Leonora when she appears before Charlie in a seemingly somnambulant state, communicating solely through a litany of repetitive demands (as if, in consonance with the metatheatrical premise of the play, reciting lines from a script) as she begs him to impregnate her: 'Charlie, give me a child,' 'a child, I want a child,' 'I wish to conceive a child,' 'I want a child, before it's too late' (*DP*, p.3). For Charlie, who captures the bizarre demands on a tape-recorder, this behaviour serves as necessary confirmation of Leonora's jealousy toward his and Catherine's carefully cultivated façade of marital and domestic contentment, a piece of irrefutable proof that her academic career has failed to compensate for the absence of a husband and child. Away from Charlie, however, Catherine confesses to Leonora that it is *she* who has long been dissatisfied with her role as 'charming wife'; 'Can you imagine what it has felt like,' she asks her cousin, 'as a scholar, to be the mere chattel of another scholar for all these years?' (*DP*, p.18). Has Catherine, too, become an unwitting performer in what might be described – to borrow from Spark's earlier review of Jung's *Answer to Job* – as 'a

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<sup>36</sup> Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill, 1963), p.60, emphasis mine.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, emphasis in original.

conspiracy of mediocrity,' devised by her husband?<sup>38</sup> Her desperate outburst certainly suggests so. A full decade before Ira Levin's famous satire of social conformity and domestic entrapment, *The Stepford Wives* (1972), which critiqued pervasive gender roles through its memorable presentation of female characters as artificial replicants devoid of bodily autonomy, *Doctors of Philosophy* interrogated similar themes of male manipulateness and female subservience through comparable scenes of mindless play-acting.

Despite its arch tone and absurdist leanings, therefore, *Doctors of Philosophy's* central preoccupation with the limitations placed upon the lives and self-perceptions of its two female protagonists comes to reveal an unequivocally feminist agenda, committed to radically undermining the circumstances that have reduced Catherine to the meagre role of her husband's 'chattel' and Leonora to that of a jealous, desperate spinster. Act II, Scene II begins not within the familiar confines of the Delfonts' living room, but upon a bare stage which, according to the directions, '*is empty and without scenery except for various pulleys and switches*' (*DP*, p.46). Catching Mrs S. as she goes about dusting and polishing the numerous exposed contraptions responsible for staging the Delfonts' daily existence, Leonora reacts with horror:

Leonora: The wall, the room! Where is it? What's happened?

Mrs S: I told you, Leonora, I'm getting the place ready. Have patience. I've got to work in my own time-space.

Leonora: Mrs S., I'm frightened. [...] I just can't bear the sight of it.

Mrs S: Are you interested in the nature of reality, Leonora, or are you too frightened?

Leonora: I'm interested. (*DP*, pp.47-8)

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<sup>38</sup> Muriel Spark, 'The Mystery of Job's Suffering: Jung's New Interpretation Examined [Review of Carl Jung's *Answer to Job*]' *The Church of England Newspaper*, 15<sup>th</sup> April 1955, p.7.

By affording Leonora a privileged insight into ‘the nature of reality’ (something altogether different from the ‘look at reality’ offered by Catherine earlier in the play) from the vantage point of her own extradiegetic ‘time-space,’ Mrs S. enables her to determine the part she has come to play for the satisfaction of the Delfonts. Confronting her tormentors, Leonora declares that she has been desubjectified by sleepwalking – quite literally – into a ‘dramatic role’ against which Charlie and Catherine can measure their own contentment (*DP*, p.60), thus upholding the elaborate illusion upon which their lives are built:

Leonora: I have occupied the role in which you’ve cast me. At times of low spirits when one is tired one behaves largely as people expect one to behave. It has been expected of me that I should be envious of you, Catherine, and I should want Charlie to give me a child. I’ve instinctively played the part in your minds of Leonora the barren virgin. (*DP*, p.61)

In an effort to convince Leonora that she is in the throes of a mental breakdown, Charlie attempts to bully her into receiving psychoanalysis in order to restore her to a perceived ‘normality’ (*DP*, p.63).<sup>39</sup> Leonora refuses, insisting: ‘My condition isn’t in the least distressing. It’s most interesting. Exhilarating. I feel like the first woman who’s ever been born. I feel I’ve discovered the world’ (*DP*, p.64). This ‘exhilarating’ awakening proves to be somewhat contagious, and soon Catherine, too, is transformed; her newfound sense of instability, provoked by Leonora’s outburst, makes her so attractive to her daughter’s boyfriend (who is also named Charlie)<sup>40</sup> that

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<sup>39</sup> Headed by Charlie, the Delfonts’ attempts at convincing Leonora that she is mentally unwell bring to mind the term ‘gaslighting’ – a form of psychological abuse, the name of which is derived from Patrick Hamilton’s 1938 play, *Gas Light* (later adapted as a film, 1944’s *Gaslight*, directed by George Cukor), which entails the purposeful undermining of another’s rationality or mental wellbeing. ‘More recently,’ Sarah Churchwell has noted, the term ‘has been resuscitated as a metaphor for the cultural sabotage of women’s perceptions, for trivialising their concerns as imaginary’: Sarah Churchwell, ‘Pushing Back: Why It’s Time for Women to Rewrite the Story,’ *The Guardian*, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/17/pushing-back-why-its-time-for-women-to-rewrite-the-story>> (accessed 17<sup>th</sup> February 2018).

<sup>40</sup> Spark took the resolutely anti-realist decision to name all three of *Doctors of Philosophy*’s male characters Charlie. ‘Men,’ she remarked of this decision, ‘are irrelevant for the purposes of the play’ (it

the pair kiss passionately. Catherine finds her characteristic equanimity suddenly 'blown to hell,' a sensation that she claims repeatedly to find 'thrilling' (*DP*, p.65). From this point onwards, the play has great fun with dialogue and set pieces pertaining to stasis and change, dramatic roles and drastic epiphanies, and closed sets and exploded fourth walls; Leonora retaliates against the dismissive charge that 'scholars are not realists,' for example, when she '*reaches out and gives the wall a push,*' before replying that 'realism is very flimsy' (*DP*, pp.97-8), while a third cousin, Annie, declares triumphantly that 'the women of this household always engage in a high level of conversation among themselves; very high' (*DP*, p.94). This 'high level' points to the women's acquirement of a newfound ontological richness, and a dawning awareness of a world beyond the confines of the stage (and the dull Charlies who stand upon it).

*Doctors of Philosophy* met with a lukewarm critical response when it opened at London's New Arts Theatre Club in October 1962. 'Miss Spark's assaults on the technical canons of stagecraft were grandiose,' complained Tom Stoppard, who argued that the play would work 'better as a straightforward and literate comedy.'<sup>41</sup> Kenneth Tynan called the play 'one of the most baffling I have ever witnessed. No doubt it has a shape and even, perhaps, a purpose; let me discretely say that they are not evident and may never be.'<sup>42</sup> 'Still, it's cheerful,' offered Philip Hope-Wallace, following a similarly bemused review.<sup>43</sup> What these early reviews neglect to consider

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was, after all, 'a woman's play'): Frankel, 'An Interview with Muriel Spark,' p.451. The play's producer, Michael Codron, was so taken by this decision that he urged Spark to change the name of the play to Charlie is My Darling (See Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, p.282).

<sup>41</sup> Tom Stoppard, 'Fine Hand at Work [Review of *Doctors of Philosophy*],' *Scene*, 29<sup>th</sup> November 1962, p.19.

<sup>42</sup> Kenneth Tynan, 'Straining for the Vital Spark [Review of *Doctors of Philosophy*],' *The Observer*, 7<sup>th</sup> October 1962, p.26.

<sup>43</sup> Philip Hope-Wallace, '*Doctors of Philosophy* [Review],' *The Guardian*, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1962, p.5.

is how Spark's play operates, in fact, as a defamiliarised interrogation of two polarised, crudely-drawn and patriarchally-inflected stereotypes of the contemporary woman, to which the various 'assaults on [...] stagecraft' criticised by Stoppard prove essential. With Brechtian anti-illusionism and playful self-referentiality, such 'assaults' expose the roles occupied by Leonora and Catherine as precisely that, so that the play enacts the metatheatrical deconstruction of the mutually exclusive extremes presented at the end of 'Bang-Bang You're Dead,' when Sybil asks herself mournfully: 'Am I a woman [...] or an intellectual monster?' ('BYD,' p.120).

What is significant about *Doctors of Philosophy*, then, is not Spark's treatment of her characters as inert puppets, but rather the ease with which these characters are shown to ensnare themselves, and one another, within various narrow, preconstructed dramatic parts, to be enacted upon a stage of their own making. Before the play has even begun, Leonora's words imply, the Delfonts have worn her down to such an extent that she can only submit to the dead-eyed and depthless stereotype to whom the audience is first introduced. In dismantling the roles of Leonora as 'barren virgin' and (albeit to a lesser extent) Catherine as submissive 'chattel,' Sparkian metalepsis can thus be read as a feminist strategy, committed to exposing and subverting the processes by which patriarchy constructs its subjects (and, in turn, its passive objects). As Malina argues, 'although metalepsis may infiltrate narratological taxonomies camouflaged as just another element of narrative structure, it harbours the potential to undermine the whole elaborate construction.' As a 'dynamic force rather than a static element,' the purpose of metalepsis 'is precisely to *undo*, at least temporarily, stable levels and definite boundaries.'<sup>44</sup> By having her authorial surrogate disassemble and

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<sup>44</sup> Malina, *Breaking the Frame*, p.132.

thus ridicule the Delfonts' fixed reality, Spark articulates her own resistance to conventional modes of realism which only reproduce, rather than question or subvert, dominant ideologies and structures of power. 'Are you interested in the nature of reality?' Leonora enquired of Mrs S. as she goes about her daily housekeeping duties. 'Very,' Mrs S. replies, 'I'm trying to give it a polish as you can see' (*DP*, p.47). The task of Mrs S. is much like that of her authorial namesake; Sparkian metalepsis here works away at the dull surface of reality until it gleams with new meaning.

'I see the absurd in a great many things, but I think that we learn from absurdity,' Spark remarked in a 2001 BBC radio interview. 'The fact that things strike us as absurd,' she added, 'makes us stop and think. I'm quite sure of that. I like to ridicule where I think ridicule is due.'<sup>45</sup> In this respect, the figure of the housekeeper serves not only as an ideal authorial stand-in – existing at a comfortable remove from the other characters, yet closely attuned to their various secrets, habits, foibles and distorted realities – but a model ridiculer, who is able to cast a wry eye over proceedings from her unique vantage point: 'I've learned to preserve my detachment and scholarly calm,' announces Mrs S., 'on the other side of the door' (*DP*, p.9). Mrs S. is not the only sagacious housekeeper to appear in Spark's fiction, however. The archival research undertaken for the present study has led to the discovery of a previously unseen short story entitled 'A Dangerous Situation on the Stairs.' The story, which is contained within a folder of handwritten notes for the novel that would become *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (and which can therefore be dated approximately to 1960), depicts – in an elliptical, fragmented fashion – a series of romantic encounters held between its protagonist, Sarah, and her unnamed lover

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<sup>45</sup> *Meridian* [Interview with Harriett Gilbert], BBC World Service, 15<sup>th</sup> November 2001 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03m11ch>> (accessed 4<sup>th</sup> January 2016).

during a six-month period spanning autumn to the following spring. The pair's interactions during this time adhere to a well-worn pattern; after being granted entrance to her lover's home by his housekeeper, Sarah waits dutifully in the hallway before he appears at the bannister to beckon her upstairs. The story begins *in media res*:

“You know your way up,” said the housekeeper, as she cleaned the street clear; she left the scene, she disappeared into the dark, beyond the silent swinging door of green beige. She said to Sarah right from the first occasion, “you know your way up,” whether it was to save her poor feet, or whether to express a certain insight and foreknowledge, or whether in the honest belief that Sarah had been before.<sup>46</sup>

Sarah has indeed been before. She appears to insist, however, on treating each visit to the townhouse as though it were her first. By doing so, she hopes that she may continue to recreate what she has come to regard fondly as ‘the bannister scene’: a set of actions which involve ‘her lover waiting up there with one foot on the landing, one on the top stair, his hands on the bannister, his eyes looking for her.’<sup>47</sup> The pair proceed to conduct their relationship as a pair of dedicated performers, repeatedly play-acting the same, pleasurable scene before the eyes of the housekeeper:

“You know your way upstairs.” [...] He will be leaning over the bannister, however. He will smile apologetically. “Come up.” “What a long time...” “Only the day before yesterday, but what a long time it has seemed.”<sup>48</sup>

While the interior of the townhouse becomes a static ‘scene,’ life outside carries on as usual: leaves continue ‘piling up on the lonely road’ throughout

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<sup>46</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘A Dangerous Situation on the Stairs [handwritten short story, 4p., c.1960-61],’ p.1, in ‘*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, handwritten notes and draft fragments, 44p. [1960-61],’ Muriel Spark Papers, Box 59, Folder 1, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa. See Appendix Figure 1. For the purpose of clarity, I do not attempt to replicate Spark’s crossings-out when quoting from the story. The full, handwritten draft can be viewed in the Appendix.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*



‘October, November, December,’ as the air thickens steadily with ‘fog and [...] influenza.’<sup>49</sup> A chasm widens between Sarah and her friends, at whom she now ‘stares [...] in a new way, to see if they were the same species as herself.’<sup>50</sup> Perturbed by their reservations about her lover, she resolves to end the affair, yet finds herself seduced by her role in the still-unfolding drama:

She was aware as she climbed, head down, that they were distinguished lovers. And yet, people would giggle, she supposed, if they knew. She kept her head down so that she could, at the bend in the stairs, delight herself with his leaning over the bannister. We are both, she said to herself, verging on the dangerous years for men and women, he fifty, I forty.

What a refinement of pleasure, she said, is this self-consciousness, seeing the affair from without and feeling it from within. We are abundantly favoured. I will put an end to it now, to-day, because it will never last. Our love must disintegrate after this; to-day is so perfect, so ripe in my awareness. I will not wait till March.

I will tell him after tea. But he was not at the stairs, not leaning over the bannister. Where is he? What has happened? “Come up, Sarah,” said his voice from a further flight above. “Come, I’ve got to do something to Micky.” He was bathing a wound in the mongrel’s back. “He got bitten. Savagely.” The water from the bowl slopped on to the carpet, his hands held the dog and bathed it, and he smiled at her tolerantly, apologetic for the dog. The scene stabbed at her with joy. Not March, but never. I cannot, she said, within herself, listen to reason. I like danger, she thought. I will take on danger for all the rest of my life, this danger of losing our distinction, our solitary gifts. It will never come to anything, it will only be danger.<sup>51</sup>

The ‘danger’ that Sarah fears, and which she later grows to accept and even welcome, relates to her concern that the pair’s ‘distinction’ will be tarnished should their relationship become widely known. There lurks a greater ‘danger,’ however, to which the short story’s title appears to allude; in first attempting to preserve their ‘solitary gifts’ by conducting their affair in private, Sarah and her lover have settled into a strange and self-alienating charade of romance, in which she plays the subservient role

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.1.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.2.

of the swooning romantic heroine, climbing the stairs only when beckoned to do so. Spark's repeated use of 'scene' encourages the suspicious reader to perceive these interactions as unnatural – less like stages in an organically evolving relationship, that is, than a staged sequence of romantic set pieces modelled on hackneyed gender roles (her lover's seemingly heroic nursing of the injured dog serving, perhaps, as the latest addition). We might return, then, to the 'certain insight and foreknowledge' that is implicit in the housekeeper's greeting, "“You know your way up,”" which recurs throughout the story like an ominous refrain (Spark's handwritten draft reveals that a crossed-out 'The Way Up' was its original title).<sup>52</sup> The housekeeper's words suggest an acute awareness of Sarah's overfamiliarity with 'the bannister scene,' and thus her gradual descent into a delusory romantic ideal. As in *Doctors of Philosophy*, Spark appears to endow the figure of the housekeeper with *a certain detachment*, with which she observes characters as they drift deeper into dramatic roles.

The seeming unreality of the courtship can be further surmised by reading the story against a memorable, and notably similar, passage from *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, in which two of Brodie's teenage pupils, Sandy Stranger and Jenny Gray, construct an imaginary love letter from their teacher to the school's singing master, Gordon Lowther. The letter reads, as Alan Bold observes, as a 'gloriously comic' reproduction of aspects of 'romantic pulp fiction,'<sup>53</sup> which betrays the schoolgirls' naivety concerning love and sex – matters which, writes Katherine Dalsimer, are here 'obscured by a romantic haze':<sup>54</sup>

My Own Delightful Gordon,

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p.1.

<sup>53</sup> Alan Bold, *Muriel Spark* (London: Methuen, 1986), p.68.

<sup>54</sup> Katherine Dalsimer, *Female Adolescence: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Literature* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1986), p.38.

Your letter has moved me deeply, as you may imagine. But alas, I must ever decline to be Mrs. Lowther. [...] But I was proud of giving myself to you when you came and took me in the bracken on Arthur's Seat while the storm raged about us. [...] I may permit misconduct to occur again from time to time as an outlet because I am in my Prime. [...]

I wish to inform you that your housekeeper fills me with anxiety [...]. Pray ask her not to say "You know your way up" when I call at your house in Cramond.

[...]

Allow me, in conclusion, to congratulate you warmly upon your sexual intercourse, as well as your singing.

With fondest joy,  
Jean Brodie<sup>55</sup>

It remains unclear as to whether Spark composed the girls' love letter before or after she completed 'A Dangerous Situation on the Stairs,' and thus whether the contents of Sandy and Jenny's concocted romance came to influence the nature of Sarah's indulgent self-image, or *vice versa*. Whatever the case may be, the likeness shared between both texts (their inclusion, in particular, of elaborate romantic set pieces, as well as a housekeeper who utters the potentially incisive words, "'You know your way up'") casts Sarah's relationship in a decidedly unflattering light. Despite her professed 'self-consciousness,' we can now discern, Sarah perceives both herself and her lover through the same 'romantic haze' that clouds the vision of Brodie's inexperienced schoolgirls. Spark's 'dangerous situation' thus articulates the peril of losing touch with reality, of slipping unwittingly into a delusory, static fiction while the leaves pile up outside.

Similarly 'dangerous situation[s]' can be seen to recur throughout Spark's early fiction, from the enervating 'game for three players' which Sybil endures while in the company of Désirée and Barry Weston in 'Bang-Bang You're Dead' ('BYD,'

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<sup>55</sup> Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp.73-4.

p.106), to the drab and increasingly deadly ‘play far advanced,’ into which Merle Coverdale finds herself hopelessly ensnared in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (BPR, p.53: as discussed in the following chapter). While the interactions between Sarah and her lover are certainly less sinister and life-threatening than those outlined above, they nevertheless point towards a sense of steadily increasing isolation, stasis and absurdity, which Spark views as detrimental (if not entirely disastrous) to human development and self-awareness. What distinguishes each of these texts from *Doctors of Philosophy* is the absence of a metaleptic frame-break; instead, real lives are shown to ossify gradually into stagnant and stifling roles, while characters’ familiar environments come to close in around them like constrictive stage sets. Although it has been considered as something of an oddity in Spark’s oeuvre (being the author’s only stage play, and a little-known and poorly-received one at that), *Doctors of Philosophy* should thus be understood as the outlandish, metatheatrical extension of its author’s pre-existing concerns, in which an oppressive reality is explosively revealed, as Leonora discovers to her shock and delight, to be ‘very flimsy’ indeed.

### **‘Former and former seas’: ‘Living part[s]’ and Hidden Depths in *The Public Image***

In his recent article, ‘Muriel Spark’s Camp Metafiction’ (2017), Len Gutkin observes how, following *The Comforters*’ explicitly metafictional treatment of ‘authorial mind reading and plotting,’ Spark’s subsequent fictions ‘would go on to engage these interests less directly, by translating Caroline’s hallucinated typewriter into subtler medial analogies for narrative omniscience and plot construction’ in novels including *The Abbess of Crewe*, where electronic surveillance methods such as wiretapping and bugging come to replace overtly self-reflexive representations of authorial

omniscience.<sup>56</sup> A similar observation could be made of the novels that emerged during the decade after *Doctors of Philosophy*, in which Leonora's extradiegetic alertness to the restrictive role that she has played before an off-stage 'invisible audience' (*DP*, p.63) is transposed to a media-saturated contemporary landscape, where tabloid prurience and the prospect of becoming a media spectacle can instill within the subject a heightened (and yet entirely plausible) dramatic self-consciousness. 'I love the glossies and the newspapers and film mags,' remarked Spark in 1971, on being asked about her recent fiction's preoccupation with celebrity, scandal and technologies of mass reproduction, 'and that's where I find a lot of my material.'<sup>57</sup> Bryan Cheyette chooses 'machine made' as the most fitting description for these novels, borrowing the phrase from Angus Wilson's review of *The Mandelbaum Gate* (owing to its numerous references to modes of modern technology and mass media communication).<sup>58</sup> As Cheyette suggests, however, the phrase is far better suited to the fictions that followed immediately after that novel – *The Public Image*, *The Driver's Seat* and *Not to Disturb* – which 'are dominated by machines of all kinds such as [...] cameras, tape-recorders, [and] telephones,' as well as 'sophisticated [...] propaganda equipment.'<sup>59</sup> Drawing upon the experimental narrative techniques encountered in the *nouveau roman*, in which (as the following chapter examines in detail) the meticulous surveillance of outward appearances took precedence over articulations of emotional depth, Spark reduces the publicity-saturated settings of such novels to an affectless landscape of flattened images. The author, as Cheyette surmises, 'has shown that the themes of her novels dictate their form and there is a

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<sup>56</sup> Len Gutkin, 'Muriel Spark's Camp Metafiction,' *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Winter 2017), pp.53-81 (p.60).

<sup>57</sup> Philip Toynbee, 'Interview with Muriel Spark,' *The Observer Colour Magazine*, 7<sup>th</sup> November 1971, pp.73-4 (p.73).

<sup>58</sup> Angus Wilson, 'Journey to Jerusalem [Review of *The Mandelbaum Gate*],' *The Observer*, 17<sup>th</sup> October 1965, p.28, quoted in Bryan Cheyette, *Muriel Spark* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2000), p.72.

<sup>59</sup> Cheyette, *Muriel Spark*, p.72, emphasis mine.

crucial link here between her heartless “machine made” tone and her highly mechanised creations.’<sup>60</sup>

Given that it was the first entry in Spark’s trilogy of ‘heartless “machine made”’ fictions, the brevity and detachment of *The Public Image*’s spare prose and spiky plot caught some critics unaware: this ostensibly ‘unwritten novel,’ wrote Saul Maloff, ‘is both banal and thin-to-vanishing’;<sup>61</sup> ‘*The Public Image* is a blown-up short story rather than a novel,’ claimed Francis Hope, who added that ‘what was crisp’ in Spark’s previous work ‘has become tense, what was sharp has become vinegary – and worst of all, what was devastatingly particular has become diffusely general’;<sup>62</sup> ‘Characters,’ complained Richard Holmes, ‘are merely touched in,’ while the setting of Rome ‘is lost in the anonymity of Annabel’s unfurnished apartment, room after room of sunlit parquet.’<sup>63</sup> Conjuring a disquieting sense of sparseness and anonymity was precisely Spark’s aim, however. Indeed, the idea of reducing a city as distinctive as Rome to a featureless parquet landscape was her starting point for the novel, which began life as a paragraph-long fragment entitled ‘The Parquet Floor,’ quoted in full below:

The gold-brown shines new on the parquet floor of the flat that somehow she has come to. There is no furniture to be seen. There is a feeling that the rent is high and that no difficulty exists in paying it. The baby is laid on the floor by the wall, he is sleeping peacefully on a white little pillow tucked in with sheets. She is wondering where her husband is, he has been away a long time, that is the only worry. Suddenly his friend from Belfast is there, eating at a table in large smiling mouthfuls, his hair and eyes are shining. He is Bill. She says, “Have you seen Frederick? I don’t know where Frederick can be. He

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Saul Maloff, ‘Lady-Tiger [Review of *The Public Image*]’, *Newsweek*, 21<sup>st</sup> October 1968, pp.108-10 (p.108).

<sup>62</sup> Francis Hope, ‘Mrs Spark in Rome [Review of *The Public Image*]’, *The Observer*, 16<sup>th</sup> June 1968, p.24.

<sup>63</sup> Richard Holmes, ‘Into a Limbo of Poise [Review of *The Public Image*]’, *The Times Saturday Review*, 15<sup>th</sup> June 1968, p.21.

hasn't been home.'<sup>64</sup>

Possessing the hazy, impressionistic quality of the dream from which it is said to have emerged,<sup>65</sup> 'The Parquet Floor' reads like a condensed version of *The Public Image*'s first chapter, and exhibits the bare bones of themes and plot elements which would be developed over the course of the completed novel. At the opening of the published text, the unnamed 'she' is Annabel Christopher, a successful film star who has taken it upon herself to procure the parquet-floored flat as a home in which to live with her husband, Frederick, and their newborn son, Carl. For Annabel, whose 'world of people had been full of mutual assistance on all practical matters,' the purchase represents a decisive bid for privacy and personal autonomy – an attempt, that is, to bridge the 'distance from life that occurred at the same time as the close-ups on the screen,' after which she 'became fixed in the public imagination as the English Tiger-Lady' (*PI*, p.37; p.38; p.22). With its bare, sun-dappled floor, the empty flat functions in Annabel's consciousness as a *tabula rasa* – a gleaming blank slate, far removed from the prying eyes and whirring lenses of the public and paparazzi – upon which she might at last cultivate and project an authentic sense of self, and, in doing so, nurture and protect her relationship with her child:

The baby, Carl, was the only reality in her life. His existence gave her a sense of being permanently secured to the world which she had not experienced since her own childhood had passed. [...] She felt a curious fear of display where the baby was concerned, as if this deep and complete satisfaction might be disfigured or melted away by some public image. (*PI*, p.35)

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<sup>64</sup> Muriel Spark, 'The Parquet Floor [1p., 1966],' in 'The Public Image, handwritten and typed notes and draft fragments [52p., 1966],' Muriel Spark Papers, Box 61, Folder 5, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

<sup>65</sup> According to Spark, the premise of *The Public Image* came to her in a dream, just before she would complete a move from New York to Rome in 1966. 'I dreamt the whole thing in New York,' she recalled, 'and when I arrived in Rome I wrote the book. It was the easiest book I ever wrote' (Frankel, 'An Interview with Muriel Spark,' p.453).

Annabel's perception of the empty flat differs, however, from those of its unwelcome visitors, who take it upon themselves to enter at will. 'Until the furniture had arrived and been put in place,' she realises, 'everyone felt they could come and go, like the workmen and removal men, without permission,' as well as the 'neighbours [who] had already toured the flat, smiling and exclaiming' (*PI*, p.6). This treatment of the private space as a public arena is underscored by the unannounced arrival of Billy O'Brien (who appears in 'The Parquet Floor' as Bill, defined by his unnerving act of eating 'in large smiling mouthfuls'), whose accusatory question to Annabel, "'is this all in aid of your public image?'" (*PI*, p.7), betrays his belief that the flat constitutes a superficial extension of the glamorous life of her dramatic persona. These numerous, minor interactions with Annabel's empty home dramatise in miniature the competing claims to her identity and privacy, which have come to define her existence ever since she found fame. Whereas Annabel might consider herself to be walking freely across the sunlit parquet into a long-yearned-for private life, to those around her she is still treading the boards, fixed in a permanent performance for her amassed spectators.

Annabel has been partially complicit in cultivating the public image for which she has become renowned, however, and Spark's narrative flits repeatedly from the parquet-floored present to detail the history of the English Tiger-Lady's elaborate construction. Working closely alongside a film director, Luigi Leopardi,<sup>66</sup> as well as a press secretary whose 'commission [was] to build up Annabel,' Annabel develops the Tiger-Lady from a role that she had played in an otherwise unremarkable film scripted by her husband, in which she won plaudits for her on-screen aura of 'terrifying

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<sup>66</sup> The 'Leopard' contained in the surname of Luigi Leopardi, the chief mastermind behind Annabel's *Tiger-Lady* persona, is surely ironic: "'What is personality but the effect one has on others?'" Luigi asks Annabel, "'Life is all the achievement of an effect. *Only the animals remain natural*'" (*PI*, p.34, emphasis mine).



serenity [...] with a tiger in her soul' (*PI*, p.23; p.20). She was, announces her narrator, 'entirely aware of the image-making process in every phase,' yet 'did not expect this personal image to last long in the public mind, for she intended to play other parts than that of the suppressed tiger' (*PI*, p.27). Unwittingly, then, Annabel has allowed her identity to ossify into that of the Tiger-Lady – a composite, or palimpsest, of the fantasies of Frederick and Luigi – to the extent that even 'her face had changed, as if by action of many famous cameras, into a mould of her public figuration' (*PI*, p.35).<sup>67</sup> Her 'instinctive method of acting,' which entails 'simply [...] playing herself in a series of poses for the camera, just as if she were getting her photograph taken for private purposes,' causes distinctions between reality and fiction to blur disquietingly (*PI*, p.10). As a consequence, Annabel constantly finds herself accused by those around her of affecting a façade, and of transforming private scenes into public spectacles: "“Oh, stop posing,” Billy said. She was standing on the carpet, one hand on a side-table [...] as if playing a middle-aged part. “I’m not posing,” she said' (*PI*, p.14).

Annabel's public image comes to inform all aspects of her private life, including her relationship with Frederick. As Susan Sellers notes, the publicity-minded machinations of Luigi's press team have 'turn[ed] Frederick and Annabel's marriage into a legend, with fixed characters and an unvarying plot,' so that, while 'Annabel gains in confidence through the images of their ideal marriage in the press, she becomes paradoxically dependent on Frederick's acquiescence.'<sup>68</sup> Despite the well-publicised 'tiger in her soul,' Annabel is thus shown to be remarkably tame,

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<sup>67</sup> Whereas Annabel's smile was once instinctive and unaffected, appearing 'quick and small' across her face, it 'now [...] was slow and formal' (*PI*, p.35).

<sup>68</sup> Susan Sellers, 'Tales of Love: Narcissism and Idealisation in *The Public Image*,' in McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark*, pp.35-48 (p.38).

enduring an unhappy and unfaithful marriage for the sake of the status and livelihood afforded by her public identity as the Tiger-Lady. 'So deeply is each partner implicated in this "public image" of Annabel as Tiger,' remarks Robert Ostermann in an early review of the novel, 'that together they are trapped, held together like a photograph of perfection permanently sealed in plastic, to be forever admired but untouched.'<sup>69</sup> Ostermann's analysis acquires a literal resonance when read against a scene in which the couple are encouraged to pose for a series of highly stylised yet apparently 'candid' publicity shots upon an artfully 'disarranged' bed (*PI*, p.26). In these images, Frederick poses 'on the edge of the bed, in a Liberty dressing-gown, smoking,' while 'sweet but unsmiling' Annabel, wearing only a 'night-dress, [with] one shoulder-band slipping down her arm' and extending a teapot 'with a gracious hand' before her husband's outstretched cup, communicates an idealised mixture of wifely servitude and barely concealed desire (*PI*, p.27). So effective are the photographs, reveals the narrator, that 'wives began to romp in bed far beyond the call of their husbands, or the capacities of their years, or any of the realities of the situation' (*PI*, p.28). The images' wild influence and air of unreality thus evokes Susan Sontag's reflections on the 'virtually unlimited authority in modern society' of 'photographic images' as a means of shaping reality.<sup>70</sup> For Sontag, photographs are 'not to so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement,' and therefore 'as much an interpretation of the world as paintings or drawings are.'<sup>71</sup>

That *The Public Image's* public images are every bit as contrived, subjective and ideologically-informed as the product of any other creative endeavour is hardly

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<sup>69</sup> Robert Ostermann, 'The Public Image Makes its Point by Understatement,' *National Observer*, 9<sup>th</sup> September 1968, p.7.

<sup>70</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1977), p.153.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p.165; p.6.

surprising; Spark's narrator has guided the reader through each stage in 'the image-making process,' from the careful creasing of bed linen to the employment of intricate post-production techniques including 'the best colour methods of the cinema,' which alter Annabel's ordinarily 'sickly-eyed' expression to something 'fiery and [...] marvellous' (*PI*, p.16). Of greater significance is the diminished, distorted and severely compromised nature of the life of the photographed subject. Indeed, to accept Sontag's belief that 'to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed' is to perceive the subject as similarly contained, 'appropriate[d]' and 'thing'-like.<sup>72</sup> 'The camera,' remarks Sontag, 'may presume, intrude, trespass, distort, [and] exploit' its subject matter, and Annabel's private life is similarly encroached upon by what her narrator has slyly termed 'the *mould* of her public figuration,' to the extent that she often 'took fright at the whole mythology that had vapoured so thickly about her' (*PI*, p.30, emphasis mine).<sup>73</sup> Similarly, for all his desire to abandon the unhappy marriage, Frederick finds himself, as a consequence of the publicity photos, 'rooted deeply and with serious interest in a living part such as many multitudes believe exist: a cultured man without temperament, studious, sportsmanlike, aristocratic, [...] Annabel's husband' (*PI*, p.27). Having fooled the watching world with expertly crafted scenes from their marriage, Annabel and Frederick have themselves become seduced by the alluring unreality of their public personae.

The oxymoronic 'living part[s]' occupied by the husband and wife thus come to evoke *Doctors of Philosophy's* stilted and self-reflexively staged gender roles, as captured in the Delfonts' idyllic *Life and Looks* profile. Without a benevolent Mrs S. on hand to offer the pair a welcome glimpse into 'the nature of reality' (*DP*, p.48),

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.13.

however, resentment builds over each party's absorption within a world of images and artifice. 'It is the deep core of stupidity,' remarks the narrator (in an aside which could have left the lips of Mrs S. herself), 'that it thrives on the absence of a looking-glass' (*PI*, p.9); despite their increasing vanity, Annabel and Frederick lack such a 'looking-glass,' and instead reflect hostilities towards one another's exasperating public images. Annabel, announces Frederick in a letter to his wife, has grown to resemble '*a beautiful shell, like something washed up on the sea-shore, a collector's item, perfectly formed, a pearly shell – but empty, devoid of the life it once held*' (*PI*, p.92). Frederick's decision to kill himself, by leaping from a scaffold at the Church of St John and St Paul, can thus be read, perversely, as a vengeful bid for posthumous *substance* rather than self-destruction. By selecting the site of the martyrdom of St Paul as his suicide location, Frederick strives to excoriate Annabel for her intolerable emptiness by emphasising the pain that it has inflicted upon *his* contrastingly delicate soul and unfailing morality. The accompaniments to Frederick's final act – a series of incriminating suicide letters addressed to an invented mother,<sup>74</sup> detailing his wife's alleged participation in 'outrageous orgies of the most licentious nature,' and the arrangement of a debauched party in her new flat – are intended, Annabel realises, 'to be blood on her hands, blood on her public image' (*PI*, p.85; p.58).

When Spark's narrative returns to the parquet-floored present, Frederick's 'intolerable party' is in full swing and the once gleaming surfaces of Annabel's flat are stained with wine and vomit, while an empty beer bottle lies next to her sleeping child (*PI*, p.58). As details of her husband's suicide and anguished letters begin to

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<sup>74</sup> That Frederick's mother has long since died is but a minor detail here; the mother-son relationship, he realises, will resonate strongly with the Italian public, and must therefore be exploited. 'Every week, every day sometimes,' notes the narrator, 'letters from sons to Mammias appeared in the Italian papers – in letters from sons in prison, sons on trial, from students who had killed themselves in a nervous crisis [...]. "Mamma. It is I, your son who writes to you..."' (*PI*, p.83).

filter through to the public and press, Annabel, learning that her home is now the intended site of her downfall, arranges a swift scene-change. The cleaned-up flat becomes the setting for a press conference, where the protagonist draws upon her dramatic training and innate sense of stagecraft to decisively alter the course of events:

Annabel sat down on the chair left vacant for her. The neighbours, with their instinct for ceremony and spectacle, had arranged those chairs which they had brought from their own best rooms in two semi-circles which flanked the best chair of all; this was upholstered in red velvet, and its arms were antiques carved. With equal instinct, Annabel sat on this best chair and adjusted the baby. The press would soon arrive. (*PI*, p.67)

Here, as in the film roles for which she became famous, Annabel's dramatic 'instinct' corresponds harmoniously with the demands of her audience (the cameras of the paparazzi, as if in happy participation with this merry dance, 'were plucked like guitars and whirled like barrel organs' [*PI*, p.71]). While Frederick had intended to stage-manage a scene of incriminating debauchery – not dissimilar, perhaps, to the wild orgy that occurs at the end of Federico Fellini's then recent tale of infamy, aristocratic decadence and media sensation in affluent Rome, *La Dolce Vita* (1960) – Annabel has other ideas. With her child raised before her 'like a triumphant shield,' and with her newly sympathetic neighbours amassed on either side, she allows the unfolding scene to assume the grandeur of 'some vast portrayal of a family and household by Holbein' (*PI*, p.68). The apparent ease with which Annabel's empty home can shift between competing spectacles of depravity and defiant dignity (all consumed unquestioningly by an 'on-stage' audience of voracious neighbours, lambasting or applauding each new scene with unflagging enthusiasm) speaks to what Guy Debord, only a year before the publication of *The Public Image*, had termed *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). 'In societies where modern conditions of production

prevail,' Debord's polemic asserts, 'all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*,' so that 'everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation,' leading to a disorienting, socially alienating, dissimulation of reality.<sup>75</sup> The spectacle, therefore, 'is not something *added* to the real world,' but rather 'the very heart of society's real unreality. In all its specific manifestations – news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment – the spectacle epitomises the prevailing model of social life.'<sup>76</sup> Contemporary Rome, referred to in *The Public Image* as 'the Motherland of Sensation' (*PI*, p.24), is presented in Spark's novel as a prime example of a society in which all social interaction has been mediated into a spectacular unreality, so that life becomes indistinguishable from the posed and preened images circulated in 'the glossies.' As one of the focal points of the public and media gaze, Annabel must – to follow Debord's thesis – surrender her subjectivity to exist solely as a depthless spectacle:

The individual who in the service of the spectacle is placed in stardom's spotlight is in fact the opposite of an individual, and as clearly the enemy of the individual in himself as of the individual in others. In entering the spectacle as a model to be identified with, he renounces all autonomy in order himself to identify with the general law of obedience to the course of things.<sup>77</sup>

In keeping with Debord's bleak prognosis of the spectacularised subject, Annabel's panicked need to retain her position 'in stardom's spotlight' leads to an alarming psychic schism. In her desperation to protect her reputation as the English Tiger-Lady from destruction following the release of Frederick's letters, she finds herself defensively unable to break role, and consequently adrift from reality. While

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<sup>75</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Detroit: Red & Black, 1983), p.2, emphasis in original.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13, emphasis in original.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.39.

travelling home from the hospital where she has identified Frederick's body, she wonders suddenly 'how the film would end,' and imagines that a 'camera [had] swung round' to capture her movements through Rome's twisting byways (*PI*, p.60). Here, for the first time in Spark's detached, 'machine made' novel, Rome appears intensely cinematic rather than anodyne and anonymous. Its 'dark intertwining streets,' containing 'narrow streets within narrower,' recall the labyrinthine, disjointed vision of the city as depicted in Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), for example, while Annabel's delirious, irrational sense of there being a predatory 'poisoner' lurking 'behind the black window-square,' or 'a man flattened against the wall with the daggers ready,' evokes Rome's appearance as a site of deadly violence and febrile paranoia in contemporary Italian *giallo* cinema, including Mario Bava's *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* (1963; *PI*, p.60).<sup>78</sup> Readers of the novel thus come to share Annabel's cinematic self-consciousness, encountering her world as an immersive, protean sequence of flickering celluloid spectacles – fleeting, fragmented and unreal.

In this state of heightened self-consciousness, Annabel comes to alienate even the most expert mythmakers in her company. Luigi, who responds to the majority of her image-protecting endeavours with banal, sycophantic praise ("“you were wonderful,”” he repeatedly tells her, his words resembling those of a fawning critic [*PI*, p.104; p.112]), eventually bristles at her manner of ““directing [Frederick's] inquest like a movie”” (*PI*, p.117). It is for a similar reason that Hélène Cixous, writing shortly after the novel's publication, described the protagonist witheringly as 'an ice-cold little vampire,' who engages in a 'hollow' art of 'blind female vitality' in

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<sup>78</sup> Italian *giallo* cinema (and its relation to Rome, violent crime, female sexuality and media culture) is discussed in detail in: Mikel J. Koven, *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2006); Ellen Victoria Nerenberg, *Murder Made in Italy: Homicide, Media, and Contemporary Italian Culture* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012).

order to survive the scandal with her career in tact.<sup>79</sup> It could be argued, however, that Annabel's feverish practice of 'female vitality' is not especially monstrous, but rather an amplified version of the psychic splitting which, according to John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), is bound to have characterised her entire existence (and hard-won *survival*) as a woman:

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid watching herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.<sup>80</sup>

Berger's analysis, which forms part of a larger set of Lacan-influenced, feminist interrogations of the visual field published in the 1970s (including, perhaps most notably, Laura Mulvey's seminal 1975 text, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' with which I engage in detail in Chapter Four's discussion of *The Driver's Seat*), is incorporated into Elaine Showalter's feminist study of psychiatry, *The Female Malady* (1985). Showalter argues that schizophrenia – which, after 1930, replaced hysteria as the predominant diagnosis ascribed to female patients – includes 'symptoms of passivity, depersonalisation, disembodiment, and fragmentation,' which 'have parallels in the social situation of women,' as articulated by Berger.<sup>81</sup> Analysing the narrative recollections of female asylum patients, Showalter pays particular attention

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<sup>79</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Muriel Spark's Latest Novel: *The Public Image*,' trans. by Christine Irizzary, in McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark*, pp.207-9 (p.208). Originally published in *Le Monde* 7410, 9<sup>th</sup> November 1968.

<sup>80</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), pp.46-7.

<sup>81</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p.213.



to the ‘repeated motif in the schizophrenic women’s sense of themselves as *unoccupied bodies*. Feeling that they have no secure identities, the women look to external appearances for confirmation that they exist. Thus they continually look at their faces in the mirror, but out of desperation rather than narcissism.’<sup>82</sup> For Showalter, ‘the abyss that opens between the schizophrenic’s body and mind [...] can be seen as an exaggeration of women’s “normal” state,’ which she defines in terms of a ‘lack of confidence, dependency on external, often masculine, definitions of the self, split between the body as sexual object and the mind as a subject, and vulnerability to conflicting social messages about femininity.’<sup>83</sup>

Annabel’s status, in the eyes of her husband, as nothing more than an ‘empty [...], beautiful shell’ – or, in the words of Gregson and Cixous respectively, a ‘lustrous surface’<sup>84</sup> or an ‘image [...] without a heart’<sup>85</sup> – might thus be read as an extreme, deranged manifestation of the depersonalisation, disembodiment and self-surveillance that Berger and Showalter each associate with ‘women’s “normal” state.’ Annabel has, after all, lacked ‘a sense of being permanently secured to the world,’ and thus secure in her sense of self, since the point at which ‘her own childhood had passed,’ which precedes her acting career by many years (*PI*, p.35). Given the meticulous commodification of her image by numerous agents, publicists and ‘famous cameras’ within a spectacularised society, and her later desperation to salvage this constructed persona following Frederick’s attempted sabotage, Annabel comes to experience the double bind of female identity more sharply than most, to the extent that, while intent on currying public favour in the panicked aftermath of her husband’s

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p.212, emphasis mine.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p.211; p.212.

<sup>84</sup> Gregson, *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction*, p.105.

<sup>85</sup> Cixous, ‘Muriel Spark’s Latest Novel: *The Public Image*,’ p.209.

suicide, she disappears altogether into a gendered spectacle, constructed for public consumption. Her newly acquired, sun-dappled flat, which once signified her privacy and personal autonomy, as well as her carefully guarded relationship with her child, now becomes the spotlit stage upon which the English Tiger-Lady will perform without pause. Indeed, despite her former ‘fear of display where the baby was concerned,’ Annabel now no longer hesitates to ‘adjus[t] the baby,’ as though he is a jointed doll or puppet to be posed and manipulated before the media glare (*PI*, p.35; p.67).

Were *The Public Image* to have concluded at this juncture, with Annabel choosing to salvage her career by eviscerating her inconvenient inner life from its pristine public ‘shell,’ the novel might better reflect the interpretations offered by Cixous and Gregson, while also supporting the latter’s wider claim for Spark as an author of ‘flat and two-dimensional’ fictions that evoke only ‘the cul-de-sac of caricature.’<sup>86</sup> What both readings fail to acknowledge, however, is the curious instance of *anagnorisis* that arrives in the novel’s final chapter, during a conversation between Annabel and her lawyer, Tom. While negotiating the arrangement of a payment to prevent a further batch of Frederick’s incriminating letters from being shown at his inquest, Tom expounds his theory that babies ““understand more than you might think”” because of their apparently innate ability to ““record noises [which] they sort of remember afterwards,”” to which Annabel replies unhesitatingly that she ““won’t buy the letters”” (*PI*, p.121). Annabel’s unexpected response appears to have been prompted by her sudden recognition (or indeed remembrance) of her child as a conscious being rather than an image-enhancing prop. Making reference to Tom’s

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<sup>86</sup> Gregson, *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction*, p.102; p.107.

hypothesis, she announces her desire “to be free like my baby. I hope he’s recording this noise” (*PI*, p.123). For Annabel, the baby now supplants the various other recording devices employed to propagate the myth of the Tiger-Lady (a persona brought to life after Luigi, on first meeting Annabel, perceived only ‘her *recordable image*, eyes that would change with the screen’s texture, something sheerly given in the face, like a gift that could be exercised’ [*PI*, p.93, emphasis mine])). Only this can account for the protagonist’s impulsive decision to ‘slip away in the heat of the day,’ out of Frederick’s ongoing inquest and decisively out of role, and to head purposefully to the airport (*PI*, p.124). Once there, she and her child will leave Italy to begin a new life:

Annabel bought a third-class ticket, had her bags weighed [...], and now was waiting for the plane. Her flight number had been called. The stewardess came forward to help her with the baby, but she gave the girl her bags instead.

Waiting for the order to board, she felt both free and unfree. [...] [S]he felt as if she was still, curiously, pregnant with the baby, but not pregnant in fact. She was pale as a shell. She did not wear her dark glasses. Nobody recognised her as she stood, having moved the baby to rest on her hip, conscious also of the baby in a sense weightlessly and perpetually within her, as an empty shell contains, by its very structure, the echo and harking image of former and former seas. (*PI*, p.125).

This final image of Annabel, anonymous and alone but for her baby, invites comparisons with the ending of *Doctors of Philosophy*, where Leonora’s awareness of the part she has played before her on- and off-stage audiences prompts her (along with several other characters) to break role, leave the stage, and seek out new possibilities. Unlike in Spark’s play, *The Public Image* presents no absolute distinction between reality and fiction; in abstracting herself from Rome’s media circus, that is, Annabel does not traverse a diegetic boundary and become any more or less ontologically ‘real’ in the process. The effect is much the same, however. As she stands among the

other passengers at the airport, Annabel appears to all intents and purposes to have abandoned her status as a shallow spectacle and taken a defiant first step into a fully rounded reality. Although she chooses not to obscure her ‘newly-televised face’ with her dark glasses, she still goes entirely unrecognised, as if the fiction of the Tiger-Lady has now evaporated just as quickly as it once ‘vapoured so thickly about her’ (*PI*, p.124; p.30). To reflect this, Spark subverts Frederick’s dismissive assessment of the protagonist by endowing his cruel metaphor of the empty shell with redemptive meaning. Annabel’s face, which now appears as ‘pale as a shell’ when seen without ‘the best colour methods of the cinema’ (*PI*, p.16), has been blanched, liberatingly, of its previous associations. Similarly, the echoing interior of Annabel’s once spectacularised shell-like self no longer suggests vacuity, but vital inner life. In this final sentence – criticised in a damning early review for its ‘use of grandiose language [that] is sudden and uncommon’ in comparison with the spare and monotonous preceding prose<sup>87</sup> – *The Public Image* installs within its alienated, image-saturated universe the hopeful prospect of history, intimacy and hidden depths.

This remains a cautiously optimistic ending, however. The ‘echo and harking image of former and former seas,’ I would suggest, imply the return of the protagonist’s long lost ‘sense of being permanently secured to the world’ (*PI*, p.35), brought about not only through her relationship to her child, but by a reestablished connection, perhaps, to a matriarchal lineage of ‘former and former’ mothers.<sup>88</sup> On the other hand, these distant and perhaps sirenic echoes might threaten to lure Annabel

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<sup>87</sup> Anon., ‘Shallowess Everywhere [Review of *The Public Image*],’ *Times Literary Supplement*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1968, p.612.

<sup>88</sup> Indeed, almost no information concerning Annabel’s family and background is provided in the novel, so that, aside from minor details concerning her favourite childhood pastime (writing and posting letters to her grandfather) and her place of birth (Wakefield, in West Yorkshire), the protagonist appears oddly lacking in personal history, and thus less like a human being than a flickering celluloid image.

towards iconography more ancient, grandiose and seductive than the weightless contemporary construction of the 'English Tiger-Lady.' The empty shell, notes Vassiliki Kolocotroni, 'recall[s] the emergence from the sea of Botticelli's Venus,' while Annabel, waiting with Carl to board her flight, 'seems unselfconsciously to have struck a Madonna and child pose.'<sup>89</sup> Who does Annabel think she is now? Her sensation of being 'both free and unfree' could allude at once to the liberating demise of her old role and the dangerous pull of new ones. In a spectacularised contemporary world, Spark appears to warn, the prospect of losing oneself to a public image looms as an ever-present threat.

### **What the Butler Foresaw: *Not to Disturb*'s 'insubstantial bodies'**

By the end of *The Public Image*, Annabel appears to have escaped not only the constraints of her scripted identity, but the trajectory of its inevitable ruin; the 'happy launchings' of public images such as hers, remarks her narrator, 'were inevitably presented with the optimism of Act I, but bearing within them all the potentials of Act III and its doomed revelations, sooner or later' (*PI*, p.24). That 'the sunny glossies of Italy' portray a world populated purely by 'sheer villains' and 'utter innocents,' in which the 'most complicated celebrities have been cast anew in these simple roles' (*PI*, p.23), suggests something of the distorted and eminently vulnerable nature of a public image, which is permanently poised to be shattered by whatever 'doomed revelations' are bound to lie in wait. The notion that a subject's public image, however celebrated or unsullied, necessarily precedes his or her eminently consumable tragic *dénouement* (a downfall which plays out with all the familiarity of

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<sup>89</sup> Vassiliki Kolocotroni, 'Poetic Perception in the Fiction of Muriel Spark,' *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, pp.16-26 (pp.21-2).

a well-thumbed script) lies at the heart of *Not to Disturb*. In this novel – the final, and most detached and dehumanised installment in Spark’s ‘machine made’ trilogy – a team of domestic servants, headed by an enterprising and media-savvy butler named Lister, plot to capitalise on the predicted deaths of their (in)famous masters by arranging the lucrative sale of a salacious ‘inside story’ to the highest bidder. Drawing upon the contemporary, publicity-saturated environments depicted in her two previous novels (*The Public Image* and *The Driver’s Seat*), along with *Doctors of Philosophy*’s twin concern with staged, seemingly artificial existences and the sagacity of household servants, *Not to Disturb* conjures a degraded, thoroughly mediatised consumer society, in which an impending human tragedy is detected with chilly indifference and then expertly exploited.

My archival research has determined that *Not to Disturb* was inspired by the circumstances surrounding – and the subsequent, highly sensationalised tabloid coverage of – a then recent murder-suicide committed by an Italian nobleman upon his wife and the man she loved. According to one of several reports from newspapers and ‘sunny glossies’ (*PI*, p.23) preserved among Spark’s notebooks and manuscripts, the *crime passionel* occurred after Anna Fallarino, having long been coerced into performing in the orgies, pornographic films and sexual role-play scenarios devised by her abusive and domineering husband, the Marquis Camillo Casati Stampa, ‘fell in love with one of the sex-game partners’ procured for *his* voyeuristic gratification.<sup>90</sup> It was by breaking from the role enforced upon her and acting with ‘genuine love’ for another person, the report implies, that Anna had made herself conspicuous,

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<sup>90</sup> Anon., ‘Secret Diary Tells of Sex Games,’ *Rome Daily American*, 4<sup>th</sup> September 1970, p.47, in Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.11344: Papers and Correspondence 1986-95, National Library of Scotland. It should be noted that Spark’s notes and research for *Not to Disturb*, along with many other items from this accession, lies far outside the 1986-95 bracket.

provoking the rage of her ‘insanely jealous’ husband, who proceeded to shoot both her and her partner before turning the gun – ‘a hunting rifle’ – on himself.<sup>91</sup> Spark had underlined the choice of murder weapon, along with the report’s concluding sentences:

After a time the couple’s sex games became common knowledge, destroying their carefully built up image as happily married and oh-so respectable members of Rome’s high society. Their wild sex life was even known to staff in a city centre boutique where she was a free-spending customer.<sup>92</sup>

Confined to the numerous narrow roles carved out for her, Anna had long existed beneath a palimpsest of public images – defined at first by her perceived marital contentment, respectability, and ‘free-spending’ wealth, and later by the ‘wild’ sexual identity dictated by her husband. For Spark, Anna’s suffering would likely have represented an extreme, real-life example of the aforementioned ‘dangerous situation[s]’ that had formed the thematic focus of her previous fictions; indeed, the tarnishing of the female victim’s ‘carefully built up image,’ at the hands of her controlling husband, through her alleged association with orgies bears an immediate, uncanny resemblance to the ordeal of Annabel Christopher, which Spark had devised four years earlier.<sup>93</sup> Anna’s abuse did not end with her violent murder, however. In this uniquely modern scandal, excerpts from her private letters and journals – items seized by members of her staff and sold swiftly to the press – were published in the form of tawdry, mass-produced mock diaries, their pages interspersed with reprints of the pornographic photographs taken by her husband. In a mediatised modern society, Anna’s seemingly inevitable demise became a profitable source of mass

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Spark’s interest in Anna Fallarino’s murder at the hands of her ‘insanely jealous’ husband (who proceeded to shoot himself) might also be attributed to the resemblance it bore to the murder of her friend, Nita McEwan, by her domineering husband (as detailed in the previous chapter).

entertainment.

That Anna, even in death, could not escape the role in which she had been cast evidently held a certain fascination for Spark, who kept two such diaries in a folder of notes and research material for her novel.<sup>94</sup> Within one of these books, she included a brief handwritten note: ‘Servants etc. watching to find a habit pattern in order to exploit it; as animal hunters, mothers, robbers and military tacticians do.’<sup>95</sup> This expert familiarity with the ‘habit pattern[s]’ of others points not to divine or supernatural omniscience, but rather the epistemological advantage that might be gained from the careful, studied scrutiny of human or animal behaviour. Indeed, each of the examples that Spark includes alongside the servant can be identified in her fiction: *The Driver’s Seat* includes a detailed section of dialogue regarding tactics for ‘big game’ hunting, based on knowledge the prey’s typical hunting habits (*DS*, p.88),<sup>96</sup> Freddy Hamilton in *The Mandelbaum Gate* learns that his mother has artfully controlled the lives of others through a ‘long-sustained tyranny’ involving ‘long-condoned lies’ (*MG*, p.60); *Memento Mori*’s Dame Lettie Colston is beaten to death by a burglar who targets her home after overhearing gossip concerning her self-imposed isolation; the spectral Paul and Elsa Hazlett in *The Hothouse by the East River*, having worked in ‘black propaganda and psychological warfare’ while alive during the Second World War, now deceive, spy on, and terrorise one another in the afterlife (*HER*, p.50). In a 1971 BBC television interview conducted by her

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<sup>94</sup> Spark’s notes contain two of these disturbing, pornographic mock-diaries: *Il Diario Della Marchesa Anna Fallarino Casati* and *The Splendours and Miseries of Marquis Casati: The Diary of an Eccentric*. The first of these is presented from the perspective of Anna Fallarino, and the second from that of her husband. See Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.11344.

<sup>95</sup> Muriel Spark, Loose handwritten note [c.1970], in *Il Diario Della Marchesa Anna Fallarino Casati*, Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.11344.

<sup>96</sup> “‘You’ve got to wait for the drag,’” remarks Bill to Lise, regarding the most effective way to hunt lions and leopards. “‘They call it the drag, you see. It kills its prey and drags it into the bush then you follow the drag and when you know where it’s left its prey you’re all right. The poor bloody beast comes out the next day to eat its prey, they like it high. And you only have a few seconds’” (*DS*, p.88).



acquaintance, the playwright W. Gordon Smith, Spark confirmed that a *human* propensity to exploit the habits of others was central to *Not to Disturb*'s premise:

I wanted to make a novel with a character who somehow or other knew what was going to happen in the future, not through any supernatural means but just because it was inevitable that people should act as they do, and that he should exploit it. And that was the butler, Lister, that character, who induced all the other servants to completely believe him.<sup>97</sup>

Transferring the elements of the Casati scandal to contemporary Switzerland, *Not to Disturb* takes place during a single night at the Château Klopstock, where the resident Baron and Baroness, Cecil and Kathy, have retreated to their library along with Kathy's lover, Victor, having instructed their staff that they are not to be disturbed under any circumstance. Lister's intimate knowledge of the private lives and public images of his masters leads him to predict correctly that none of the trio will remain alive by dawn. The effect is that the Klopstocks and their guest, while still alive, are thought of as though they are already dead: "They haunt the house," Lister remarks sourly as he impatiently awaits the morning, "like insubstantial bodies" (*ND*, p.23). The servants' certainty of this outcome produces a disorienting temporal effect; with the events of the following day already apparently set in place, the characters' conception of time becomes oddly flattened and spatialised, so that past, present and future are treated as ontologically equivalent – as if already set out in the various Acts of a prewritten script. Or, to put it in Lister's terms, "what's done is about to be done and the future has come to pass" (*ND*, p.9). At various intervals throughout the evening, Lister advises his colleagues not to "split hairs [...] between the past, present and future tenses," nor to "strain after vulgar chronology," because "to all intents and purposes [the Klopstocks] are already dead although as a matter of

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<sup>97</sup> 'Muriel Spark [television interview with W. Gordon Smith]', *Scope* (BBC, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1971).

banal fact, the night's business has yet to accomplish itself" (ND, p.6; p.43; p.12). An additional, comically grotesque exchange between Lister and his colleague, Eleanor, concerning their masters' imminent, inevitable deaths, and the pressing need to remain discreet about their plans, was drafted by Spark:

"He was..."

"Be careful, he'll hear you."

"He is—" she says in a loud voice, "a very fine person."

"A pity he got that dentist's leer from his new dental bridge. Not that it matters now."

"They always compose the features at the mortuary, that is before rigor mortis sets in, as in this case. His dentures don't show. He lay peaceful as—"

"Don't let him hear you. Was that the car downstairs?"<sup>98</sup>

While Lister exhibits some of the hallmarks of authorial omniscience (he possesses a detailed knowledge of the future, for example, as well as an awareness of the behaviour and precise whereabouts of each the other characters), he has acquired this understanding *without* the use of what Spark described to W. Gordon Smith as 'supernatural means.'<sup>99</sup> He is instead an exceptionally attentive – and deeply exploitative – version of the servant as described by Mikhail Bakhtin. 'Servants,' Bakhtin asserts, are 'the most privileged witnesses to private life' because, as they are 'called upon to participate in all intimate aspects of personal life,' they possess a 'distinctive, embodied point of view on the world of private life without which a

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<sup>98</sup> Muriel Spark, Loose draft fragment in 'Not to Disturb, handwritten and typed notes and chapter outlines, character lists and draft fragments, 197 pieces [unpaginated, c.1970],' Muriel Spark Papers, Box 53, Folder 5, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

<sup>99</sup> My interpretation of Lister as an expert manipulator of the 'habit pattern[s]' of other human beings is therefore markedly different to the divine and supernatural ones proposed in numerous readings of the novel. For Robert Hosmer, for example, Lister is *Not to Disturb's* omniscient 'archmagician,' a 'clever and consummate [...] *auteur*' who encourages the novel's 'demonic cast into *following his script*': 'Muriel Spark,' in Gerard Carruthers and Liam McIlvaney, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.203-16 (p.208, emphasis mine). For similar readings, see, *inter alia*, Joseph Hynes, *The Art of the Real: Muriel Spark's Novels* (London: Associated University Presses), pp.155-76.

literature treating private life could not manage.’<sup>100</sup> But unlike similarly ‘privileged witnesses’ such as Mrs S., or the unnamed housekeeper in ‘A Dangerous Situation on the Stairs,’ Lister does far more than remark sagely from the sidelines. Having attuned himself closely to a ‘habit pattern’ that, he realises, will inevitably and imminently lead to a profitable murder-suicide, he schedules the evening with precision timekeeping befitting of the novel’s Swiss setting – a fact underscored, with macabre comedy, when he times the preparation of the evening meal around the expected deaths: ““fifteen more minutes for the casserole. [...] We sit down at seven if we’re lucky and they don’t decide to dine before they die”” (*ND*, p.14). Elsewhere, Lister and his colleagues are seen to converge unsettlingly with the technological apparatus at their disposal (‘Lister raises a finger and the discs of the [tape-recorder] begin to spin. [...] Lister raises a finger and the machine stops’ [*ND*, p.46]), which often appear more alive than their human operators (the house telephone ‘wheezes’ and ‘hisses [...] through its wind-pipe,’ for example, while the tape-recorder ‘emits [...] long, dramatic sighs’ even before replaying a recorded voice [*ND*, p.14; p.43]). Lister’s boastful remark concerning his colleagues’ extraordinary proficiency with these devices, ““we’re all computerised these days,”” thus gestures towards a cold, eerily inhuman present, wherein what he calls ““the human touch”” has been subsumed by a detached, technological functionality (*ND*, p.50). ‘One of the ironies of the novel,’ Robert Hosmer remarks astutely, ‘lies in the servants’ condition: they are as dead as the Baron and his companions.’<sup>101</sup>

Exhibiting morbid humour, an absurdist (or indeed disdainful) treatment of human vitality and mortality, and frequent, casual allusions to a grim yet

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<sup>100</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp.124-5.

<sup>101</sup> Hosmer, ‘Muriel Spark,’ p.208.

inconsequential future that lies inevitably in wait, *Not to Disturb* could well appear as a prime example of the ‘calculated contempt’ that Spark, ‘from her Catholic perspective,’ supposedly reserves for ‘human beings as a species.’<sup>102</sup> Early reviews of the novel supported such a reading, and claimed to find Spark’s increasing aloofness towards the suffering of her characters to be disquieting. Any ‘residual warmth’ that *The Public Image* or *The Driver’s Seat* might have retained from Spark’s preceding novels, complained Claire Tomalin, is entirely absent from *Not to Disturb*’s ‘vision of hell, where all [characters] are pimps, bawds, madmen or corpses, those who batten and those who traffic in flesh living or dead.’ The mortal world that Spark conjures is thus as an unnervingly ‘inhuman’ one, full of ‘monsters dancing with monsters in the borders of a bestiary; grotesque and nasty, but remote.’<sup>103</sup> Spark, remarked Robert Nye in a similarly unflattering review, ‘has seemed for some books now to be engaged in a very peculiar game of her own devising. [...] Brief, brittle, [and] nasty in an arch sort of way, each new text appears almost consciously devised to dismay.’ Referring to the acerbic and aptly-nicknamed Gloria Deploresyeux (or Deplores You, to the ears), a character from Spark’s 1958 short story, ‘Come Along, Marjorie,’ Nye asserts that ‘when the ghostly ghastly Gloria appears as a character [...] in Mrs Spark’s fiction, the outcome is often very good. But when she stays outside the creation and assumes the role of *creator* it is horrid.’ This, he argues, makes *Not to Disturb* an unpalatable novel that could best be described as ‘life-deploring,’ in that its narrative tone and management of plot and character appear to have become inflected (or indeed *infected*) by a growing authorial indifference to human life.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Gregson, *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction*, p.102.

<sup>103</sup> Claire Tomalin, ‘The Servants’ Revenge [Review of *Not to Disturb*],’ *The Observer*, 14<sup>th</sup> November 1971, p.33.

<sup>104</sup> Robert Nye, ‘Gloria Deplores You Strikes Again [Review of *Not to Disturb*],’ *The Guardian*, 11<sup>th</sup> November 1971, p.9, emphasis in original.

Tomalin and Nye were of course correct to detect something of a ‘life-deploring’ chill from the pages of *Not to Disturb*, but to associate this with Spark’s apparently contemptuous Catholicism, as Gregson and Bradbury are quick to do, is to overlook how the novel relates specifically to a postmodern, late capitalist and media-saturated consumer society, famously characterised in Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) by ‘the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense,’ which is expressed ‘in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum.’<sup>105</sup> Jameson, returning to Debord’s ‘remarkable formulation’ of a spectacularised society in which all relationships are mediated by visual signifiers without a concrete referent,<sup>106</sup> describes this ‘depthlessness’ as a certain ‘waning of affect,’ linked to ‘the liberation [...] from the older anomie of the centered subject [which] may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling, *since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling.*’<sup>107</sup> This ‘waning of affect’ joins a host of other postmodern negations, including ‘the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history,’ and ‘a radical eclipse of Nature itself.’<sup>108</sup> The result is a deathly flattening of human experience, so that previous – and precapitalist – oppositions between ‘essence and appearance,’ ‘latent and manifest,’ ‘authenticity and inauthenticity’ and ‘signifier and signified’ are each ‘replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces.’<sup>109</sup> Modernist affect is thus displaced by a postmodern sheen, which signals ‘the end [...] of the unique and the personal’ and the arrival of ‘a whole new type of emotional ground tone’ that is

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<sup>105</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), p.9; p.6.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p.235. See also p.18, p.125, p.276 and p.415 for direct engagements with the work of Debord.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15, emphasis mine.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21; p.34.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

distinguished by apathy, superficiality and ‘schizophrenia.’<sup>110</sup> The ‘joyful intensities’ of this schizophrenic ‘ground tone,’ Jameson believes, constitute an empty ‘pastiche’ of emotional experience, which contrasts sharply with the more radical practice of ‘parody’:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter [...]. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs.<sup>111</sup>

To articulate a sense of the distinctive ‘depthlessness’ that comes to define the postmodern era, Jameson juxtaposes descriptions of two emblematic artworks:

Vincent Van Gogh’s painting, *A Pair of Boots* (1887), and Andy Warhol’s silkscreen reproduction, *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980). Whereas the battered, dirt-encrusted boots depicted in the former evince something of the life, hardship and history of the peasant to whom they presumably belonged,<sup>112</sup> Jameson argues, the one-dimensional assemblage of free-floating, glittering high-heeled shoes displayed in the latter are seemingly abstracted from any social context, and thus communicate only ‘a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms.’<sup>113</sup> Simon Malpas notes the following of the contrasting artworks’ significance to Jameson’s theorisation of the postmodern:

[W]hat Jameson is [...] identify[ing] is the transformation of experience in

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p.15; p.29. Here, Jameson references a Lacanian model of schizophrenia to discuss ‘a breakdown in the signifying chain’ as it pertains to the postmodern consciousness (p.29).

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p.17.

<sup>112</sup> In addition to the example of Van Gogh’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*, Jameson discusses Edvard Munch’s painting, *The Scream* (1893), as ‘a canonical expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation, a virtually programmatic emblem of what used to be called the age of anxiety.’ The image, Jameson argues, is a perfect expression of modernist depth, in that it depicts a subject experiencing an intense emotion, which ‘is then projected out and externalised, as gesture or cry, as desperate communication and the outward dramatisation of inward feeling’ (Ibid., pp.11-12).

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p.9.

postmodernity. The objects around us that we might once have experienced in terms of their use values are commodified to such an extent that exchange value, in fact the infinite exchangeability of all commodities, has come to account for the entirety of our experience of the world. Warhol's shoes are *infinitely reproducible, interchangeable, superficial, and contextless, just one commodity from a potentially endless collection in which use value has become entirely irrelevant.*<sup>114</sup>

What effect might such a 'contextless,' simulacral culture of commodities and commodification, in which, Jameson asserts, the world 'comes before the subject with heightened intensity [...] here described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity,' have on the form and content of the fiction produced within it?<sup>115</sup> As Gregson suggests, much postmodern fiction has responded to a culture 'so influenced by the technological media that any sense of the real is lost' by 'draw[ing] attention away from the subjective interior, and [...] flatten[ing] characters in a process of ontological reduction in which they are rendered static and mechanical.'<sup>116</sup> Postmodern affectlessness and commodification, Gregson later concludes, 'is precisely what leads to the prevalence of caricature' in much contemporary fiction, 'in which characters are portrayed by mere surfaces.'<sup>117</sup>

With its glassy-eyed perspective on death and violence, and its cast of flattened, affectless caricatures and non-entities, whose bodies and minds are shown to merge seamlessly with the technologies of communication and mass-reproduction that they have to hand, *Not to Disturb* sits comfortably alongside other 'depthless' postmodern fictions, including J. G. Ballard's techno-dystopian *Crash* (1973) and Alain Robbe-Grillet's sinisterly denatured erotic fantasy, *Project for a Revolution in*

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<sup>114</sup> Simon Malpas, *The Postmodern* (London; New York: Routledge), p.119, emphasis mine.

<sup>115</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp.27-8.

<sup>116</sup> Gregson, *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction*, p.3.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p.162.

*New York* (1970). The rigorously desubjectified Baroness Klopstock, whose “insubstantial bod[y]” is reduced to a sexualised surface by her husband, and then commodified relentlessly by her employees, appears as both emblem and victim of the postmodern era that Jameson describes. Indeed, it is the Baroness’s development of something resembling genuine affection for her prearranged lover, Victor, that marks her out as deviant and doomed to those around her. “The Baroness hasn’t been playing the game,” remarks Theo, the Klopstocks’ chauffeur. “She used to keep her hair frosted or blond-streaked,” replies his wife, Clara: “She shouldn’t have let go her shape. Why did she suddenly start to go natural? She must have started to be sincere with someone” (*ND*, p.35). References to “frosted” hair and a carefully preserved “shape” attest to the importance placed upon a fixed and flattened identity from which the self must not dare deviate. As with Anna Fallarino, Baroness Klopstock’s attempts to break from her assigned role (to transition, that is, from object to subject, from depthless commodity to rounded humanity) are met with both fatal physical violence and the similarly brutal reinscription of her enforced identity within narratives dictated by others. That Spark does not narrate the murder of Baroness Klopstock but only the ensuing media frenzy is itself meaningful; premeditated by her husband and feverishly anticipated by the rest of the household, her death is rendered abstract and devoid of human significance, serving only as a source of financial gain, media content, and the necessary restoration of the novel’s elaborately scripted order. With an ending that invokes and yet refuses tragic catharsis, the novel rests, finally, upon the surface image of a policeman at the crime scene, nearing the end of his shift and ‘waiting’ in vain ‘for the relief man to come’ (*ND*, p.96).<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Spark’s interest in incorporating references to tragic catharsis (or the chilling lack thereof) within her most sinister plots can be traced to the novel which preceded *Not to Disturb, The Driver’s Seat*, as discussed in the final section of the following chapter.



Despite its unwavering mood of crazed unreality and its numerous outrageous and eccentric set pieces (including, with more than a hint of dark comedy and Gothic pastiche, a chaotic sham wedding between a pregnant chambermaid and a madman clanking his chains in the attic, while a deadly thunderstorm rages outside), what lies at the heart of *Not to Disturb* is the insidious degradation of the private life and public image of Baroness Klopstock, which was set in motion long before the point at which the novel begins. Indeed, the obvious artificiality of the storyworld reads as a deeply unnerving extension of the dangerous fiction first cultivated by the Baron, within which the Baroness finds herself ensnared. Like the Marquis Casati Stampa, Baron Klopstock comes to be associated chiefly with his reputation as a lascivious and domineering amateur pornographer: he is “obsessed with sex” according to Eleanor, and “a pornophile” in the words of Lister (*ND*, p.13; p.76). ‘There is the suggestion,’ Peter Kemp infers from the servants’ gossip, ‘that [the Baron’s] fantasies and simulations [...] have taken on a merciless momentum of their own,’ so that ‘the fictional stereotypes [the Klopstocks] have perversely toyed with close in vengefully around them.’<sup>119</sup> This is a convincing interpretation, but one which tells only half of the story. As with the salacious commodification of Anna Fallarino’s murder as a scandalous (and highly saleable) tragedy by her domestic staff, the circumstances surrounding the anticipated death of Baroness Klopstock are further embellished by Lister and his cohorts until any trace of the ‘real’ woman is obscured entirely.<sup>120</sup> By offering snatches of the servants’ backstairs whispers, the novel – like *The Public Image* before it – expresses something of the inextricable connection between a late capitalist, mediatised culture of simulated and commodified identities, and a

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<sup>119</sup> Peter Kemp, *Muriel Spark* (London: Elek, 1974), p.135.

<sup>120</sup> Accordingly, Baroness Klopstock appears only fleetingly in the novel, when she arrives at the château in her Coupé, where she is due to meet her husband and her lover in the library.

scopophilic, sexually imbalanced one of the devouring male gaze.

It is in this respect that *Not to Disturb* ought to be read as a stranger and far more sinister counterpart to *Doctors of Philosophy*, which is heavily inflected by a depthless postmodern present and the voracious commodification of life, sex and death. The metatheatrical aspects of Spark's stage play, I earlier argued, come to articulate the rigid limitations placed upon the identity and free will of Leonora while she languishes in the inhibiting company of the Delfonts, with dialogue that is often presented self-reflexively as lines from a prewritten script, and scenery that is designed to appear as deliberately artificial and constrictive. The form and content of *Not to Disturb* achieves something similar. The novel is replete, as Willy Maley notes, 'with metaphors of staging, screening, casting, corpsing, directing, producing, spinning, and setting.'<sup>121</sup> In their efforts to exploit the anticipated deaths of their masters, the servants pose for staged photographs, record false testimonials before the murders have even taken place, and arrange to sell the rights to a future film adaptation of the night's events. As the servants go about their business, the once imposing Château Klopstock comes to resemble a cobbled-together stage set; with something of the wall-wobbling shock effected by Mrs S., Eleanor gleefully dislodges the scenery by upending the building's parquet flooring (repurposed, perhaps, from Annabel Christopher's stage-like flat, or the Delfonts' disintegrating living room) with her nail file. Similarly, the plot is organised neatly into five chapters or 'acts,' so that its overall structure complies with Gustav Freytag's well-known model of the five stages of the unified dramatic plot.<sup>122</sup> The effect is rhetorical, in that it suggests that

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<sup>121</sup> Willy Maley, 'Not to Deconstruct? Righting and Deference in *Not to Disturb*,' in McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark*, pp.170-88 (p.172).

<sup>122</sup> See Gustav Freytag, *Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, trans. Elias J. MacEwan (New York: Griggs, 1895), pp.114-40.

the servants' spatialised sense of chronology and expert familiarity with their masters' fixed public images and well-worn 'habit pattern' has enabled them to conceptualise and commodify the evening ahead as a predetermined 'script,' which Lister has learned by heart. The novel is punctuated, as Peter Kemp observes, by the butler's 'resounding curtain-lines,' including his ominous, recurrent call to the others: "'Let's proceed'" (ND, p.44).<sup>123</sup> By encountering the novel as a depthless drama, the reader comes to share the servants' viewpoint, perceiving the assorted victims and villains as similarly "'insubstantial'" – 'little more than ciphers,' or 'refugees from Cluedo,' as Maley puts it.<sup>124</sup>

For Spark, however, the overt theatricality or *textuality* of *Not to Disturb's* flattened and denatured storyworld does not signify a complete absence of realism *per se*, but serves instead as an accurate (if satirically heightened) reflection of real people whose identities and interactions are distorted severely in a time of rampant consumerism and celebrity-obsessed culture. In the unpublished transcript of her 1970 interview with Ian Gillham (conducted while she was still at work on *Not to Disturb*, and edited for publication in *The Listener*), Spark spoke of feeling 'acutely aware,' while living in Rome, 'of the power of the sensationalist press in Italy.' Owing to the pervasive influence of 'the glossies,' she felt, daily life in the city had come to assume 'very dramatic qualities,' having become permeated with 'all sorts of emotions, jealousy, anger, everything, but in a really Renaissance full-blooded way.'<sup>125</sup> Spark's comment likely accounts for the intentionally heavy-handed reference to English Renaissance drama with which the novel begins: "'Their life,'" says Lister, "a general

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<sup>123</sup> Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, p.132.

<sup>124</sup> Maley, 'Not to Deconstruct?', p.174.

<sup>125</sup> Ian Gillham, Unedited transcript of 'Keeping it Short: Muriel Spark Talks about Her Books to Ian Gillham,' in Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10989/195: Biographical Notes and Interviews, 1953-1970 (published in abridged form in *The Listener*, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1970, pp.411-3), emphasis mine.

mist of error. Their death, a hideous storm of terror. – I quote from *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster, an English dramatist of old”” (ND, p.1). The impression produced is of a deliberate dramatic disfigurement, on the part of the servants (and the wider culture that they inhabit), of an already lurid scenario, from which the febrile fictionality of the storyworld can be seen to have emerged. As the novel progresses, dialogue among the servants becomes increasingly overburdened by further references to a widening range of novels, poetry and plays (including Andrew Marvell’s *To His Coy Mistress* [1681] and D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* [1928]), which occur so frequently that any evocative or referential power that they might have once possessed is deliberately dulled. As Peter Kemp observes of these recurrent allusions, ‘literary genres, classically employed to arouse pity and fear, or create terror, are here disordered to provoke contempt’ from readers and characters alike.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, the impression produced is not that the imminent deaths of the Klopstocks constitute a tragedy comparable with those encountered in English Renaissance drama, for example, but that, from the perspective of the servants, they might at least be marketed as such. In this sense, *Not to Disturb*’s literary references are every bit as ‘infinitely reproducible, interchangeable, superficial, and contextless’ as any other feature of its depthless postmodern storyworld,<sup>127</sup> including the portraits that adorn the walls of the Château Klopstock (mere photocopies of distant originals) to the building itself (bathetically revealed to be an eleven-year-old construction, comprised of clumsily curated antiquities).<sup>128</sup> Perhaps to underscore the vacuity of the servants’ bookish gossip, the only room to which they and the narrator lack access in the

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<sup>126</sup> Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, p.138.

<sup>127</sup> Malpas, *The Postmodern*, p.119.

<sup>128</sup> This jumble of contextless features includes ‘an Adam mantelpiece,’ ‘Regency wrought-iron banisters,’ exceedingly tiny reproductions of paintings by Claude Monet and Francisco Goya, and a strange assemblage of ‘ornamental keys, enamelled snuff-boxes and bright coins’ (NTD, p.45).

château is the library, where the Klopstocks and Victor are sequestered. ““The books,”” remarks Lister of the undisturbed space, ““are silent”” (ND, p.44).

If, in *Doctors of Philosophy*, what I earlier termed ‘Sparkian metalepsis’ works to dismantle the Delfonts’ elaborate and oppressive fiction from the inside out, in *Not to Disturb* it produces the opposite effect, by foregrounding both the artificiality and extreme insularity of its diegetic world, and thus emphasising the hopelessly irreversible entrapment of the Baroness within the plots of others, and in the role in which she has been cast. In one memorable sequence, which arrives towards the end of the novel, the night’s proceedings appear to be threatened by the unexpected arrival of two visitors, Anne and Alex, who demand entry to the Klopstocks’ home in the hope of saving the lives of Kathy and Victor. Their attempted disturbance is thwarted, however, by an extraordinary *deus ex machina*:

Meanwhile the lightning, which strikes the clump of elms so that the two friends huddled there are killed instantly without pain, zig-zags across the lawns, illuminating the lilypond and the sunken rose garden like a self-stricken flashphotographer, and like a zipfastener ripped from its garment by a sexual maniac, [...] skim[s] the rooftops of the house, leaving intact, however, the well-insulated telephone wires which Lister [...] has rather feared might break down. (ND, pp.86-7)

By summarily dispatching the pair of disturbers in a subordinate clause, the metaleptic, precision-engineered lightning bolt keeps the progress of the *crime passionel* firmly on course, while ensuring that the closed-off ‘set’ of the Château Klopstock remains as conveniently ‘well-insulated’ as its telephone wires. This could be Spark at her most cruel and flagrantly tyrannical, flexing her omnipotent muscles by demonstrating her effortless ability to remove any wrinkle from the smooth running of her expertly organised plot. The peculiar metaphors of the violent ‘sexual

maniac’ and the ‘self-stricken flashphotographer’ suggest something rather different, however. Taken together, these images speak to the respective forces at play in cultivating *Not to Disturb*’s oppressive unreality (the abuses of the ““pornophile”” Baron, and the publicity-minded motivations of Lister and company), which have coalesced to brew what Lister describes via John Webster as a perfect ““storm of terror””. The sequence’s heavily underscored ‘compact definitiveness’ and stark ‘refusal of open-endedness,’ which Gregson identifies as the defining feature of Spark’s distinctly ‘unpostmodern’ oeuvre,<sup>129</sup> gestures in fact to the postmodern death of affect; if Lister and his coterie of media-savvy and tech-obsessed vampires are to be understood as the collective embodiment of an affectless, posthuman future, then the lightning’s metaleptic intrusion presents inescapable, inconsequential annihilation as the only possible outcome.

In a 2004 interview broadcast on BBC Radio Four’s *Front Row*, Spark recalled *Not to Disturb* rather ambiguously as her ‘complete break-down and build-up book.’<sup>130</sup> While her comment might be interpreted most readily in terms of Lister et al’s attempts to reconstruct and repurpose the lives and deaths of their masters as a lucrative commodity, it serves as an equally fitting description of the novel itself – a work which, as my research has shown, is built from the ruins of real tragedy, and which employs deliberate artifice and metafictional pyrotechnics in order to reflect something of the heightened, unreal nature of its source material. Intriguingly, the author’s archival material reveals that her elaborate fictionalisation of the Casati Stampa scandal was intended to extend far beyond a single novel; even while writing *Not to Disturb*, Spark was actively considering its suitability for both stage and

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<sup>129</sup> Gregson, *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction*, p.105.

<sup>130</sup> *Front Row* [Interview with Mark Lawson], BBC Radio Four, 26<sup>th</sup> February 2004 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00d3wk6>> (accessed 8<sup>th</sup> January 2016).

screen.<sup>131</sup> At Spark's request, the playwrights W. Gordon Smith, Brian de Breffny and Christopher Holme (all personal acquaintances of the author) each contributed scripts for a proposed theatrical adaptation. Adhering closely to the content of an earlier draft of the novel, the scripts pay close attention to the servants' calculated anticipation of the precise moment of their masters' deaths, and thus bear a remarkable similarity to one another – most strikingly in their recommendations for the set design. Smith specifies that a 'moon-faced servants' wall clock,' designed like 'something Warhol,' is to appear prominently on stage throughout the performance,<sup>132</sup> while de Breffny includes a 'large brightly coloured moon-faced electric television clock with colossal hands and figures' as part of his proposed stage set.<sup>133</sup> Holme's script stipulates that a series of similarly large clocks in the servants' quarters are to bear the 'cheerful and modern' design influences of 'pop art and Warhol and [David] Hockney,' while those in the main part of the château are to appear 'old, grand and gloomy' in order to suggest a contrast between 'the place of life and the place of death.'<sup>134</sup>

While there is no evidence to suggest that any of these adaptations came to inform the content of *Not to Disturb* as Spark readied her novel for publication, it is fascinating, nevertheless, that each of the dramatic 'treatments' solicited by the author

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<sup>131</sup> I proceed, in the present paragraph, to discuss the proposed theatrical adaptation of *Not to Disturb*. It should be noted, however, that Spark also had a cinematic adaptation in mind while still in the process of conceptualising and writing the novel. 'Do you remember when we met in Rome and I told you I was writing a book with the principal character specially for you?', she enquired of the actor, Alec Guinness, in 1972 (Letter from Muriel Spark to Alec Guinness, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1972, from Lungotevere Raffaello Sanzio 9, Rome. Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.11344). 'Guinness,' Spark confirmed in a letter to W. Gordon Smith, 'is the obvious Lister because I created the character specially for him' (Letter from Muriel Spark to W. Gordon Smith, 31<sup>st</sup> May 1972, from Lungotevere Raffaello Sanzio 9, etc. Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.11344). Unfortunately for Spark, Guinness was not interested. After receiving a copy of *Not to Disturb*, he wrote back to decline a starring role in the proposed film.

<sup>132</sup> W. Gordon Smith, '*Not to Disturb* [unpublished dramatic adaptation, June 1971, 134 pages],' p.2, in Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.11344.

<sup>133</sup> Brian de Breffny, '*Not to Disturb* [unpublished dramatic adaptation, July 1971, 118 pages],' p.1, in Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.11344.

<sup>134</sup> Christopher Holme, '*Not to Disturb* [unpublished dramatic adaptation, June 1971, 168 pages],' p.2, in Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.11344.

(and those submitted by Smith and Holme, in particular) should choose to depict the servants' activities and environment by way of direct references to the vibrant sheen of pop art. Associated as it is with the commodification of *already commodified* images (including those prevalent in mass culture, from pre-existing photographs of film stars to consumer goods as banal as tinned soup) via technologies of endless reproduction, the artistic movement serves as an ideal representation of the collective mindset of Lister and his colleagues. From what Holme calls their 'place of life,' the servants circle the unfolding tragedy like vultures, armed with the tools and imagination necessary to profit from the Klopstocks' already diminished and degraded public images by transforming them into further, increasingly distorted, reproductions. 'Warhol's human subjects [...] like Marilyn Monroe,' notes Jameson, were 'themselves commodified and transformed into their own images' long before they fell under the artist's gaze.<sup>135</sup> Like predatory pop artists, Lister and company seize upon lives that appear to have morphed already into their crude 'public figuration[s]' (*PI*, p.35), and which have thus become, to return to Jameson's description of the postmodernist significance of *Diamond Dust Shoes*, 'shorn of their earlier life world' and consequently ripe for repurposing.<sup>136</sup> "They have placed themselves, unfortunately, within the realm of predestination" (*ND*, p.37), remarks the butler of his masters, his words referring less to Calvinist theology than to the prison of a profitable public image.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.11. Warhol's famous silkscreen portraits of the likes of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley were made from pre-existing photographs taken from newspapers and magazines.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8

<sup>137</sup> There is an implicit hypocrisy in Spark's attempts to profit *herself* from the Casati Stampa tragedy by commissioning scripts and offering film roles to actors such as Guinness. Her actions, in this respect, resemble the murky operations of Lister and his cohorts. Had the theatrical and cinematic adaptations of *Not to Disturb* come to fruition, the novel's satirical attack on such practices may have been undermined entirely.



### **Conclusion: Private Lives, ‘public figuration[s]’ and the Myth of Spark**

Rather like the policemen who attend the final scene of *Not to Disturb* to count the bodies and apportion the blame, Spark’s critics have tended to survey the violence, misogyny, death and dehumanisation compressed into her characteristically concise narratives and treat this as incriminating evidence of authorial cruelty. For critics including Gregson, Bradbury, Tomalin and Nye, *Not to Disturb* may well reflect Spark at the height (or rather the most decadent depths) of her creative powers, self-consciously staging a murder that appears inevitable to everyone involved in the story except for its two oblivious victims, Kathy and Victor. What the author achieves in this novel is something much more inventive, however. Indeed, what might appear to be flaws or limitations in Spark’s management of plot, characterisation and narrative perspective announce themselves instead as radical aesthetic and postmodern strategies. Instead of paring her fingernails above a puppet show, Spark depicts the insidious erosion of a character’s sense of self by those who surround her, as observed in the *real* abuse of Anna Fallarino. Examples such as Anna’s reveal how fiction can seep into and distort scenarios which once appeared natural – a theme explored at length, albeit with far greater levity, via the metaleptic/metatheatrical techniques utilised throughout *Doctors of Philosophy*.

Whereas *Doctors of Philosophy*’s stifling scenes from a marriage ought to be read, as I have argued, as the absurdist, experimental extension of concerns expressed throughout Spark’s early fiction (in novels and short stories including ‘Bang-Bang You’re Dead,’ *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and the unpublished ‘A Dangerous Situation on the Stairs’), *Not to Disturb* can be seen to take its author’s later interest in the hyperreal celebrity culture that beamed back at her from the pages of ‘the glossies

and the newspapers and film mags' to a similarly delirious extreme.<sup>138</sup> In the “modern society” that is depicted in this novel, Lister remarks astutely, “the popular glossy magazines have replaced the servants’ hall. Our position of privilege is unparalleled in history. The career of domestic service is the thing of the future” (*ND*, p.83). Lister’s comment, which doubles as a neat summation of Spark’s gradual shift in focus from private lives to heavily mediatised public images during the period spanning the late 1950s and the early 1970s, speaks of a new, affectless postmodern age dominated by simulacra, in which ‘privileged witnesses’ like himself might enjoy a uniquely powerful position.<sup>139</sup> This is a superficial revolution in more than one sense; as Patricia Waugh observes, ‘the upper-class engines of lust and landed inheritance [are] run down to be replaced by the new engines of publicity, fame, and acquired wealth,’ so that, while the Klopstocks’ ‘black carnival world is turned upside down,’ its ‘order and its models of human functioning [...] remain fundamentally undisturbed.’<sup>140</sup> Indeed, as demonstrated by the servants’ rabid commodification of the Klopstocks’ already besmirched reputations, the new order that prevails in Spark’s ‘break-down and build-up book’ only replicates the hideous abuses and excesses of the last.

That Spark chose to populate her grotesque modern fable of fame, fortune and media exploitation with a cast of near non-entities is not evidence, then, of what Gregson describes as the author’s ‘Catholic anti-humanism,’ which is ‘profoundly at odds with the humanist assumptions of the classic realist novel.’<sup>141</sup> For Spark, who

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<sup>138</sup> Toynbee, ‘Interview with Muriel Spark,’ p.73.

<sup>139</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.124.

<sup>140</sup> Patricia Waugh, ‘Muriel Spark and the Metaphysics of Modernity: Art, Secularization, and Psychosis,’ in David Herman, ed., *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp.63-93 (p.77).

<sup>141</sup> Gregson, *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction*, p.6; p.102.

claimed to take issue with the ‘dogmatic and absolute truth’ encountered in so-called ‘realistic novels,’<sup>142</sup> the resolutely anti-realist aspects of *Not to Disturb* – eerily ‘flat’ and mechanical characters; an apparently artificial, stage-like setting; dialogue overloaded with a glut of valueless literary allusions – articulate a palpably *real* sense of Jamesonian ‘depthlessness’ by conjuring a cold and degraded reality in which only the surfaces of objects, texts and bodies remain. Spark had, of course, been developing such techniques over the preceding decade or so; the overtly ‘staged’ and ‘scripted’ elements of the novel hark back to *Doctors of Philosophy*, while the notion of an individual’s entrapment within his or her public (and highly *publicised*) ‘mould’ was first explored in detail in *The Public Image*’s spectacularised contemporary Rome.

Far from supporting what I earlier named as ‘the myth of Spark,’ the three texts that have formed the focus of the present chapter tell a different story. Despite their detached perspectives and often disturbing choices of subject matter, neither exhibits the kind of performative, didactic cruelty with which Spark’s fiction is so frequently associated. Cruelty is certainly prevalent, however, and each text offers a sustained exploration of an insidious, enervating masculine influence which dictates the parameters and practices of women’s lives. In their worst moments, each of Spark’s women – the listless, somnambulant Leonora; the impassive, shell-like Annabel; the unnervingly insubstantial Baroness Klopstock – comes to embody the uncompromising demands placed upon the female subject within the particular culture and society she inhabits. Instead of demonstrating the relative inconsequentiality of human actions when viewed from a divine perspective, Spark is shown in these texts to be concerned with abuses enacted *by* and *upon* human subjects, which render the

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<sup>142</sup> Robert Hosmer, ‘An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark’, *Salmagundi*, Vol. 146/147 (Spring/Summer 2005), pp.127-58 (p.147).

individual self-alienated and insignificant – be this from within the constrictive space of the Delfonts’ living room, the toxic marriage and manipulative media circus within which Annabel endures a waking fever dream of idealised femininity, or the crazed unreality cooked up by Baroness Klopstock’s abusive husband and her exploitative, media-minded employees. Spark’s restless formal and thematic experimentation undoubtedly aids her expression of such concerns, while offering occasional instances of gleeful resistance; in *Doctors of Philosophy* and the final paragraph of *The Public Image* respectively, wobbling stage sets and similarly abrupt, ‘frame-breaking’ shifts in narrative tone and perspective reveal possibilities (and, specifically, possibilities for women) that stretch far beyond ‘the cul-de-sac of caricature.’<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Gregson, *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction*, p.107.

## **‘Drama[s] of exact observation’: Spark and the *Nouveau Roman***

But now suppose the eyes of man rest on things without indulgence, insistently [...]. [H]is sense of sight is content to take their measurements; and his passion, similarly, rests on their surface, without attempting to penetrate them since there is nothing inside, without feigning the least appeal since they would not answer.  
– Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘Nature, Humanism, Tragedy’ (1958)<sup>1</sup>

Who knows her thoughts? Who can tell?  
– *The Driver’s Seat* (p.50)

Focusing on the development of her fiction during the period spanning 1960 and 1970, this chapter examines the evolving relationship between Spark’s novels and the ethos and aesthetics of the *nouveau roman*, a mode of writing associated most closely with the fiction and literary criticism of one of its leading theorists and practitioners, Alain Robbe-Grillet. As Spark recalled in a 1971 interview with Philip Toynbee, exposure to the *nouveau roman* (otherwise known as the new, or anti-, novel) had proven revelatory at an early stage in her literary career: ‘in the early 1950s, there was no Robbe-Grillet [...]. Hardly anyone was trying to write novels with all the compression and obliqueness I was aiming at.’<sup>2</sup> Although Spark had initially found that the characteristic ‘compression and obliqueness’ of Robbe-Grillet’s prose happened to match a writing style to which she herself aspired, her work would later

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘Nature, Humanism, Tragedy,’ in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), pp.49-75 (pp.52-3).

<sup>2</sup> Philip Toynbee, ‘Interview with Muriel Spark,’ *The Observer Colour Magazine*, 7<sup>th</sup> November 1971, pp.73-4 (p.73).

make direct reference to, and even function as an implicit critique of, the style and philosophy of the *nouveau roman*. The diverse ways in which Spark adopts (and adapts) the anti-novel's associated theories and techniques in three distinctly different novels composed during the beginning, middle and end of the decade – *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960), *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965) and *The Driver's Seat* (1970) – form the focus of my analysis.

Having emerged in France during the 1940s and 50s, the works of the *nouveaux romanciers* – among them, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Robert Pinget, Claude Simon, Michel Butor and Robbe-Grillet – first reached British readers in 1957, when translations of short stories by Robbe-Grillet and Butor were printed in literary magazines and periodicals including *Encounter* and *The London Magazine*.<sup>3</sup> By the turn of the decade, translations of a number of novels by Robbe-Grillet, Butor and Sarraute had received notable attention and acclaim from British critics, having been printed by Calder Publications.<sup>4</sup> While these writers did not share a set ideology, or belong to any particular school (indeed, their very association with one another is somewhat arbitrary, resulting largely from a shared publisher, Jérôme Lindon's Les Éditions de Minuit, and the coinage of '*nouveau roman*' in a 1957 *Le Monde* article by Émile Henriot, in which they were grouped together),<sup>5</sup> they were united in a common rejection of what they perceived to be the hackneyed conventions of Balzacian realism in favour of innovative and self-reflexive approaches to plot,

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<sup>3</sup> For a useful overview of the *nouveau roman*'s emergence in Britain, see Adam Guy, '[B. S.] Johnson and the *nouveau roman*: Trawl and other Butorian Projects,' in *B. S. Johnson and Post-War Literature: Possibilities of the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Martin Ryle and Julia Jordan (London: Palgrave, 2014), pp.35-53.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Anne Duchene, 'The Method in the Novel,' *The Manchester Guardian*, 20<sup>th</sup> March 1959, p.11; Thomas Hogan, 'Flight from Reality,' *The Guardian*, 14<sup>th</sup> October 1959, p.4; Philip Toynbee, 'Enter the Anti-Novel,' *The Observer*, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1959, p.22.

<sup>5</sup> Émile Henriot, 'Un nouveau roman,' *Le Monde*, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1957, p.12. Another early, and influential, usage of '*nouveau roman*' appeared a few months later in Maurice Nadeau's 'Nouvelles formules pour le roman' (*Critique* [August-September, 1957], pp.707-22).

character and narration.<sup>6</sup> In his 1956 essay, ‘A Future for the Novel’ – one of a series of influential essays written by the author between 1953 and 1963, which were presented together in *For a New Novel* (1963) – Robbe-Grillet identifies the *nouveau roman*’s characteristic ‘destitution of the old myths of “depth”’ as the feature which distinguishes it most from the ‘traditional role’ of authors including Balzac, Gide and Madame de La Fayette:

The writer’s traditional role consisted in excavating Nature, in burrowing deeper and deeper to reach some ever more intimate strata, in finally unearthing some fragment of a disconcerting secret. Having descended into the abyss of human passions, he would send to the seemingly tranquil world (the world on the surface) triumphant messages describing the mysteries he had actually touched with his own hands.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas the ‘traditional role’ of the author involved depicting ‘the entire hidden soul of things,’ the *nouveau roman*, according to Robbe-Grillet, was committed purely to the surface; ‘the *surface* of things,’ he wrote, ‘has ceased to be for us a mask of their heart, a sentiment that led to every kind of metaphysical transcendence.’<sup>8</sup> Eliminating projections of depth thus meant that ‘man and things would be cleansed of their systematic *romanticism*,’<sup>9</sup> allowing for a depiction of the world that ‘is neither significant nor absurd. It *is*, quite simply [...]. Around us, defying the noisy pack of our animistic or projective adjectives, things *are there*.’

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<sup>6</sup> Rather than attempt to examine the general influence of *nouveau roman* on Spark’s fiction, the present chapter narrows its focus to Spark’s engagement with specific theories and narrative techniques encountered in the essays and novels of Robbe-Grillet, who Spark cites directly as an influence. For a broader understanding of the philosophies of other *nouveaux romanciers*, see, for example, Nathalie Sarraute, *The Age of Suspicion: Essays on the Novel*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: George Braziller, 1963), and Michel Butor, *Inventory: Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968).

<sup>7</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘A Future for the Novel,’ in *For a New Novel*, pp.15-24 (pp.23-4).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24, emphasis in original.

<sup>9</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘On Several Obsolete Notions,’ in *For a New Novel*, pp.25-48 (p.39, emphasis in original).

Their surfaces are distinct and smooth, *intact*.<sup>10</sup> Numerous examples of this approach can be traced throughout the author's fiction, be it in the narrator's panoramic surveillance of a colonial banana plantation at the beginning of the 1957 novel, *Jealousy* (described by one critic as 'the novelistic equivalent of a tracking shot'),<sup>11</sup> to the Euclidean descriptions of household objects which permeate *The Voyeur* (1958). In the 1959 novel, *In the Labyrinth*, the narrator's precise, externalised description of the proximities and positionings of snowfall on a city street strives not to convey the poetic significance of the scene, but resembles instead the meticulous field notes of a meteorologist:

It lies in a thinnish layer – two inches or so – but perfectly even, covering all horizontal surfaces with the same dull, neutral whiteness. The only marks that can be seen are the rectilinear paths, parallel to the rows of houses and to the gutters which are still quite visible (made even more distinct by the vertical edge of the pavement, which remains black), and dividing the pavement into two unequal bands above their entire length.<sup>12</sup>

Robbe-Grillet was not alone in conceptualising the *nouveau roman* in terms of a surface-versus-depth dialectic. In his 1952 essay, 'Objective Literature,' Roland Barthes had already described the form and function of the *nouveau roman* in similar terms, as a rejection of 'the novel long established as the experience of a depth: a social depth with Balzac and Zola, a "psychological depth" with Flaubert, a memorial depth with Proust' in favour of an attempt to 'establish the novel on the surface.'<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the novel's traditional 'endoscopic function,' Barthes argued, the *nouveau*

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<sup>10</sup> Robbe-Grillet, 'A Future for the Novel,' p.19, emphases in original.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy F. Lane, 'The Stain, the Impotent Gaze, and the Theft of *Jouissance*: Towards a Žižekian Reading of Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*,' *French Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 2, pp.193-206 (p.198). The cinematic quality of Robbe-Grillet's narration (and its influence on Spark's fiction) is examined in closer detail in the following chapter.

<sup>12</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *In the Labyrinth*, trans. Christine Brooke-Rose (London: Calder Publications, 2000), p.19.

<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Objective Literature,' in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp.13-24 (p.23).



*roman* was a mode of writing committed solely to recording ‘a direct experience of man’s surroundings, without this man’s being able to fall back on a psychology, a metaphysic, or a psychoanalysis in order to approach the objective milieu he discovers’ (an interpretation which Robbe-Grillet would himself contest, as discussed in the final section of this chapter).<sup>14</sup> Robbe-Grillet’s prose is thus seen to possess ‘no density and no depth: it remains on the surface of the object and inspects it impartially, without favouring any particular quality.’<sup>15</sup> This mode of narration, which Barthes describes as ‘not the rape of an abyss, but the rapture of a surface,’<sup>16</sup> constitutes for Kristin Ross a ‘project of redemptive *hygiene*,’ which ‘proposes to *clean* the Augean stables of the realistic novel form of [its] fetters and archaisms.’ The ‘new novelist,’ Ross remarks, remains ‘eternally vigilant, on the lookout for the tell-tale *stains* of an outmoded romanticism that lurk in the form of animistic descriptive adjectives and metaphors,’ so that the vision of the ‘new seer’ is ‘*cleansed* and focused to become a tool for conducting a set of technical, almost administrative operations based on criteria of efficacy.’<sup>17</sup> Spark’s fascination with this efficacious aspect of the narration – what she identified as its ‘special kind of drama – the drama of exact observation’ – would become the characteristic feature of her engagement

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.14.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonisation and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), pp.75-6, emphases mine. Ross’s references to ‘hygiene,’ ‘stains’ and ‘cleansed’ vision are far from incidental; her study of modernisation and decolonisation in relation to bourgeois life in postwar, metropolitan France interprets the *nouveau roman*, associated as it is with unmediated objectivity and precise, surface-level descriptions, as part of a ‘generalised postwar atmosphere of moral purification, national cleansing, and literary laundering’ (p.76). Ross identifies the prominence of metaphors of cleanliness within French postwar culture (ranging from those found in literature, film and advertising to accounts of ‘clean’ modes of torture in Algeria), and attributes them to the end of empire and the consequent displacement of French colonial authority. This heightened emphasis on cleanliness in domestic, public and cultural life, Ross’s study argues, served not only as the means by which the French maintained a sense of superiority over the newly decolonised, but also a way of purging the stains of the Occupation by cultivating and propagating a belief in their nation’s ‘moral purification.’

with the *nouveau roman*.<sup>18</sup>

Despite Spark attesting repeatedly to its influence on her writing,<sup>19</sup> critical commentary on the author's relationship to the *nouveau roman* has tended – perhaps ironically – to stop short at the surface, resting upon the aesthetic similarities that her novels of the early to mid-1970s share with the fictions of Robbe-Grillet, instead of examining the ways in which her work might offer a deeper commentary, be it direct or implicit, on the theories and practices of the 'new novelists.'<sup>20</sup> In an early review of *The Driver's Seat*, for example, Frank Kermode claims to detect within the novel 'a strong flavour of the *nouveau roman*,' but concludes that, while 'Mrs Spark has studied Robbe-Grillet with care,' she has 'decided that his methods [...] are useful if you want to present obsessed or manic states,' such as that of the protagonist, Lise.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, critics have clung faithfully to the received and revered image of the author as a Catholic novelist, taking Spark's religion as their ultimate limit of interpretation when deciphering the aims of her experimental narrative practices. For Robert Hosmer, Spark aimed only at 'creating ghastly parodies of the *nouveau roman*' by co-opting its characteristic 'commitment to distance and detachment [and] fondness for the present tense' to produce 'fictions which are deeply consistent with her longstanding, unremitting Catholic concerns.' Robbe-Grillet's well-known

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<sup>18</sup> Toynbee, 'Interview with Muriel Spark,' p.73.

<sup>19</sup> 'I was thinking the same thoughts that they were thinking, people like Robbe-Grillet,' Spark told Martin McQuillan in 2002. 'We were influenced by the same, breathing the same informed air. So, I naturally would have a bent towards the *nouveau roman* but in fact I was very influenced by Robbe-Grillet' (Martin McQuillan, "'The Same Informed Air': An Interview with Muriel Spark,' in McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction* [London: Palgrave, 2002], pp.210-29 [p.216]).

<sup>20</sup> It must be noted, however, that Spark never cited a specific novel, short story, film or essay by any *nouveau romancier* as an influence on her work. This may well account for the rather generalised and superficial approach adopted in various critical discussions of her fiction's relationship to the anti-novel.

<sup>21</sup> Frank Kermode, 'Sheerer Spark [Review of *The Driver's Seat*]' *The Listener*, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1970, p.425, emphasis mine.

‘cinematic structural and narrative devices’ and ‘fondness for the present tense,’ Hosmer argues, are countered in Spark’s fiction by the proleptic anticipation of the ending. In novels such as *The Driver’s Seat* and *Not to Disturb*, ‘it is *the End* which gives meaning and coherence, not only in aesthetic terms, but also in theological terms.’<sup>22</sup> Adopting a near-identical reading, Ian Rankin describes *The Driver’s Seat* as merely ‘a homage to Robbe-Grillet’s technique,’ in which the ‘philosophy of the *nouveau roman*’ is invoked only to be superseded by the future tense’s revelation of God’s ‘divine [...] pattern.’<sup>23</sup>

A more nuanced and productive reading is encountered in Aidan Day’s 2007 article, ‘Parodying Postmodernism,’ discussed in greater detail in the final section of this chapter.<sup>24</sup> Focusing specifically on the various thematic and stylistic similarities between Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy* and Spark’s *The Driver’s Seat*, Day examines how Spark’s ‘appropriation’ of, and ‘metacommentary’ on, the various hallmarks of the *nouveau roman* ‘amounts to a critical engagement with postmodern assumptions and perspectives.’<sup>25</sup> Although Day presents a thorough and incisive analysis of the ways in which Spark’s prose exceeds a simple mimicry of Robbe-Grillet – an approach which supports a persuasive thesis that, by drawing upon the techniques of the *nouveau roman*, the author depicts a character ‘suffering a type of despair in a world suffering

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<sup>22</sup> Robert E. Hosmer, ‘Writing with Intent: The Artistry of Muriel Spark,’ *Commonweal*, Vol. 118 (1989), pp.233-41 (p.238), emphasis mine.

<sup>23</sup> Ian Rankin, ‘The Deliberate Cunning of Muriel Spark,’ in Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson, eds., *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies: New Visions, Old Dreams* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp.41-53 (p.43). Theological interpretations of *The Driver’s Seat*’s narrative and temporal structure are examined in detail in the following chapter.

<sup>24</sup> For similarly productive analyses of the *nouveau roman*’s influence on Spark’s fiction, see Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory Since 1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp.46-51; Martin McQuillan, ‘Introduction: “I Don’t Know Anything About Freud”: Muriel Spark Meets Contemporary Criticism,’ *Theorising Muriel Spark*, pp.1–31 (pp.9–11); Bryan Cheyette, *Muriel Spark* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2000), pp.71-83.

<sup>25</sup> Aidan Day, ‘Parodying Postmodernism: Muriel Spark (*The Driver’s Seat*) and Robbe-Grillet (*Jealousy*),’ *English*, Vol. 56, No. 216 (Autumn 2007), pp.321-37 (p.322).

from a dearth of reality' – his reading is limited by its near-singular focus on *The Driver's Seat*.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Day's commentary on Spark's *prior* engagement with what he terms 'postmodern assumptions and perspectives,' be they derived from the *nouveau roman* or elsewhere, is notably scarce, extending only to a brief discussion of *The Mandelbaum Gate*'s digressive remarks on 'the new French writers' (*MG*, p.177).<sup>27</sup> This example aside, *The Driver's Seat*, long recognised as possessing a 'strong flavour of the *nouveau roman*,' appears misleadingly as Spark's sole engagement with the art form.

The present chapter seeks to remedy this shortcoming by considering *The Driver's Seat* not as a one-off experiment, but rather the result of Spark's sustained examination of the *nouveau roman*'s particular style and ethos, which had begun ten years earlier with the composition of her subversive social satire, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. In my analysis of that novel, I observe how Spark draws playfully upon the apparent depthlessness of the anti-novel's prose to depict a community in thrall to the superficial and deadened by habit and convention. The relentless exteriority of Robbe-Grillet's narration, I argue, presents Spark with an ideal means of communicating a Bergsonian form of comedy – one which involves the supposedly vital individual appearing, to humorous or even unsettling degrees, as a mindless automaton or two-dimensional stock character. This is followed by a reading of *The Mandelbaum Gate*, and in particular the novel's depiction of the trial and testimony of the Holocaust administrator, Adolf Eichmann, whose chilling lack of empathy is conveyed via direct references to 'the sensation[s] [...] that the anti-novelists induce' among their readers (*MG*, p.177). By drawing upon the studied detachment and

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.326.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.331.

characteristic efficacy of the anti-novel to communicate a sense of Eichmann's single-minded devotion to duty and efficient action, Spark explores the sinister implications of a mode of narrative – and, by extension, a mode of narrative *consciousness* – marked by a steadfast refusal to acknowledge psychological depths, and which thus articulates perfectly what Hannah Arendt memorably termed 'the banality of evil.'<sup>28</sup> All of this leads to *The Driver's Seat*, in which Spark presents her most extensive examination of the dehumanising narrative potential of the *nouveau roman*, combining the absurd and horrific implications of its prose (as explored in the two preceding examples) with the metafictional concerns of her earliest fictions. In doing so, she depicts a nightmarish world so detached from reality that its protagonist must plot her own tragic death in order to articulate her subjectivity and engage at last with the real. I therefore treat these novels – to quote the title of Robbe-Grillet's 1968 essay collection<sup>29</sup> – as valuable *snapshots* of Spark's evolving engagement with the forms, theories and functions of the *nouveau roman*'s particular 'drama of exact observation.'

**'Interesting finds and human remains': Venturing beneath 'the surface of things' in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye***

Written and published in 1960, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* could be considered typical of Spark's early social satires, fitting neatly among a set of fictions characterised by what Alan Bold describes as a 'fascination with enclosed communities.'<sup>30</sup> These specific, circumscribed social sets include the group of feuding

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<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Snapshots*, trans. Bruce Morrissette (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> Alan Bold, *Muriel Spark* (London: Methuen, 1986), p.50.

septuagenarians in the morbid comedy *Memento Mori*, the desert island castaways in *Robinson*, and the Edinburgh schoolgirls and London boarding house lodgers featured in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The Girls of Slender Means* respectively. In novels such as these, Spark tends to locate comic potential in patterns of thought and behaviour which have become rigid and mechanical, and codes of social conduct followed so unquestioningly that the subject becomes a target for forces of ridicule, exploitation or subversion. In *The Bachelors* (written immediately after *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, and published in the same year), the titular characters appear – initially, at least – comical in their uncanny uniformity, as evinced by their identical morning routines: ‘these men wriggled their toes when they had got back to bed and, however hard they tried, could not prevent some irritating crumbs of toast from falling on the sheets; they smoked a cigarette, slept, then rose at twelve.’<sup>31</sup> As Ian Gregson notes, however, a potentially sinister undercurrent is detectable in the ‘stalled’ and ‘sterile’ nature of the men’s lives, which leaves them exposed to mendacious ‘exploiters of a paucity which makes the human all too easy to predict and categorise.’<sup>32</sup>

What distinguishes *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* from Spark’s other social satires is that its derisory effects are achieved by way of narrative techniques influenced directly by the *nouveau roman*. It was Robbe-Grillet’s apparent rejection of psychological depth, Spark recalled, that inspired her own novel’s externalised narrative perspective:

I was very much impressed by Robbe-Grillet [...]. I was very, very interested in his methods. He got away from the novel of descriptions of people's feelings: “he felt,” “he thought” [...]. “He said” is a fact, actually an outward fact, but “he felt” and “he thought” are interpolations by the author. I was very interested in this. I wrote one book without any expressed feelings and

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<sup>31</sup> Muriel Spark, *The Bachelors* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p.129.

<sup>32</sup> Ian Gregson, *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction* (New York: Continuum, 2006), p.106.

thoughts, that was *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, although nobody has noticed that.<sup>33</sup>

This refusal of interiority in favour of ‘outward fact’ serves a powerful rhetorical function in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, enabling Spark to depict a community so beholden to prevailing economic and cultural standards that its members have come to appear curiously depthless and mechanical in their patterns of thought and physical action. From the outset, the novel’s industrialised and socially stratified Peckham seems conspicuously superficial; names of residents and locations such Merle *Coverdale*, Dixie *Morse* and *Findlater*’s Ballroom indicate both the obfuscatory character of the novel’s environment, as well as the potential for the extraction and exposure of buried meanings by a revelatory force, which emerges in the form of Dougal Douglas. As his own name might imply, Dougal *Douglas* (or *Douglas Dougal*, the moniker he later adopts in order to gain secondary employment) is frequently associated with practices of excavation and exposure. A graduate from Edinburgh University, Dougal has arrived in Peckham to take up the role of Assistant to the Personnel Manager at the local textiles factory, Meadows, Meade & Grindley, a position his employers define vaguely as geared towards “‘bring[ing] vision into the lives of the workers’” (*BPR*, p.16). Declaring it his “‘job to take the pulse of the people and plumb the industrial depths of Peckham’” (*BPR*, p.17), Dougal sets about on a mission to uncover the repressed secrets, desires and fears of its inhabitants, his actions jolting the villagers out of the comfortingly familiar patterns of habit and convention that have rendered their behaviour as rigid and predictable as the machines they operate. Appositely, Dougal’s practice of what he terms “‘human research’” (*BPR*, p.18) is synchronous with the archaeological excavation of a tunnel beneath the

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Hosmer, ‘An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark’, *Salmagundi*, Vol. 146/147 (Spring/Summer 2005), pp.127-58 (p.147).

local factories, the resulting discovery of ‘interesting finds and human remains’ (*BPR*, p.129) being equally applicable to his own endeavours.

Given his unnerving charisma and frequent association with the subterranean, as well as his unique physical features, including a hunched shoulder and a forehead bearing two stumps (the remains of a pair of surgically-removed, horn-like protuberances), Dougal could be claimed convincingly as a diabolic or otherworldly being – not only an outsider to Peckham, but an entity who occupies an entirely separate ontological realm to the other characters.<sup>34</sup> W. H. Auden believed as much when, in a critical overview of Spark’s early novels, he described Dougal as ‘a human instrument of the devil whose name is Legion.’<sup>35</sup> Contrary to this view, I interpret Dougal as a figure rooted firmly within the novel’s mortal world,<sup>36</sup> yet who stands in direct opposition to what Cairns Craig describes as ‘a world of characters so banalised by the standardised requirements of a modern industrial environment that they are nothing more than repetitions of each other.’<sup>37</sup> As Peter Kemp has argued, ‘Dougal’s function in the book is to apply the goad,’ to ‘create moments of truth by engineering situations in which characters are forced to experience the sharp facts of life.’<sup>38</sup> His

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<sup>34</sup> For an account of critical interpretations of Dougal as a supernatural or specifically diabolic being, see, *inter alia*, Richard Mayne, ‘Fiery Particle – On Muriel Spark,’ *Encounter*, Vol. 25 (December 1965), pp.61-8.

<sup>35</sup> W. H. Auden, ‘A Disturbing Novelist,’ *The Mid-Century*, Vol. 39 (May 1962), pp.5-8 (p.7).

<sup>36</sup> Indeed, in her 1960 overview of her literary career thus far, ‘How I Became a Novelist,’ Spark describes *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* as simply ‘the story of a young man who causes high jinks wherever he goes,’ rather than a tale of diabolism or supernatural beings (in Penelope Jardine, ed., *The Golden Fleece: Essays* [Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2014], pp.74-7 [p.76]).

<sup>37</sup> Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p.173.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Kemp, *Muriel Spark* (London: Elek, 1974), p.55. In tactfully ‘apply[ing] the goad’ with those he encounters, as Kemp puts it, Dougal’s interactions largely avoid didacticism or overt moral guidance. In this sense, I am inclined to agree with Bryan Cheyette’s assessment of Dougal as a ‘refreshingly amoral character’ (*Muriel Spark* [Cheyette’s text], p.50). Here, Cheyette compares Dougal to the polarised figures of Ronald Bridges and Patrick Seton in the novel that followed *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, *The Bachelors*. Cheyette identifies Bridges as a ‘transcendent figure’ who ‘quests for the truth and is associated with a life-enhancing unity’ (the latter quality suggested by his surname). Conversely, the murderous and fraudulent Seton, as his own surname might imply, appears as the ‘evil



purpose, concurs Ruth Whittaker, 'is to act as a catalyst on the inhabitants of Peckham Rye. [...] [L]ike the telephone call in *Memento Mori*, he acts as a stimulant, disturbing the spiritual torpor of Peckham, and in some cases making people aware of the narrowness of their lives.'<sup>39</sup> Indeed, within the novel's ideologically conservative and habit-bound society, Dougal's disruptive machinations have notable, and sometimes severe, consequences: he evokes a powerful nonconformist streak in the browbeaten Humphrey Place, leading him to jilt his shallow and demanding fiancée at the altar; he forces his landlady, Miss Frierne, to acknowledge the brother she rejected, the stress of which causes her to suffer a stroke; in his interactions with his manager, Mr Druce, who 'could not keep his eyes off Dougal' (*BPR*, p.14), he unearths possible signs of repressed homosexual desire.

Away from Dougal's enlivening effects, however, an aura of stultifying mechanicity pervades *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*'s industrial Peckham, whose residents are known to themselves and one another by their specific workplace functions, as though they lack distinct personalities, interior lives or individual agency: 'Dawn Waghorn, cone-winder, Annette Wren, trainee-seamer, Elaine Kent, process-controller, Odette Hill, uptwister' (*BPR*, p.13). These specific designations even determine the limits of characters' social interactions; outside of work, for example, Dixie only 'addressed the men, ignoring Elaine as she had done all evening, because Elaine was factory' (*BPR*, p.43). Stranger, more extreme examples of this

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double' of Bridges. Cheyette asserts that, 'by giving Ronald an obvious double, instead of making his doubleness part of his identity,' Spark's novel 'becomes overly didactic and moralistic' – a 'response,' he suggests, to the amoral 'anarchism of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*' (pp.48-9). As my reading of the *nouveau roman*'s influence on *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* will demonstrate, the characteristic plainness of prose in the anti-novel would be co-opted by Spark to assist her novel's coolly amoral and anti-didactic approach.

<sup>39</sup> Ruth Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p.59.

rigid, mechanistic behaviour can be traced throughout the wider community. It is there, for example, in the sexual proclivities of Mr Druce, who seeks his erotic thrills from the shuddering motion of a department store elevator, and is even detectable in the jive danced by couples in Findlater's Ballroom, which resembles the automatic movement of 'an unwound toy roundabout' (*BPR*, p.59). It is in the ballroom, a space supposedly removed from the routinised efficiency demanded in the workplace, that the mechanistic actions of the residents are at their most pronounced. Here the interactions between young men and women resemble the intricate component processes of an elaborate mechanical sequence, like those operating in the local factories:

Most of the men looked as if they had not properly woken from deep sleep, but glided as if drugged, and with half-closed lids, towards their chosen partner. This approach found favour with the girls. The actual invitation to dance was mostly delivered by gesture; a scarcely noticeable flick of the man's head towards the dance floor. Whereupon the girl, with an outstretched movement of surrender, would swim into the hands of the summoning partner. (*BPR*, p.58)

In his analysis of this and other scenes from *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, Peter Kemp observes that the actions of the villagers are captured in a narrative which resembles in tone 'some anthropologist's dispatch,' comprised of an 'alert notation' of various 'tribal rituals.'<sup>40</sup> This is only partly the case, however; as indicated by the 'drugged' drift of the men and the automatic 'surrender' of the women, these 'rituals' have since been degraded to a kind of social autopilot, played out without evidence of natural impulse or self-awareness. What Kemp describes as the narrator's 'alert' and anthropological attention to such actions is produced, nevertheless, by way of narrative techniques associated with the *nouveau roman* – namely the narrator's

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<sup>40</sup> Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, p.57.

scrupulous, almost forensic focus on surface appearances, and vigilant attention towards patterns of repeated behaviour. In the narration of the ballroom scene, form and content operate in close accord, with the blankly functional prose mimicking the robotic efficiency with which the couples pair off. Whereas a perspective limited to recording surface details articulates for Robbe-Grillet a rejection of ‘the old myths of “depth,”’<sup>41</sup> its use here is purely rhetorical; psychological depth can be rejected, Spark demonstrates, where none is evident to begin with. Readers, rather like Dougal, thus examine the community with a mixture of fascination and suspicion, perceiving its members less like vital, adaptable beings than thoughtless drones, devoid of interiority and locked in repeating patterns of automatic behaviour.

It is here, I wish to suggest, that Spark’s satirically-motivated mimicry of the *nouveau roman* converges with a Bergsonian approach to comedy. In *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900), Henri Bergson identifies comedy as a ‘kind of *absentmindedness* on the part of life,’ detected in circumstances wherein human vitality has been replaced by ‘a certain *mechanical inelasticity*’ which precludes the individual from responding spontaneously or flexibly to changing situations.<sup>42</sup> The philosopher’s nineteenth century axiom of the comic, developed during a period of rapid technological advancement, appears especially relevant to *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*’s absurdist depictions of mechanistic social interactions and sexual practices. The sheer *incongruity* of encountering such examples of absentmindedness and inelasticity, ‘just where one would expect to find the wide

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<sup>41</sup> Robbe-Grillet, ‘A Future for the Novel,’ p.23.

<sup>42</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Clouesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan, 1911), p.10. All emphases in quotations from this text are in the original.

awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being,<sup>43</sup> is to Bergson inherently funny; ‘*the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body,*’ he argues, ‘*are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine.*’<sup>44</sup> Laughter, Bergson contends, is therefore a natural, necessary response to this recognition of ‘*something mechanical encrusted on the living,*’ which has caused the individual to fall back upon the ‘easy automatism of acquired habits.’<sup>45</sup> All individuals, he suggests, have the propensity to slip into comedic roles:

In one sense it might be said that all *character* is comic, provided we mean by character the *ready-made* element in our personality, that mechanical element which resembles a piece of clockwork wound up once and for all and capable of working automatically. [...] It is comic to wander out of one’s own self. It is comic to fall into a ready-made category. And what is most comic of all is to become a category oneself into which others will fall, as into a ready-made frame; it is to crystallise into a stock character.<sup>46</sup>

In *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, the danger of allowing oneself ‘to fall into a ready-made category’ and thus to come to resemble ‘a stock character’ is nowhere more apparent than in the figure of Trevor Lomas. A hollow caricature of a surly Teddy Boy, Trevor appears as the most extreme example of what Michael Gardiner identifies as the various ‘spurious and over-practiced social roles’ exhibited throughout the text.<sup>47</sup> From the curiously lifeless nature of his strut, described as a ‘somnambulistic sway’ (*BPR*, p.57), to the hackneyed quality of his speech (the delivery of lines such as “‘Come and wriggle, snake’” [*BPR*, p.58] being his preferred means of commanding women to dance), Trevor’s behaviour is that of a man going through the motions, akin to the ‘piece of clockwork [...] working automatically’

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.29.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p.37; p.19.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.149.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory Since 1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p.57.

which, for Bergson, propels the figure of comedy forward. In his analysis of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*'s representation of 1950s youth subcultures, Nick Bentley observes how, despite appearing to embody a rebellious cultural faction, Trevor is 'representative of the prevailing dominant culture rather than a potentially subversive threat to it.'<sup>48</sup> Bentley's reading may well account for the immediate hostility that Trevor displays toward the *truly* subversive Dougal, given the threat he poses to the society's unchallenged codes of conduct. It is in the ballroom that Dougal demonstrates this subversiveness in the form of an elaborate, improvised dance with a dustbin lid – an act of protest against the codified behaviour of men like Trevor, and a revelation of his own boundless imagination:

[Dougal] pressed into the midst of the dancers, bearing before him the lid of a dust-bin, which he had obtained from the back premises. Then he placed the lid upside down on the floor, sat cross-legged inside it, and was a man in a rocking boat rowing for his life.

[...]

Next, Dougal sat on his haunches and banged a message out on a tomtom. [...] He was an ardent cyclist, crouched over the handlebars and pedalling uphill with the lid between his knees. He was an old woman with an umbrella; he stood on the upturned edges of the lid and speared fish from his rocking canoe; he was the man at the wheel of a racing car; he did many things with the lid until he finally propped the dust-bin lid up on his high shoulder, beating the cymbal rhythmically with his hand while with the other hand he limply conducted an invisible band, being, with long blank face, the band-leader. (*BPR*, pp.59-60)

The description of the dance amounts to an extraordinary narrative sequence, in which form and content cohere to express Dougal's defiance of a deeply conformist ethos. Not only do his shape-shifting movements fly in the face of the community's closely-regulated uniformity, but Spark's newly-buoyant narration, which leaps frenetically to capture each of his imaginative impersonations, also flouts the

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<sup>48</sup> Nick Bentley, "New Elizabethans": The Representation of Youth Subcultures in 1950s British Fiction,' *Literature & History*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring 2010), pp.16-33 (p.28).

conventions of the clinical and steadfastly literal prose applied elsewhere. In contrast to the ‘mechanical inelasticity’ that surrounds him, Dougal embodies and expresses Bergson’s description of ‘comic fancy’: ‘a living energy, a strange plant that has flourished on the stony portions of the social soil,’ which can remedy lapses into lassitude and rigidity.<sup>49</sup> Crucially, Dougal’s shape-shifting does not evince signs of supernatural powers, but is achieved by way of a physical and imaginative dexterity available to, yet feared by, the other men and women. The restorative effects of ‘comic fancy’ relate to what Bergson theorises more generally in his philosophy as *élan vital*, or ‘life impulse’; a being, Bergson believes, can be alive *by degrees* – that is, he or she can be rendered more or less inert (and thus more or less comical) through habit and absentmindedness. But while the laughter provoked by Dougal might be intended to have the redemptive effect described by Bergson, its restoration of deadened sensitivities leads more often to painful confrontations with long-ignored truths; Miss Frierne, for example, ‘screamed with hysterical mirth’ (*BPR*, p.123) after Dougal impersonates a corpse following the news of her estranged brother’s death, while Merle Coverdale ‘laugh[s] from her chest’ in Dougal’s entertaining company, before confessing to him: “‘I’ve had a rotten life’” (*BPR*, p.98). Dougal’s playfully anarchic presence in the community, which is motivated by his desire to delve beneath the surface and elicit uncharacteristic responses from its residents, can thus be seen as an attempt to reintroduce this ‘living energy’ into an emotionally barren wasteland.

‘Wherever there is repetition or complete similarity,’ argues Bergson of the source of the comic, ‘we always suspect some mechanism at work behind the

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<sup>49</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.65.

living.’<sup>50</sup> In Spark’s novel, however, the humour derived from the aforementioned examples of the ‘*mechanical encrusted on the living*’ has a limit, which, if exceeded, spills over into something altogether more unsettling. This is most evident in the stagnant affair between Merle Coverdale, a typist at Meadows, Meade & Grindley, and her manager, Mr Druce. The monotony of the affair is, initially, rich in ironic humour. Despite her insistence on maintaining a distinction between her work and leisure time (““Remind me in the morning on business premises, Vincent,” she said. “I don’t bring the office into my home, as you know”” [BPR, p.52]), the drudgery of Merle’s evenings with Druce mimics the regimented processes of the factory:

Merle switched on the television and found a play far advanced. They watched the fragment of the play as they drank their coffee. Then they went into the bedroom and took off their clothes in a steady rhythm. Merle took off her cardigan and Mr. Druce took off his coat. Merle went to the wardrobe and brought out a green quilted silk dressing-gown. Mr. Druce went to the wardrobe and found his blue dressing-gown with white spots. Merle took off her blouse and Mr. Druce his waistcoat. [...]

They stayed in bed for an hour, in the course of which Merle twice screamed because Mr. Druce had once pinched and once bit her. ‘I’m covered with marks as it is,’ she said.

[...]

She went into the scullery and put on the kettle while he put on his trousers and went home to his wife. (BPR, p.53-4)

Much like the stagnated social choreography exhibited in the ballroom, the interactions between Merle and Druce are so deeply entrenched as to appear thoughtless and mechanical, their familiar ‘steady rhythm’ causing the pair to resemble performers in a ‘play far advanced,’ akin to that being broadcast on the living room television. Even Druce’s bites and pinches, and the screams they elicit from Merle, appear to conform to a set formula. Left alone at the end of the evening, Merle’s final resemblance to another literary typist, depicted in ‘The Fire Sermon’

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.34.

from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), appears all too obvious to be unintentional.<sup>51</sup> Akin to the affair between Merle and Druce, the dull sexual encounter in Eliot's poem is framed as a mechanical act, from the description of the 'human engine' that precedes it, to the 'automatic hand' with which the woman operates the gramophone and smoothes her hair afterwards.<sup>52</sup> Like Eliot's typist, who endures a passionless tryst with the 'young man carbuncular,' Merle ends her night in a similar state of anhedonic indifference:<sup>53</sup>

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,  
Hardly aware of her departed lover;  
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:  
"Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over."<sup>54</sup>

As a means of articulating the affair's aura of deadening rigidity, the characteristic narrative traits of the *nouveau roman* – namely, the intricate attention to exterior details, the listless narration of sequential actions, and the refusal of psychological depth – have been co-opted by Spark to disquieting effect. This was a mode of writing, she told Martin Stannard, where the notable absence of expressed 'thoughts or feelings' places the reader in the more active, interpretive role of 'sighter': 'You're just observing, that's all. A sighter. You're only seeing what people do. You read between the lines what they think [...]. It really gives you another dimension because people fill it in.'<sup>55</sup> Perhaps paradoxically, the lack of affect

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<sup>51</sup> A detailed discussion of Eliot's influence on Spark would exceed the scope of the present study. For conclusive evidence of this influence, however, we need only look to Spark's unpublished correspondence with John Masefield. '[T. S. Eliot] proved a sort of revelation,' Spark wrote to Masefield of her own poetry-writing, 'and everything we write in the way of poetry seems guided by his work': Letter from Muriel Spark to John Masefield, 26<sup>th</sup> May 1951, from 8 Sussex Mansions, 65 Old Brompton Road, London. Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10607/89, National Library of Scotland.

<sup>52</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), pp.59-80 (p.67, l.217; p.69, l.255).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.68, l.232.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.69, ll.249-52.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009), p.xviii.



characteristic of Robbe-Grillet's prose is adopted to *generate* affect in Spark's novel; rather than announcing Merle's despair explicitly, Spark allows it to be inferred 'between the lines' of her pointedly depthless prose. As a 'sighter,' the reader thus occupies a position similar to that of Dougal, the only character attuned to the nature of Merle's suffering. "Are you a free woman or a slave?" he asks Merle of her relationship with Druce. "After six years going on seven," she responds, "I'm tied in a sort of way" (*BPR*, p.99). Seemingly unable to extricate herself from the 'far advanced' routine of the affair, and having grown dependent upon Druce's payments for her flat, Merle has been drained steadily of her vitality and independence. As with the playfully didactic, yet never domineering, approach he takes with the other residents, Dougal tacitly alerts Merle to the danger that awaits her should she remain tethered to Druce. From engaging her in discussions about the affair during strolls through the local graveyard to leaving her standing alone in the narrow hallway, 'lined with wood like a coffin' (*BPR*, p.126), of his boarding house lodgings, Dougal frequently frames Merle as a woman in grave danger. Even his dictation of notes for Merle's transcription is an act loaded with portent; the verbal articulation of punctuation marks ("ahead full stop" [*BPR*, p.128]) comes to foreshadow her life's imminent end.

This sense of steadily increasing danger and dread is only heightened by a laconic, conspicuously 'neutral' narrative perspective, which dwells repeatedly upon the sinisterly banal circumstances of Merle and Druce's arrangement. In his analysis of Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, Adam Shatz notes how the 'sterile, descriptive rigour' and 'eerie rhythms and hypnotic repetitions' of the novel's prose work to 'create a

sense of mounting disquiet.’<sup>56</sup> In *Jealousy*, this ‘mounting disquiet’ culminates in brief, perhaps hallucinatory, instances of ambiguously expressed violence, often concerning the repeated crushing of a centipede. In an article which would be republished as the introduction to the 2008 Oneworld edition of *Jealousy*, Tom McCarthy treats such instances as abstract ‘escape route[s]’ from the ‘vicious circle of meals, cocktails, hair-combing, [and] spying’ that comprises the novel’s ‘stultifying, oppressive and persistent present tense’ – an infernal pattern of ‘loops and repetitions’ punctuated only by brief sparks of violence. The violence inflicted repeatedly upon the ‘venomous *Scutigera*,’ McCarthy asserts, thus ‘serves as a meeting point for associations so overloaded that if it were a plug socket it would be smoking.’<sup>57</sup> Merle and Druce inhabit their own version of this ‘stultifying, oppressive and persistent present tense.’ The pair endure a dull routine that festers with Druce’s jealousy and sadism, into which the fatal violence alluded to by Dougal insidiously creeps:

He handed over her glass of wine. He looked at the label on the bottle. He sat down and took his shoes off. He put on his slippers. He looked down at his watch. Merle switched on the television. Neither looked at it. [...]

He leaned forward and tickled her neck. She drew away. He pinched the skin of her long neck, and she screamed. [...]

He came towards her with the corkscrew and stabbed it into her long neck nine times, and killed her. Then he took his hat and went home to his wife. (*BPR*, pp.135-6)

The brutal murder of Merle appears as merely a minor deviation from her and Druce’s typical nights in. Perversely, their evening still adheres to its drearily regular formula, with the ‘far advanced’ routine of drinking, undressing and television leading on to pinches, screams and Druce’s eventual return to his wife. Narrated with the same tonal

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<sup>56</sup> Adam Shatz, ‘At the Crime Scene,’ *London Review of Books*, Vol. 36, No. 15, 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014, pp.21-6 (p.24).

<sup>57</sup> Tom McCarthy, ‘The Geometry of the Pressant,’ *Artforum International*, Vol. 46, No. 10 (Summer 2008), pp.392-5 (p.394). The narrative subjectivity implicit in the obsessive repetition of such scenes, as well as their ‘overloaded’ associations, is discussed in both the following chapter and the final section of this one.

flatness and syntactic repetitiveness of any of Druce's other actions, or any of the routinised deeds depicted in the earlier scene between the pair, the murder is not only deprived of its appropriate emotional resonance, but is presented as an unnerving extension of the affair's oppressive and deadening aura. The description of Merle's death thus constitutes a tentative exploration of the *nouveau roman's* sinisterly dehumanising narrative effects, which Spark would draw upon to far more disturbing effect in *The Driver's Seat* a decade later.

In keeping with its broadly comic tone, however, the novel's conclusion goes some way towards remedying the disquieting effects of such scenes by staging Dougal's entertaining defeat of his main adversary, Trevor, and departure from Peckham. The pair finally come to blows within the tunnel which runs beneath the village, where Trevor stabs Dougal in the eye with one of the human bones which litter the ground, before Dougal uses the same weapon to beat his opponent unconscious and complete his exit. On one level, the scene serves as a satisfying literalisation of Dougal's earlier expressed intention to "plumb the depths" of the community; that he manages to access the bone-strewn tunnel above which the factories sit seems a perfect illustration of his ability, evinced throughout the novel, to go beneath the '*mechanical encrusted on the living*,' as Bergson puts it, and locate signs of an authentic human presence. That Trevor targets his opponent's eye articulates his continued rejection of the aforementioned "vision" with which Dougal is associated (of all the novel's characters, the two-dimensional Trevor is changed the least by Dougal's subversive presence, making his final, unconscious state rather fitting). On another level, the subterranean scene communicates the novel's ultimate defiance of what Spark took to be the sterile and dehumanised realm

of the *nouveau roman* - a mode of writing she felt to be committed solely to 'outward fact[s]' and impenetrable surfaces.<sup>58</sup> In disrupting familiar patterns of behaviour, teasing out uncharacteristic responses and emotions, and behaving in ways which flout the rigid dimensions of the narrative itself, Dougal has repeatedly demonstrated the opposite. In direct opposition to Robbe-Grillet, whose 'A Future for the Novel' rejected literature devoted to 'burrowing deeper and deeper' in order to unearth 'the entire hidden soul of things,'<sup>59</sup> Spark's novel affirms the possibility, as the last words of the text affirm, of encountering 'another world than this' (*BPR*, p.143).

#### **'Repetition, boredom, despair': The *Nouveau Roman* and the Eichmann Trial**

Unlike *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, *The Mandelbaum Gate* never seeks to mimic or co-opt the narrative conventions of the *nouveau roman* in order to generate a particular rhetorical effect. Instead, the novel's representation of the Eichmann trial, and its disturbing impact upon Spark's protagonist, Barbara Vaughan, includes brief but direct references to 'the anti-novelists' and 'the new French writers,' thoughts of whom enter Barbara's mind as she witnesses Eichmann delivering his testimony in the Jerusalem District Court:

Minute by minute throughout the hours the prisoner discoursed on the massacre without mentioning the word, covering all aspects of every question addressed to him with the meticulous indiscriminating reflex of a computing machine. [...] [Barbara] thought, it all feels like a familiar dream, and presently located the sensation as one that the anti-novelists induce. [...] At school she usually took the novels and plays of the new French writers with the sixth form. She thought, repetition, boredom, despair, going nowhere for nothing, all of which conditions are enclosed in a tight, unbreakable statement

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<sup>58</sup> Hosmer, 'An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark,' p.147.

<sup>59</sup> Robbe-Grillet, 'A Future for the Novel,' p.23.

of the times at hand. (*MG*, p.177)

Spark's decision to refer directly to the *nouveau roman* and its practitioners (the first and only time she would do so in any of her fictions) establishes an explicit connection between the effects produced in the narratives of 'the anti-novelists' and the horror of the trial itself. Bryan Cheyette elucidates this connection when he writes that 'Eichmann, like the authors of the anti-novel, turns people into objects and drains them of their humanity by using a deadening bureaucratic language.'<sup>60</sup>

Spark had first-hand experience of this 'deadening bureaucratic language,' having attended Eichmann's trial in June of 1961 with the intention of reporting on the event for both the *Observer* and BBC Radio's Third Programme. As she later remarked in an interview with Benjamin Ivry, it was not a monster that she recalled seeing in the District Court, but rather a dull, white-collar worker, who spoke of atrocities in the sanitising language of a bureaucratic report:

I found it absolutely horrifying to see, as Hannah Arendt said, 'the banality of evil.' This little man being tried, Eichmann, was always perfectly horrible to his own lawyer, but he clicked to attention whenever the judge spoke to him. He was accused of transporting some children to their fate in the camps, and he claimed that he wasn't responsible, because there had been a delay; if he had done it, it would have been done on time. Eichmann wasn't a huge man with horns on his head. He was a sort of weasel, but you meet his sort every day on the street, like a grocer or banker. Eichmann could only come out with these banal phrases, he never grasped the evil he had perpetrated. That's what was so shocking, that he was a little bad man, not a big bad man.<sup>61</sup>

Spark's appalled reaction towards Eichmann – this 'little bad man,' for whom the reality of Nazi terror was obscured beneath the 'banal' bureaucracy of transport timetables – never found its way onto the pages of the *Observer* or any radio feature.

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<sup>60</sup> Cheyette, *Muriel Spark*, p.71.

<sup>61</sup> Benjamin Ivry, 'A Sinister Affair: Muriel Spark in Conversation,' *The Economist* (US), 23rd November 1991, p.102.

Instead, the author wove her experience of the trial into *The Mandelbaum Gate* as an event witnessed by Barbara during her pilgrimage across Jerusalem. A Catholic convert of Jewish descent (like Spark herself), Barbara crosses the Holy Land in a determined attempt to feel at last ‘all of a piece, a Gentile Jewess, a private-judging Catholic, a shy adventuress’ (*MG*, p.194). In a novel preoccupied with the themes of free will and the fluidity of identity, however, Eichmann’s presence is a disturbing reminder of a mindset far removed from her own. His is a detached, mechanistic way of thinking – one Spark represents as devoid of original, independent thought and shackled instead to the conditions of Nazi law.

As her comments to Ivry reveal, Spark’s response to Eichmann bears the influence of Hannah Arendt’s contentious take on the criminal and his trial, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). Eichmann, Arendt controversially argued, was neither fiendish nor monstrous; for him, the systematic annihilation of six million Jews was an impersonal, abstract exercise – merely a matter of following rules and obeying orders, of arranging schedules and timetables with the utmost dedication and efficiency. Eichmann, the former chief of the Jewish Office of the Gestapo, struck Arendt as being entirely honest when he presented himself in court as a thoughtless bureaucrat, a small and far-removed part of a vast system of oppression and genocide, who could easily have been replaced by someone else. ‘The trouble with Eichmann,’ she claimed, ‘was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.’ This ‘new type of criminal,’ as the prosecution had described him, was driven by neither blood lust nor sadistic cruelty, but rather a

simple sense of duty to a state-sanctioned extermination scheme.<sup>62</sup>

The present section of this chapter examines Spark's translation of historical fact and first-hand experience into a fictional encounter in *The Mandelbaum Gate*, in a scene which marks a crucial turning point, not only in Barbara's quest for self-determination, but the course and *form* of the novel itself. Throughout, however, I return to Spark's developing, and often difficult, relationship with the *nouveau roman*. The urge for extreme objectification and the absence of intersubjectivity associated with this mode of writing, Spark discovered in the course of composing her novel, possessed the unsettling power to obfuscate and annul the reality of death and suffering, and could thus articulate Eichmann's terrifying detachment from the human dimension of his crimes.

### **'The lips in the glass-bound dock': Eichmann in Focus in *The Mandelbaum Gate***

By far the longest of her characteristically spare and economical novels, *The Mandelbaum Gate* constitutes something of an anomaly within Spark's distinctive oeuvre. An adventure story-cum-romantic comedy divided into two parts and centred around a set of English, Israeli and Palestinian characters scattered across a bisected Jerusalem in June of 1961, it lacks either the conceptual simplicity of the works that preceded it or the 'brief, brittle, nasty' qualities of the novella-length fictions that

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<sup>62</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p.276. This perception of Eichmann as 'terrifyingly normal' is shared by many other Holocaust writers, including Elie Wiesel, who admitted that he 'wanted to picture Eichmann as a monster. I wanted him to be a man like the Minotaur by Picasso - with three ears, four noses. But he was human' (Elie Wiesel, 'Some Questions That Remain Open,' in Asher Cohen and Charlotte Wardi, eds., *Comprehending the Holocaust: Historical and Literary Research* [Frankfurt: Verlag Peter Lang, 1988], pp.9-20 [p.16]).

followed in the years immediately afterwards.<sup>63</sup> Spark had expressed her eagerness to visit and write about contemporary, conflicted Jerusalem in a letter to her editor. By ensuring that she saw ‘different versions of the Holy Land,’ she believed, she might write her ‘best’ novel yet:

I want to set the action of the novel in the Holy Land where I think the symbols of my grandmother’s origins reside. [...]

[T]here are special complications in going to the Holy Land, because one cannot travel freely between Jordan and Israel [...].

I could go through the Israelis, but I get the impression that they are predominantly interested in showing off their achievements in modern Israel. I want to see all this, and the people connected with it, but I don’t want to be tied to one set.

I could go with the Catholics but they go in parties and so far as I can gather quite definitely exclude the modern ethos and all non-Christian aspects of the place. The priest who is probably the best authority on the Holy Land told me, “All the places of interest are in Jordan, the rest is not Christian, it won’t interest you.” [...]

The different versions of the Holy Land that I have heard are themselves significant, and part of my theme. Obviously the place is full of tensions, and I really feel I can make a good novel, probably my best.

I could write something for the *Observer* [...]. The Third Programme want me to do something about the Eichmann trial when it is finished. I want to go to the Trial while I am there and I think this should be easy enough.<sup>64</sup>

Racial and religious divisions; social and political unrest; traditional and contemporary aspects of Jerusalem; the significance of Eichmann’s ongoing trial: the contents of Spark’s letter read like a checklist of *The Mandelbaum Gate*’s principal

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<sup>63</sup> Robert Nye, ‘Gloria Deploras You Strikes Again [Review of *Not to Disturb*],’ *The Guardian*, 11<sup>th</sup> November 1971, p.9.

<sup>64</sup> Letter from Muriel Spark to Lovat ‘Rache’ Dickson, 26th May 1961, from 13 Baldwin Crescent, Camberwell, London. Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10607/15: Correspondence 1941-92, National Library of Scotland. Spark had enclosed a draft of the novel’s first chapter, entitled ‘The Gentile Jewesses’ (not to be confused with Spark’s short story of the same name, which was later published in 1963). Rache replied with great enthusiasm about the developing novel: ‘You are on to a big thing here, something on the scale of [Arnold Bennett’s] *The Old Wives’ Tale*. [...] I hope you will make this a long and full book: I can feel shaping in Miriam (I don’t think you have yet given her a name, but I have christened her that in my mind) a memorable character, someone like [Thomas Hardy’s] Tess who can never be forgotten.’ ‘As to going to the Middle East,’ he added, ‘don’t NOT go if it is going to help the book?’ (Letter from Lovat ‘Rache’ Dickson to Muriel Spark, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1961, Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10607/15: Correspondence 1941-92, National Library of Scotland).



themes.<sup>65</sup> The title of the novel's second chapter, 'Barbara Vaughan's Identity,' reveals another. Barbara's self-confessed 'state of conflict' (*MG*, p.23) – her hyphenated identity as a Gentile Jew, combined with the antagonistic demands of her Catholic faith and her sexual relationship with her newly divorced lover, Harry Clegg (whom, she feels, she can marry only if his marriage can be annulled by the Vatican) – extends into the turbulent history of the Middle East, and is emblematised in the divided city she attempts to cross.<sup>66</sup> Barbara's conviction that 'the essential thing about herself remained unspoken, uncategorized, unlocated' (*MG*, p.28) is frequently tested, however, by the categorising impulses and competing identity claims of those around her. The Foreign Office official and spy, Freddy Hamilton, immediately reduces her to a crude list of class and gender-based expectations: 'His first impression had been of a pleasant English spinster; she was a teacher of English at a girls' school; she was on a tour of the Holy Land' (*MG*, p.16). As Peter Kemp notes, a kind of 'social myopia' pervades these interactions, where characters, 'unwilling to tackle the difficulty and complexity of the individual,' are 'lazily prone to stop short at the type with its comfortingly familiar features.'<sup>67</sup> Unlike Spark herself, whose letter reveals a reluctance to be 'tied to one set' during her travels, characters such as Freddy are far happier with 'comfortingly familiar' appearances. The moment that Barbara diverges from the template of an English spinster abroad, having mentioned her Jewish heritage, she fills Freddy with a 'sense of her dangerousness' (*MG*, p.17) – a sense, that is, of her inherent otherness and unclassifiability.

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<sup>65</sup> A detailed discussion of each of these themes would far exceed the scope of the present chapter. For sustained analyses of the political and religious aspects of the novel as a whole, see: John Glavin, 'The Mandelbaum Gate: Muriel Spark's Apocalyptic Gag,' in David Herman, ed., *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp.153-72, and Adam Piette, 'Muriel Spark and the Politics of the Contemporary,' in Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp.52-62.

<sup>66</sup> That Spark named *The Mandelbaum Gate* after the security checkpoint between the Israeli and Jordanian sectors of Jerusalem underscores the thematic centrality of such divisions to her novel.

<sup>67</sup> Peter Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, p.100.

So far, so familiar, it might seem. Spark has, on the surface at least, set a comedy of manners in a ‘state of conflict,’ and loaded it with cultural misunderstandings, romantic complications and social blunders. But as evinced by the fear that grips Freddy on learning that Barbara is not quite what she appears (‘he now noticed the Jewishness of her appearance, something dark and intense’ [MG, p.17]), even mundane encounters come to betray deep-rooted prejudices and anxieties. Later, when an Israeli tour guide insists that Barbara is in fact a ‘whole Jew’ due to her matrilineal heritage, the protagonist comes to feel like a ‘victim deprived of fresh air and civil rights,’ sensing ‘her personal identity beginning to escape like smoke from among her bones’ (MG, p.27). The implications here are impossible to ignore; the sustained scrutiny of Barbara’s identity extends, of course, to modern Jewish history and the events of the Holocaust. The smoking bones viscerally evoke the crematoria ovens of Auschwitz, while the guide’s mock outrage at the upset he has caused – “I ask her a question, she makes a big thing of it that I am Gestapo” (MG, p.26) – refers explicitly to Nazi Germany and the Nuremberg laws. ‘In Nazi Germany,’ writes Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), ‘the Nuremberg Laws with their distinction between Reich citizens (full citizens) and nationals (second-class citizens without political rights) had paved the way for a development in which eventually all nationals of “alien blood” could lose their nationality by official decree.’<sup>68</sup> Whatever Barbara may make of her identity, therefore, under these laws she would, due to her Jewish mother, have been classified as a national and thus ‘deprived of fresh air and civil rights’ within a system representing extreme and uncompromising order.

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<sup>68</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland; New York: Meridian Books), p.288.

Given Eichmann's presence in Jerusalem at the time of these identity disputes, the implications of the Nuremberg laws loom large over the contemporary scene. Indeed, for all her insistence that the trial, by virtue of its being 'political and temporary,' represents 'something apart from her purpose' (*MG*, p.175) in the Holy Land, Barbara is confronted in the Jerusalem District Court with a logic that directly opposes and rejects her 'unique and unrepeatable' self (*MG*, p.25). Eichmann, as Cheyette argues, represents 'the ultimate determinist and false categorizer,' whose chillingly measured responses to cross-examination parallel the Nazis' systematic extermination campaign.<sup>69</sup> Spark constructs these responses from verbatim samples of Eichmann's real testimony, as though a purely fictional dialogue would fail to do justice to the hollow, dehumanising verbosity she had heard first-hand.<sup>70</sup> Rather like Charles Reznikoff's objectivist prose-poem, *Holocaust* (1975), which draws directly from courtroom accounts (including those from the Eichmann trial) of life and death in the concentration camps, these fragments of speech transform the narrative into a sinister echo chamber, reverberating with the real 'ritualistic lines' (*MG*, p.178) that saved Eichmann from having to speak or think for himself.<sup>71</sup>

*Bureau IV-B-4. Four-B-four*

I was not in charge of the operation itself, only with transportation...  
 Müller needed Himmler's consent.  
 I was not in a position to make any suggestions, only to obey orders.  
 And technical transport problems.  
 Strictly with time-tables and technical transport problems.  
 I was concerned strictly with time-tables and technical transport problems.

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<sup>69</sup> Bryan Cheyette, 'Writing Against Conversion: Muriel Spark and the Gentile Jewess,' in Martin McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction* (London: Palgrave, 2002), pp.95-112 (p.108).

<sup>70</sup> Spark's archive at the McFarlin Library contains a translated transcript of the minutes of the Eichmann trial. This includes Eichmann's full testimony, from which Spark underlines specific examples of evasiveness in his speech ('Photocopy of a typed translation of minutes of court sessions of the Eichmann trial,' Muriel Spark Papers, Box 39, Folders 1-4, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa).

<sup>71</sup> Charles Reznikoff, *Holocaust* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1975). I am grateful to Professor Sue Vice for suggesting the compositional similarity between Reznikoff's poem and Eichmann's speech, as represented by Spark.

*Bureau IV-B-4. Four-B-four-IV-B-4. (MG, p.178)*<sup>72</sup>

Even the textual arrangement of the testimony mirrors Eichmann's profound detachment from the crimes he perpetrated. Bracketed off between the twin headings, '*Bureau IV-B-4*' (a subsection of the Head Office for Reich Security, of which he was in charge), the echoes of Nazi commands are severed from their original context, becoming a dull list of routinised deeds without human significance. This is less a way of speaking than an act of burial – a relentless heaping of words on top of words, obfuscating and annulling the repercussions of Nazi terror. Both tortuous and torturous, this slow drip of information – 'technical transport problems. / Strictly with time-tables and technical transport problems' – convinces Barbara that she is losing her mind, having found herself 'caught in a conspiracy to prevent her brain from functioning' (MG, p.179). Like Eichmann, she is unable to think.

Thinking, or rather the failure to do so, lies at the centre of Arendt's concept of banal evil. 'The longer one listened to him,' she wrote of Eichmann, 'the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else.' For Arendt, Eichmann's imperviousness to critical thought – his reliance on the abundance of 'stock phrases and self-invented clichés' with which he communicated – provided him with 'the most reliable of safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such.'<sup>73</sup> Eichmann, she believed, existed in a world in which language was cut off from thought and judgement, where 'matter was subject to rigid "language rules."' 'It is rare,' Arendt remarks, 'to find [Nazi] documents in which

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<sup>72</sup> The same lines from which Spark constructs Eichmann's speech are underlined in her copy of the translated minutes of the trial.

<sup>73</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p.49, emphasis in original.

such bald words as “extermination,” “liquidation,” or “killing” occur. The prescribed code names for killing were “final solution,” “evacuation” (*Aussiedlung*), and “special treatment” (*Sonderbehandlung*).<sup>74</sup> Such ‘rules’ betray a refusal to engage with human reality, and by extension human mortality.

It was Spark’s own exposure to this surfeit of weightless language that left her, like Barbara, lost for words. The experience, she told her editor at the *New Yorker* in 1963, had proven so disturbing that it had left her ‘literally unable to talk about it’ ever since (a comment which accounts for her failure to produce a report of the trial for either print or radio).<sup>75</sup> This failure to speak – a failure, presumably, to make sense of Eichmann’s terrifying shallowness – coincided for the author with a paradoxical *excess* of language. Writing to her literary agent shortly after returning from Jerusalem, she noted how convoluted her recent correspondence had become, attributing this to the five long days she had spent listening to Eichmann’s testimony.<sup>76</sup> What emerged for Spark in the aftermath of the trial, then, was a curious sensation of absence and excess – a dearth of meaning against a superfluity of meaningless language. Eichmann, and by extension the trial itself, had come to seem absurd.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.85.

<sup>75</sup> Letter from Muriel Spark to Robert Henderson, 20<sup>th</sup> March 1963, from 13 Baldwin Crescent, etc., Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10607/18: General Correspondence, 1963, National Library of Scotland. In the same letter, Spark writes admiringly of Arendt’s reportage on the trial, which had appeared in the *New Yorker* as a series of articles before its publication as a book-length report. ‘[T]he Eichmann trial articles,’ she wrote, ‘are the best thing I’ve read on the subject.’ Henderson replied in agreement: ‘I admired the Eichmann trial series, too – and was astonished and fascinated, as well as horrified by them. One has been horrified so often that I began them wondering what more was left. There was plenty’ (Letter from Robert Henderson to Muriel Spark, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1963, Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10607/18: General Correspondence, 1963, National Library of Scotland).

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Muriel Spark to John Smith, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1961, from 13 Baldwin Crescent, etc., Muriel Spark Papers, Box 1, Folder 10: Correspondence with John Smith: May-September 1961, Washington University in St Louis Library.

The same sense of absurdity pervades the trial scene in *The Mandelbaum Gate*, where Barbara listens while ‘[t]he counsel for the defence consulted his document and drew [Eichmann’s] attention to specific names, Mistery this and that and their sons, locked in reality’ (*MG*, p.179). Changing the translation settings on her earphones between English, French and Italian fails to elucidate matters, as she wonders: ‘What was he talking about? The effect was the same in any language, and the terrible paradox remained, and the actual discourse was a dead mechanical tick, while its subject, the massacre, was living’ (*MG*, p.177). Here, the ‘living’ memory of the massacre sits uncomfortably alongside Eichmann’s meaningless regurgitations. Barbara now inhabits a glass box of her own. In a position terrifyingly similar to that of the accused, she finds herself screened off from the awful fates of ‘Mistery this and that,’ anaesthetised by a way of speaking that leaves no room for the victim to emerge. As her mind wanders, she begins to perceive Eichmann – and, by extension, herself – as ‘a character from the pages of a long *anti-roman*’ (*MG*, p.179), for whom the human reality of the Holocaust has been lost in translation.

Thoughtlessness; desensitised, mechanistic behaviour; a profound disengagement from reality: what is especially striking about the way in which Spark depicts the banality of evil as embodied in the figure of Eichmann (a depiction enhanced by the author’s references to the detached and dehumanised aura of the *nouveau roman*) is how closely these factors resemble the components of the comic as defined by Bergson, and explored earlier in relation to *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. In his recent essay, ‘Bergson and the Comedy of Horrors’ (2013), John Mullarkey argues that Bergson’s conceptualisation of the ‘origin of the comical’ – that is, of one ‘having

lost some of one's vitality, of becoming a living machine, a ridiculous and monstrous hybrid' – is merely 'the flip-side of the origin of horror':

[W]here the comic concerns what is alive and of value *making itself* inert and worthless, horror relates to a subject *being made* worthless and inert by *another*. What would be truly horrific in Bergsonian terms is not the monster *as* monster (being evil and loving it), but the banality, the sheer contingency of his or her being monstrous *to us* [...]. Indeed, the process whereby our vitality is *disregarded* [...] would lead, *in extremis*, to the collapse of even sadism (and sadistic laughter), which would still be an acknowledgement of a *minimal* intersubjectivity. Eventually, we would be regarded as pure objects. The horror of Auschwitz, then, is the historical corroboration of procedural death.<sup>77</sup>

With its discussion of the banal and contingent dimensions of monstrosity, and direct references to Auschwitz and 'procedural death,' Mullarkey's analysis of the horrific 'flip-side' of the Bergsonian comic bears an obvious relevance to Spark's depiction of Eichmann, whose language is terrifying because of the ease with which it renders subjects – like those 'Misters this and that' – 'worthless and inert' to murderous effect. The trial scene also maintains Eichmann's *own* inertness; the 'dead mechanical tick' of his voice, which relays verbatim streams of bureaucratic language, being certain evidence of what Bergson would identify as '*something mechanical encrusted on the living*.' As her interview with Ivry reveals, Spark had watched in horror as Eichmann '*clicked* to attention whenever the judge spoke to him,'<sup>78</sup> before responding with words which seem, to quote from Robbe-Grillet's manifesto for the *nouveau roman*, eerily 'without signification, without soul, without values' in their failure to express either the subjectivity of the speaker or acknowledge that of the victims.<sup>79</sup>

That the perpetrator and victims are rendered equally inhuman accounts for the scene's pervading sense of unreality, as well as Barbara's sense that she is losing her

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<sup>77</sup> John Mullarkey, 'Bergson and the Comedy of Horrors,' in S. E. Gontarski, Paul Ardoin, Laci Mattison, eds., *Understanding Bergson: Understanding Modernism* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp.243-55 (pp.248-9), all emphases in original.

<sup>78</sup> Ivry, 'A Sinister Affair,' p.102, emphasis mine.

<sup>79</sup> Robbe-Grillet, 'Nature, Humanism, Tragedy,' p.71.

mind.

On trial in *The Mandelbaum Gate*, then, is the purpose and human significance of the Eichmann trial itself. Before she enters the courtroom, Barbara is reminded by Saul Ephraim, an Israeli professor, that the trial is ““part of the history of the Jews”” (*MG*, p.175). Saul has good reason to think so, too. Unlike the Nuremberg trial in 1945, in which the prosecution relied heavily on documentary evidence in their case against Nazi leaders, the Eichmann trial foregrounded the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. Whereas Nuremberg was ‘a monumental documentary case,’ Shoshana Felman argues, ‘the Eichmann trial was a monumental testimonial case,’ designed to leave an indelible mark on the collective memory of mankind.<sup>80</sup> As David Cesarani details in his meticulous accounts of the trial, the Israeli prosecution team (led by Gideon Hausner) arranged for over a hundred witnesses to testify to the impact of Nazi measures in almost every country that had been affected, while aiming at the same time to represent as many aspects of anti-Semitism in pre-war Jewish life as possible.<sup>81</sup> Hausner, as Arendt details in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, even opened his address to the court not on behalf of the state he represented, but of ‘six million prosecutors’:

When I stand before you, judges of Israel, in this court, to accuse Adolf Eichmann, I do not stand alone. Here with me at this moment stand six million prosecutors. But alas, they cannot rise to level the finger of accusation in the direction of the glass dock and cry out *J'accuse* against the man who sits there. [...] Their blood cries to Heaven, but their voice cannot be heard. Thus it falls

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<sup>80</sup> Shoshana Felman, ‘A Ghost in the House of Justice: Death and the Language of the Law,’ *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities*, Vol. 13 (Special Issue: ‘Cultural Studies and the Law,’ July 2001), pp.241-82 (p.242).

<sup>81</sup> See David Cesarani, *Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a ‘Desk Murderer’* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007), pp.250-2, and *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes* (London: Vintage Books, 2004), pp.237-323.



to me to be their mouthpiece and to deliver the heinous accusation in their name.<sup>82</sup>

The trial, as evinced by Hausner's emotive opening address, represented for Felman something 'jurisprudentially revolutionary' – a 'legal process of translation of thousands of private, secret traumas into one collective, public and communally acknowledged one.'<sup>83</sup> The testimonies of the victims, televised and broadcast around the world, served not only to portray a long and brutal history of anti-Semitism, but to present the Holocaust as the latest, and most extreme, manifestation of evil within this timeline.

For Arendt, though, the efforts of the Israeli prosecution to weave a human narrative of past suffering amounted only to 'bad history and cheap rhetoric,' manifesting an enormous discrepancy between the extraordinary shallowness of the perpetrator and what the prosecution could make of him on ideological grounds. 'It was clearly at cross purposes with putting Eichmann on trial,' she wrote, 'suggesting that perhaps he was only an innocent executor of some mysteriously foreordained destiny.'<sup>84</sup> What Eichmann's crimes represented instead, she believed, was a fundamental rupture in the continuity of moral and legal thought – not the endpoint of any pre-existing narrative, but a signal of the collapse of existing frames of meaning, and of the need to redefine these frames in the wake of a new kind of criminal. 'Not only are all our political concepts and definitions insufficient for an understanding of totalitarian phenomena,' Arendt contends in her 1953 essay, 'Mankind and Terror,' 'but also all our categories of thought and standards of judgement seem to explode in

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<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p.260.

<sup>83</sup> Shoshana Felman, 'Theatres of Justice: Arendt in Jerusalem, the Eichmann Trial, and the Redefinition of Meaning in the Wake of the Holocaust,' *Theoretical Inquiries into Law*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (July 2000), pp.465-507 (p.492).

<sup>84</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p.19.

our hands the instant we try to apply them.’<sup>85</sup> Eichmann, she felt, was not to be understood as the embodied culmination of millennia of anti-Semitism, but as a thoughtless bureaucrat whose motivations were strictly careerist. ‘Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement,’ she insists, ‘he had no motives at all.’<sup>86</sup>

The banality of evil thus serves not as a comprehensive explanation for Eichmann’s crimes, but points instead to a phenomenological blind spot – a space of *unknowing* – that existing categories of thought and judgement fail to elucidate. This failure, however, holds for Arendt a crucial ‘lesson’ of its own, distinct from the extended history lesson being taught in the District Court: ‘That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together.’<sup>87</sup> The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman expresses something similar when he writes that the mass destruction of the Jews ‘was accompanied not by the uproar of emotions, but the dead silence of unconcern.’<sup>88</sup> Despite his verbosity, Eichmann personifies this ‘dead silence’ completely – something brought into sharp focus through the transcribed extracts of his pre-trial interrogation by the Israeli police officer, Captain Avner W. Less. As Eichmann describes in exhaustive detail the Byzantine structures of the Third Reich, it is his resistance to independent thought and emotional identification that emerges most prominently:

[Bureau] IV-B-4 never decided anything on the strength of its own judgement and authority. It never would have entered my head to mess myself up with a decision of my own. And neither, as I’ve said before, did any of my staff ever make a decision of his own. All decisions were based on a) the relevant Reich

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<sup>85</sup> Hannah Arendt, ‘Mankind and Terror,’ in Jerome Kohn, ed., *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), pp.297-306 (p.302).

<sup>86</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p.287.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p.288.

<sup>88</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p.74.

laws and accompanying implementation orders; b) the police regulations, the decrees, orders, and instructions of Himmler and the Head of the Security Police – those were our legislative bases [...]. The loyalty oath in itself called for unquestioning obedience. So naturally we had to comply with the laws and regulations.<sup>89</sup>

Notable here, against the intricate yet clearly defined operations of Nazi law, is the threat of ‘mess’ – the chaos heralded by emotion and personal judgement. Eichmann, it seems, would have felt guilt only had he not acted with ‘unquestioning obedience’ and thus disrupted the perfect order in which he served. The criminal thus stood for something unprecedented and uniquely dangerous; his thoughtless, emotionless complicity could cause greater suffering than actions founded upon malign intent precisely because it allowed him to follow commands without contesting them, to devote himself wholly and unquestioningly (and, as he states, ‘naturally’) to a pre-existing order. In this sense, Eichmann might be read not only as ‘a character from the pages of a long *anti-roman*,’ but a deeply disturbing version of its author; he demonstrates a perspective which, committed purely to the surface, functions as a ‘tool,’ as Kristin Ross described earlier, ‘for conducting a set of technical, almost administrative operations based on criteria of efficacy.’<sup>90</sup>

It is this shallow and single-minded devotion to duty, as opposed to a deep-rooted anti-Semitism, that Barbara registers in the courtroom. Crucially, Spark has her protagonist arrive at the trial during its ‘boring phase,’ after ‘the impassioned evidence from survivors of the death-camps was over.’ Having missed the survivors’ testimonies, Barbara is left with only the absent presence that remains: ‘the lips in the glass-bound dock [which] continued to move’ (*MG*, p.178). Like Arendt before her,

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<sup>89</sup> Jochen von Lang and Claus Sibyll, eds., *Eichmann Interrogated: Transcripts from the Archives of the Israeli Police* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), p.124.

<sup>90</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, p.76.

Spark chooses here to make Eichmann her prime focus, confronting Barbara directly with the methodical, detached, dehumanising and senselessly sensible language of the desk murderer, until she is ‘taken in by the certainty, immediately irresistible, that this dull phase was in reality the desperate heart of the trial’ (*MG*, p.179) (Re)positioning Eichmann’s cold-blooded determinism at the trial’s ‘desperate heart’ thus constitutes a radical revisioning of the historical moment – a decentring of the witness testimonies and the ideological implications that comprised the Israeli prosecution’s performance of justice. It was by taking such an approach, Spark believed, that she felt she had come to disappoint some Israeli readers of the novel: ‘With the Israeli readers having suffered greatly,’ she later reflected, ‘they obviously looked for a great deal of that suffering to be – as with the Holocaust – to be emphasised. However I didn’t emphasise [this aspect of] the Eichmann trial.’<sup>91</sup> The foregrounding techniques that Spark applies – her selective sampling and repetition of Eichmann’s speech, her sustained focus on his moving lips, and her refusal to depict the testimonies of his victims – thus strive not for objective realism, but announce themselves instead as aesthetic articulations of the chilling thoughtlessness and deification of duty that, she believed, lay at the core of the trial.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Hosmer, ‘An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark,’ p.144.

<sup>92</sup> In this sense, Spark’s narrative techniques bear a notable similarity to the cinematic ones used in Eyal Sivan and Rony Brauman’s 1999 film, *The Specialist*. The film, which begins with a dedication to Arendt, is a carefully edited version of original footage of the Eichmann trial, with special emphasis placed upon the figure behind the glass. As Sivan provocatively insists: ‘I was right to focus on the perpetrator. Because he’s talking from inside the system, Eichmann’s testimony is a hundred times more powerful than any survivor’s’ (quoted in Frances Guerin, ‘The Perpetrator in Focus: Turn of the Century Holocaust Remembrance in *The Specialist*,’ *Law Text Culture*, Vol. 10 [2006], pp.167-94 [p.167]). Accordingly, much of the footage used in the film is of Eichmann’s dead-eyed gaze, while the voices of those outside the frame are often distorted or drowned out altogether. For a more detailed discussion of the film and its relation to both Arendt and Spark, see my essay, ‘“Repetition, boredom, despair”’: Muriel Spark and the Eichmann Trial,’ in Jenni Adams and Sue Vice, eds., *Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2012), pp.165-84 (pp.165-7). *The Specialist* is also discussed in relation to Spark, Arendt and Rebecca West in Lyndsey Stonebridge’s later essay, ‘Writing after Nuremberg: The Judicial Imagination in the Age of the Trauma Trial,’ in Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp.101-9.

‘It was a highly religious trial,’ Barbara notes sardonically – and she is right. Not religious, of course, in the sense described by Saul, as a confirmation of the survival of the Jewish faith, but in relation instead to the fascist doctrine worshipped by the man in the glass box: ‘the complex theology in which not [Eichmann’s] own actions, not even Hitler’s, were the theme of his defence, but the honour of the Supreme Being, the system, and its least tributary, Bureau IV-B-4’ (*MG*, pp.179-80). Emotionally screened off from the barbarism of Nazi rule, Eichmann can do no more than automatically relay, *ad nauseam*, directives from the Bureau. It seems appropriate, then, for Spark to invoke the clinical factuality of the *nouveau roman* to render ‘the theme of the defence’ – the unnatural order followed, as Eichmann attested in his pre-trial interrogation, ‘naturally’ and with ‘unquestioning obedience.’ Eichmann, as Allan Massie asserts, is a ‘ghastly parody of the believer.’<sup>93</sup> Set up against Barbara’s quest for spiritual growth, his ‘highly religious’ submission to ‘an imperative deity named Bureau IV-B-4, of whom he was the High Priest’ is a vocation perversely parodied (*MG*, p.179). In this sense, Spark’s representation of Eichmann as a depthless figure from a *nouveau roman* corresponds perfectly with the suggestion, proposed in Robert Eaglestone’s recent book, *The Broken Voice: Reading Post-Holocaust Literature* (2017), that ‘literature or testimony about perpetrators should, if Arendt is right, [...] be very bad – terrible, actually – at the representation and so the understanding of this “banal” evil.’<sup>94</sup> Eaglestone argues that ‘texts about perpetrators should be about *nobodies* in this sense, failed selves (like Eichmann) rejecting an active, thoughtful subjectivity for thoughtlessness and forgetfulness,’ because ‘the

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<sup>93</sup> Allan Massie, ‘Calvinism and Catholicism in Muriel Spark,’ in Alan Bold, ed., *Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision* (London: Vision Press, 1984), pp.94-107 (p.99).

<sup>94</sup> Robert Eaglestone *The Broken Voice: Reading Post-Holocaust Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.39.

large, complex systems which make up the “banal” evil are precisely aimed at negating subjectivity, personal agency, and choice, the representation of which are core to literature.’<sup>95</sup>

A certain irony hangs, however, over Spark’s contemptuous treatment of the ‘*anti-roman*’ and ‘the new French writers’ as a form of shorthand to signify the rigidity of thought and deification of order that she registered in Eichmann. As Robbe-Grillet would attest in various works of autobiography and criticism, his approach to the *nouveau roman* (and the disorienting ordering strategies depicted therein) was predicated, in fact, upon an outright *rejection* of the extreme order represented by totalitarian systems including Nazi Germany. In his 1977 essay, ‘Order and Disorder in Film and Fiction,’ the author identifies the exposure and undermining of unnatural orders as the central preoccupation of novels including *Jealousy*, *The Erasers* (1953) and *The Voyeur*, along with films such as *The Immortal* (1963) and 1961’s *Last Year at Marienbad* (the former directed by Robbe-Grillet and the latter by Alain Resnais, with Robbe-Grillet writing the screenplay). This preoccupation, he writes, is often expressed self-reflexively through his texts’ inclusion of ‘characters who organise order,’ or ‘a narrator, who wishes to organise the world at a glance’; the inevitable undoing of such attempts only highlights the orders’ various contrivances.<sup>96</sup> Robbe-Grillet relates this recurrent theme to political, and specifically postwar, realities:

Established order always claims to be natural. And it is rather striking that in

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p.40, emphasis in original.

<sup>96</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘Order and Disorder in Film and Fiction,’ trans. Bruce Morrisette, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Autumn 1977), pp.1-20 (pp.8-9). We might note, for example, the doomed and ultimately self-destructive attempts of the detective in *The Erasers* to piece together the narrative of a murder, the subject of *In the Labyrinth*’s failed quest to shape the chaotic flux of his reality into something resembling a coherent order, or (perhaps most famously) the plight of the couple in *Last Year at Marienbad*, who find themselves condemned to stalk the rooms of a labyrinthine hotel in the vain hope of determining whether or not they had met the year before, and, if so, what might have taken place between them.

every society, even the maddest, established order is presented to the public by its leaders as something quite natural – that is, just and definitive and so forth. [...] In Nazi Germany, which was a really mad society, there were theoreticians who presented as quite natural the ‘fact’ that the so-called Aryan race should dominate the other races. This was ‘natural.’ This is what Marx called ideology. In sum, ideology is established order which is masked as natural order, which pretends to be not a creation of the society but, on the contrary, a sort of divine law dictated, so to speak, by God.<sup>97</sup>

Masquerading as ‘natural’ and God-given, the fascist desire for perfect order – the use of race, in particular, as a means of categorising, isolating and annihilating beings – comes to render the world alien and inorganic. For Robbe-Grillet, these were deeply personal concerns. In his autobiographical novel, *Ghosts in the Mirror* (1984), he recalls his childhood fear of being ‘sucked reluctantly into the heart of an unknown, unstable, irrational liquid universe ready to engulf [him].’<sup>98</sup> This was a universe that the author associated closely with Nazi power; his parents, anti-Semites and Nazi collaborators, had themselves been ‘sucked’ into this very system.<sup>99</sup> This formative experience, he acknowledged, had drawn him to ‘problematic experimentation[s] with fiction and its contradictions [...] as the most promising arena in which to act out [...] the fight to the death between order and freedom, the insoluble conflict between rational classification and subversion, otherwise known as disorder.’<sup>100</sup>

While Spark would wait until *The Driver’s Seat* before staging her own ‘fight to the death between order and freedom,’ *The Mandelbaum Gate* pursues its own peculiar resolution of Eichmann’s unsettling presence within Barbara’s plot. Recoiling from Eichmann’s perverse submission to the will of an operation now in ruins, Barbara realises as if ‘without awareness’ (*MG*, p.177) that she will not only complete

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp.3-4.

<sup>98</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Ghosts in the Mirror*, trans. Jo Levy (London: John Calder, 1988), p.33.

<sup>99</sup> As detailed in James Miller, ‘In the Labyrinth,’ *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), pp.123-66.

<sup>100</sup> Robbe-Grillet, *Ghosts in the Mirror*, p.133.

her pilgrimage, but will wed her lover regardless of whether or not his marriage can be annulled by the Vatican. This curious moment of *anagnorisis*, seemingly prompted by the ‘repetition, boredom, [and] despair’ experienced at the trial, extends to the form of the novel itself. The languorous, protracted pace of its first half gives way to a frenzied final section, completed in a fifty-seven-hour stretch of writing that led to its author’s hospitalisation.<sup>101</sup> Awash with plot contrivances including unlikely love affairs, espionage, murder and kidnap, these final hundred or so pages culminate with the heroine (having crossed the border back into the Israeli sector of Jerusalem, while masquerading as a nun and carrying falsified identification papers), ‘run[ning] along the pavements of the sweet, rational streets’ (*MG*, p.300). Having referenced the apparent stagnancy of the ‘*anti-roman*,’ Spark appears to overcompensate for its perceived plotlessness with a heightened, delirious fictionality. A generous reading of this extravagant ending might consider how, just as fractured Jerusalem once signified Barbara’s conflicted sense of self, these ‘sweet, rational streets’ reflect the gleeful shedding of roles and rules, of resisting myopic visions and taking in a rich, expansive view of her life and surroundings (never to be ‘tied to one set,’ as Spark wrote in her letter to her editor).

Even for Spark, though, this interpretation would ultimately prove unconvincing. Despite her initial belief, expressed to her editor, that *The Mandelbaum Gate* might become her best novel, she eventually distanced herself from it, citing its hurried and uneven ending as a particular weakness. ‘I don’t like that book awfully much,’ she admitted five years after its publication, ‘it’s out of proportion. In the

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<sup>101</sup> For an account of the novel’s composition (including its frantic final stages), see Mary Holland, ‘The Prime of Muriel Spark,’ *The Observer Colour Magazine*, 17<sup>th</sup> October 1965, pp.8-10. ‘I got rather ill finishing it,’ Spark recalled of the uninterrupted stretch of writing that led to the completion of the novel. ‘I thought I’d never get my fingers off the pencil and didn’t dare go to the doctor to ask him to straighten them’ (p.10).



beginning it's slow, and in the end it's very rapid, it races [...]. I decided never again to write a long book, [but to] keep them short.'<sup>102</sup> And she did. From *The Public Image* in 1968 through to *The Hothouse by the East River* in 1973, Spark composed a series of slight, elliptical novels, all scrupulously mean in their economy, with narratives that privileged surface details over emotional depth. 'I objectified everything much more after that,' she told Martin McQuillan in 2001. 'I wrote books more like *Not to Disturb* and *The Driver's Seat* and was very much more influenced by the French writers of the *nouveau roman*.'<sup>103</sup>

**'Drastic reductions' and 'tell-tale stains': Writing Under/Against the Influence in *The Driver's Seat***

Arriving late sometimes and never  
Quite expected, still they come,  
Bringing a folded meaning home  
Between the lines, inside the letter.  
– Muriel Spark, 'The Messengers'  
(1967)<sup>104</sup>

Spark's comment to McQuillan, concerning her decision to begin writing fiction 'influenced by the French writers of the *nouveau roman*,' might seem strange, and perhaps even disconcerting, for two distinct reasons. For one, the *nouveau roman* was certainly not a new influence on the author's writing at the end of the 1960s, as evinced by her account of the composition of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* a decade

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<sup>102</sup> Ian Gillham, 'Keeping it Short: Muriel Spark Talks about Her Books to Ian Gillham,' *The Listener*, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1970, pp.411-3 (p.412).

<sup>103</sup> Martin McQuillan, "'The Same Informed Air'", p.215.

<sup>104</sup> Muriel Spark, 'The Messengers,' in *All the Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), p.37, ll.1-4.

earlier. Secondly, given the unnerving likeness drawn in *The Mandelbaum Gate* between the works of ‘the new French novelists’ and Eichmann’s deathly bureaucratic language, Spark’s claim that she had begun to write under the influence of such authors might seem, at worst, a betrayal of the crimes that she had heard about at length in the Jerusalem District Court. In *The Second World War in Contemporary British Fiction* (2011), Victoria Stewart neatly encapsulates the nature of the latter ‘problem’: the uncomfortable notion that ‘Spark somehow learns from, or even imitates, Eichmann’s delivery, as much as she learns from the new novelists that their project is a shared one.’<sup>105</sup> What I wish to suggest, however, is that what Spark describes to McQuillan is a more committed mode of engagement with the *nouveau roman* than had been seen in her previous work. Indeed, in both *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and *The Mandelbaum Gate*, the *nouveau roman* is invoked only to be rejected, as if in disgust, by both the narrator and central character; *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* ends by contrasting the dispassionate murder of Merle Coverdale with a slapstick brawl and the hopeful affirmation of ‘another world than this,’ while *The Mandelbaum Gate*’s frenetic final third is initiated by Barbara’s impulsive decision to turn away from ‘the character from the pages of a long *anti-roman*’ and complete her pilgrimage. Rather than simply attacking the *nouveaux romanciers* for participating in a form of fascism of representation, Spark’s decision to write under their influence in *The Driver’s Seat* constitutes an attempt to engage with, and ultimately confront, the anti-novel’s aura of objectification and dehumanisation from the inside out.

It is of course significant that, in discussing with McQuillan the *nouveau roman*’s influence on her fiction after *The Mandelbaum Gate*, Spark should mention

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<sup>105</sup> Victoria Stewart, *The Second World War in Contemporary British Fiction: Secret Histories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p.48.

her will to ‘objectif[y] everything much more.’ The slippery distinction between the objectivist and objectifying intentions of the *nouveaux romanciers* would form one of the key debates surrounding the ‘new novel.’ For early critics, including Barthes in ‘Objective Literature,’ the work of writers such as Robbe-Grillet could be characterised by their seemingly *chosiste*, or ‘thing-oriented,’ aesthetic, whereby individuals and their environments are represented with apparently unmediated objectivity. As one of the chief practitioners of the supposed *l’école du regard*, Robbe-Grillet was thought to ‘impos[e] a unique order of apprehension: the sense of sight’ in his narratives, so that ‘the [narrated] object is no longer the centre of correspondences, a welter of sensations and symbols: *it is merely an optical resistance.*’<sup>106</sup> For Robbe-Grillet, however, this assessment was not entirely accurate. In ‘A Future for the Novel,’ the author claims that ‘[o]bjectivity in the ordinary sense of the word – total impersonality of observation – is all too obviously an illusion.’<sup>107</sup> His novels are ‘objective,’ he insists, only insofar as they relate the orientation of a *subjective* consciousness, from the specific, limited perceptual position that Barthes identifies. In ‘New Novel, New Man’ (1961), he attempts to clarify this earlier misreading of his fiction:

Since there were many objects in [the *nouveau roman*], and since there was something unaccustomed about them, a special meaning was quickly attached to the word “objectivity,” uttered in their regard by certain critics, though in a very special sense: oriented toward the object. Taken in its habitual sense – neutral, cold, impartial, the word became an absurdity. Not only is it *a man* who, in my novels for instance, describes everything, but it is the least neutral, the least impartial of men: always engaged, on the contrary, *in an emotional adventure of the most obsessive kind*, to the point of often *distorting his vision* and of producing imaginings *close to delirium.*<sup>108</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Barthes, ‘Objective Literature,’ p.14, emphasis mine.

<sup>107</sup> Robbe-Grillet, ‘A Future for the Novel,’ p.23.

<sup>108</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘New Novel, New Man,’ *For a New Novel*, pp.133-42 (p.138, emphases mine).

Combining tonal flatness and forensic detail with an extreme and unmediated subjectivity, Robbe-Grillet's narratives speak not of objectivity but *objectification*. Novels including *The Voyeur*, *Jealousy* and *In the Labyrinth* are each narrated by an unidentified objectifying consciousness – what Bruce Morrissette has termed the 'je-néant,' or 'absent-I,' narrator – which reduces everything in its view to a set of meticulous measurements and positionings.<sup>109</sup> This reduction is achieved, as Hanna Meretoja asserts, via a narrative gaze which causes characters to 'merge into the thing-world.'<sup>110</sup> Take, for instance, the narrator's conspicuous view of a woman, referred to simply as A..., brushing her hair in *Jealousy*:

The brush descends the length of the loose hair with a faint noise somewhere between the sound of a breath and a crackle. No sooner has it reached the bottom than it quietly rises again toward the head, where the whole surface of its bristles sinks in before gliding over the black mass again. [...] The head leans to the right, offering the hair more readily to the brush. Each time the latter lands at the top of its cycle behind the nape of the neck, the head leans farther to the right and then rises again with an effort, while the right hand, holding the brush, moves away in the opposite direction. The left hand, which loosely confines the hair between the wrist, the palm and the fingers, releases it for a second and then closes on it again, gathering the strands together with a firm, mechanical gesture, while the brush continues its course to the extreme tips of hair.<sup>111</sup>

The female subject at the centre of this scene is barely identifiable, monitored with such meticulous precision that she is reduced to little more than an abstract play of shapes, lines and measurements, with her movements likened to the preprogrammed functions and 'mechanical gestures' of an automaton. A certain fear and violence is implicit in the narrator's attempts to control a perceived threat of (specifically *feminine*) disorder – evident in the 'extreme tips' of her 'black mass' of hair, for example – by reconfiguring and subsuming it within a rigid geometric order. That the

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<sup>109</sup> Bruce Morrissette, *The Novels of Robbe-Grillet* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p.113.

<sup>110</sup> Hanna Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory: The Crisis and Return of Storytelling from Robbe-Grillet to Tournier* (London: Palgrave, 2014), p.94.

<sup>111</sup> Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Calder, 1959), p.66.

woman's name is only partially revealed as A... is similarly suggestive; is the narrator demonstrating a sense of mastery by eliding it purposefully, in a way that mirrors the fragmented representation of her body in the text, or does its incompleteness suggest that the woman has managed to elude complete narration – to remain, at least partly, private and unknowable? This ambiguity, to which I shall return in the following chapter, is only heightened by the novel's title. The French *jalousie* signifies both 'jealousy' and the *jalousie* window (the slanted glass slats of which provide the observer with only a partial outlook), and thereby underscores the text's preoccupation with the relationship between the restricted nature of its narrative viewpoint and the obsessive, emotionally distorted perception of its narrator. In this novel, notes Stephen Heath, the 'Robbe-Grillet *chosiste* is really Robbe-Grillet [the] novelist of the subjective world of the pathologically disturbed.'<sup>112</sup>

Participating in what their author describes as 'a double movement of creation and destruction,' the obsessively rendered scenes in Robbe-Grillet's fiction thus bear traces of a narrative *violence*, whereby the living subject is rendered increasingly obscure and inhuman with each successive description.<sup>113</sup> This did not go unnoticed by Spark; Robbe-Grillet, she remarked, 'is doing something new in his precision. I believe that he was a sighter – a gunsighter – during the war, where every little millimetre counted. And one does see this in his obsession with exactitude.'<sup>114</sup> Spark's sly conflation of voyeurism and violent intent ('a sighter – a gunsighter') is especially telling here, suggesting her recognition that a novel such as *Jealousy* aims not at total

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<sup>112</sup> Stephen Heath, *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing* (London: Elek, 1972), p.116.

<sup>113</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'Time and Description in Fiction Today,' *For a New Novel*, pp.143-56 (p.148).

<sup>114</sup> Israel Shenker, 'Portrait of a Woman Reading: Muriel Spark Interviewed by Israel Shenker,' *Book World*, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1968, p.2. An account of Robbe-Grillet's wartime experience is provided in Ilona Leki, *Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Boston: Twayne, 1983).

objectivity, but carries instead a foreboding sense of its narrator's dangerous and desubjectifying presence. The same crazed compulsion to order and objectify beings and their surroundings is evident throughout *The Driver's Seat*. Described by Spark as 'a study, in a way, of self-destruction,'<sup>115</sup> the novel narrates, in meticulous, clinically precise detail, the final few days in the life of a woman named Lise, who plots her own murder in what Aidan Day describes as 'an attempt to break out of her felt sense of distance from reality' by 'occupy[ing] – as an autonomous, willing agent – the driver's seat of her own life,' and thus escaping the suffocating and unnatural order that she has come to inhabit.<sup>116</sup>

From the outset, *The Driver's Seat* appears saturated with a stifling sense of geometry redolent of the anti-novel.<sup>117</sup> Lise's life, the reader learns, has long been marked by a deadening rigidity, from the curiously symmetrical distribution of her work colleagues ('she has five girls under her and two men. Over her are two women and five men'), to the fixed shape of her mouth, with its lips permanently 'pressed together like the ruled line of a balance sheet' (*DS*, p.9). Indeed, Robbe-Grillet could himself qualify as the famously 'studious and strict-principled' architect of Lise's 'austere' designer apartment – a strictly minimalist, 'clean-lined and clear' space, the furnishings of which are built from once 'swaying tall pines,' which are now 'subdued into silence and into obedient bulks' (*DS*, p.15). Lise has come to resemble one of these lifeless bulks; she is subdued and dutifully silent, her body dissolving seamlessly

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<sup>115</sup> Ian Gillham, 'Keeping it Short,' p.412.

<sup>116</sup> Day, 'Parodying Postmodernism,' pp.328-9.

<sup>117</sup> 'It seems that we are going to have to put up with an even sheerer Spark, a writer growing more and more parsimonious in the provision of interpretative hand-outs,' lamented Frank Kermode in his review of the novel. 'Perhaps,' he added, 'we must not mind if her novels at first bewilder and disappoint us. We shall have to hang on to the idea that she is a much more difficult and important artist than her reputation as an entertainer has allowed many to believe, and hope in the long run to catch up with her' ('Sheerer Spark,' p.425).

‘into the dignity of unvarnished pinewood,’ so that her home, even when she is present, seems unnervingly ‘uninhabited’ (*DS*, p.14). As she lies motionless but for her ‘eye-slits open[ing] from time to time,’ with her body framed by ‘the bed-supports, the door, the window frame, the hanging cupboard, the storage space, the shelves, the desk that extends, the tables that stack’ (*DS*, p.15), she resembles the two-dimensional subject of a Cubist painting, her form eerily indistinguishable from ‘the thing-world’ that encloses it – one dull surface among many.<sup>118</sup>

Examining scenes such as this one, Day notes how ‘Spark’s invocation [...] of Robbe-Grillet’s descriptive exactitude’ functions to serve the ‘satiric point [...] that authentic, organic human presence is absent in a space that signifies only the repression of natural energy.’ Echoing the style of the *nouveau roman*, he argues, has enabled Spark to satirise ‘an entire Western world that has committed itself to an effacement of living reality, to a preoccupation with exteriors rather than interiors, surfaces rather than depths.’<sup>119</sup> Such a reading might envisage *The Driver’s Seat*, set as it is within a myriad of anonymous and seemingly interchangeable interiors, including department stores, airports, designer apartments and chain hotels, and featuring numerous, prosaic scenes of tourism and consumption, as emblematic of what Fredric Jameson describes as ‘the inner truth of that newly emergent social order of late capitalism,’ which is distinguishable, as the previous chapter explored, by a waning of affect associated with schizophrenia.<sup>120</sup> In this light, a convincing case can be made for Lise – a tourist and consumer whose exact age, surname, personal life and familial relations remain unspecified, unknown or simply inconsequential – as an

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<sup>118</sup> Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory*, p.94.

<sup>119</sup> Day, ‘Parodying Postmodernism,’ pp.326-7.

<sup>120</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society,’ in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), pp.1-20 (p.3).

avatar for the blankness of postmodernity, whose lack of history communicates the Jamesonian schizophrenia of a perpetual present.<sup>121</sup> If Spark had a target in mind, however, it seems less likely to be a hopelessly detached and consumerist Western world than the *nouveau roman* itself.<sup>122</sup> As the details of Lise's home, appearance and work indicate, Spark does not appear to invoke the *nouveau roman* for any satirical purpose so much as to *recreate* an exaggerated version of it as a textual prison – or, perhaps more fittingly (given the preceding discussion of *The Mandelbaum Gate*), a glass box within which her protagonist finds herself trapped. In this sense, descriptions of Lise's 'detail warden of a mouth' (*DS*, p.9) and the supposed 'dignity' inherent in her seemingly 'uninhabited' living space are particularly revealing; Lise, having internalised the objectifying and dehumanising gaze of her own *nouveau romancier*, has monitored and minimised her body and behaviour fastidiously, becoming a living embodiment of the 'distinct and smooth' surface advocated by Robbe-Grillet himself.<sup>123</sup>

That *The Driver's Seat* should begin with a reference to 'drastic reductions' (*DS*, p.1) – relating here to the set of discounted dresses encountered by Lise in a department store – is thus far from incidental. As if obeying the philosophy of the *nouveau roman* in which they are contained, characters in the novel restrict their interactions with people and things accordingly. A customer in an airport bookshop purchases titles based purely on the colours of their covers, for example, while the attempted seduction of Lise by her lecherous admirer, Bill, is limited to Bill's demand

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<sup>121</sup> See Fredric Jameson, 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,' in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), pp.1-54.

<sup>122</sup> In contrast, the novels written immediately before and after *The Driver's Seat*, *The Public Image* and *Not to Disturb* respectively, can be seen to draw upon the *nouveau roman*'s preoccupation with surface details at the expense of psychological depth to target various contemporary vacuities, from the cult of celebrity to the image-making industry (as explored in the previous chapter).

<sup>123</sup> Robbe-Grillet, 'A Future for the Novel,' p.19.



of a daily, regimented orgasm as he ‘stares ahead with glazed and quite unbalanced eyes’ which are ‘too wide open to signify anything but some mental distance from reality’ (*DS*, p.35). In instances such as these, the familiar components of the Bergsonian comic are evoked to absurd and unnerving effect, as characters regard themselves and one another as beings devoid of inner lives and emotional depths. In this novel, tears are stimulated by neither sadness nor hilarity, but by the lachrymatory agent released by the policemen patrolling the streets (*DS*, p.99). Even the arrival of laughter, welcomed by Bergson as ‘an immediate [social] *corrective*,’ which ‘singles out and represses a special kind of absent-mindedness in men and events,’ only emphasises the insensibility of the storyworld and its inhabitants.<sup>124</sup> The person laughing merely comes to resemble a newly-detonated ‘container of laughing-gas’ (*DS*, p.17), a component part of a vast network of similarly mindless, automatic processes.

It is this agonising ‘distance from reality’ that Lise feels compelled to bridge. In keeping with her name, which resembles the French *lire/lisent* (‘to read’/ ‘they read’), she has long been defined by the ease with which she can be comprehended and thus controlled by others – slotting neatly, for example, into the rigid, gender-imbalanced office hierarchy ‘where she has worked continually, except for the months of illness, for sixteen years and some months’ (*DS*, p.9). This glimpse at a past aberration is not unintentional; Lise has slid from control before and is to do so again, as her eyes widen and her lips part ‘a fragment more open than usual’ (*DS*, p.72). For Patricia Waugh, these parted lips (a detail repeated an excessive thirteen times within

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<sup>124</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p.88.

this short novel's hundred or so pages)<sup>125</sup> form part of *The Driver's Seat's* 'deep poetic structure,' made up of 'a rhythm of *containment*' comprised of 'interiors, bodies, clothing and uniforms, veils [...] – and *expulsion* – shouts, tears, steam, streams, [...] violence, murder.'<sup>126</sup> If Lise's old, meticulously regulated life can be read as an orderly, enclosed text in its own right, the new rhythm of violent, passionate '*expulsion*' that characterises her experiences in the narrative present suggests a tearing apart of preexisting narratives, as she dictates her own plot by hunting for a man to murder her. 'Who knows her thoughts?' wonders her narrator with an anxious, uncharacteristic interest in character psychology, '[w]ho can tell?' (*DS*, p.50).<sup>127</sup>

Readers of *The Driver's Seat* likely find themselves compelled to ask similar questions. Lise has broken from a rigid and artificial order seemingly lifted from the pages of an anti-novel only to ensnare herself within a deadly plot of her own devising. Why escape one degraded reality only to seek death in another, and why execute this plan with such morbid precision (specifying that her wrists and ankles are to be bound with pairs of men's neckties, and that the first stab she receives will be directed at her throat, for example)? For Day, Lise's actions constitute an attempt to evoke tragedy, considered by Robbe-Grillet to be 'something which paradoxically humanises and hence recuperates the alien universe,'<sup>128</sup> and thus anathema to the

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<sup>125</sup> As noted by Jonathan Kemp, who examines the repeated motif of Lise's parted lips in dialogue with the work of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari ("Her Lips are Slightly Parted": The Ineffability of Erotic Sociality in Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 3 [2008], pp.544-57)

<sup>126</sup> Patricia Waugh, 'Muriel Spark and the Metaphysics of Modernity: Art, Secularization, and Psychosis,' in David Herman, ed., *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp.63-93 (p.68), emphases in original.

<sup>127</sup> The sense of epistemological anxiety that Lise's actions stimulate in her narrator forms the focus of the following chapter.

<sup>128</sup> Day, 'Parodying Postmodernism,' p.334.

‘singular style of studied apathy’ that is often associated with his narrative methods.<sup>129</sup> Indeed, Robbe-Grillet would argue that tragedy serves as an unconvincing ‘attempt to “recover” the distance which exists between man and things’ by positing a world from which meaning can be salvaged in the form of the purgative, enlightening or morally purifying effects of catharsis.<sup>130</sup> The archival research undertaken in the present study confirms Spark’s interest in the nature of tragic employment.<sup>131</sup> Her notebooks reveal that the composition of *The Driver’s Seat* entailed extensive research into Aristotelian tragedy, drawing upon studies including Werner Jaeger’s *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development* (1923) and Lascelles Abercrombie’s *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1932). From the latter text, Spark copied the following two passages and included them alongside a set of notes on Lise:

The (^Aristotle’s) definition of Tragedy is this: Tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious, complete in itself, and possessing a certain magnitude; in language that gives delight appropriate to each portion of the work; in the form of drama, not of narrative its *Katharsis*\* of emotions.

\*Purgation<sup>132</sup>

In contrast with history, in which nothing begins and nothing ends, and in which the mere sequence of events must satisfy as best it may our desire to know the secret connection of events, in poetry we see an event complete in itself, definitively beginning and definitively ending and proceeding with perfect coherence from antecedents we understand to consequences we accept as inevitable.<sup>133</sup>

<sup>129</sup> Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, p.128.

<sup>130</sup> Robbe-Grillet, ‘Nature, Humanism, Tragedy,’ p.59.

<sup>131</sup> *The Driver’s Seat*, Spark remarked in an interview, ‘is the nearest [novel] I have to Greek tragedy’: Robert Hosmer, “‘Fascinated by Suspense’: An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark,” in Robert Hosmer, ed., *Hidden Possibilities: Essays in Honor of Muriel Spark* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2014), pp.227-55 (p.247).

<sup>132</sup> Quotation from Lascelles Abercrombie, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1932), p.96, in Muriel Spark, ‘Handwritten notes and draft fragments [*The Driver’s Seat*; pages unnumbered],’ Muriel Spark Papers, Box 16, Folder 8, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa. The use of parenthesis and the asterisked ‘Purgation’ are both additions by Spark. Here, Spark quotes Abercrombie’s text partially and imperfectly; the complete passage reads as follows: ‘The definition of tragedy, then, is this: Tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious, complete in itself, and possessing a certain magnitude; in language that gives delight appropriate to each portion of the work; in the form of drama, not of narrative; through pity and fear accomplishing its *Katharsis* of such emotions.’

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p.111, quoted in Muriel Spark, ‘Handwritten notes and draft fragments [*The Driver’s Seat*],’ McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

That Spark had these passages in mind while conceptualising Lise’s journey towards self-destruction – a journey which functions implicitly as an escape route from the ‘repetition, boredom, [and] despair’ encountered in the *nouveau roman* – is illuminating. If an analogy were to be drawn between Abercrombie’s account of history, where ‘nothing begins and nothing ends,’ and the looping scenes and exhaustive, often inconsequential descriptions encountered in the *nouveau roman* (‘going nowhere for nothing,’ as Barbara puts it, dismissively), then Lise’s quest acquires a newfound, almost heroic significance. Here we might observe Lise as a less explicitly metafictional version of Caroline Rose in *The Comforters*. Just as Caroline strives to disrupt what she described as “‘the convenient slick plot’” (*TC*, p.104) of the hackneyed detective novel into which she senses she has been written, Lise’s construction of a tragic arc that is ‘complete in itself,’ and carries with it a definitive and ‘inevitable’ *dénouement*, constitutes an attempt to counter the stalled and self-alienating quality of life beneath the gaze of her *nouveau romancier*. Seeking to arrive at such an ending, Lise assumes the grandeur of a tragic heroine, her every action geared towards leaving a trace of her subjectivity within a world that has denied it.<sup>134</sup> A compelling performance artist attired in garish clothes selected for how prominently they will display her eventual bloodstains, she erupts into public displays of shrieks and tears so as to ‘successfully regist[er] the fact of her presence’ (*DS*, p.20) among potential eyewitnesses, before finding a man willing to stab her to death in the manner she desires and with the knife she has supplied (rather tellingly, given her desire to construct a plot of her own, the weapon is specified as a ‘*paper-knife*’ [*DS*, p.67]). As

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<sup>134</sup> It is perhaps significant, given her intention to weave a personal narrative dictated by the components of classical tragedy, that Lise’s sole addition to her anonymous-looking and seemingly ‘uninhabited’ home is a ‘patterned rug from Greece’ (*DS*, p.14).

with the uncharacteristically buoyant description of Dougal's dancing in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, Lise's death drive effects a suspension of the externalised perspective of her narrator; as she seeks out her murderer and 'lays the trail' (*DS*, p.51) of clues to be followed by investigators, journalists and her own narrator, she is described in unusually poetic terms as 'a stag scenting the breeze' (*DS*, p.73), her purposeful search for death's thrill and finality casting ripples through the still waters of the novel's prose.

As her notes show, Spark quotes from Abercrombie's definition of Aristotelian tragedy as an imitative act which effects the '*Katharsis* of emotions,' and annotates '*Katharsis*' so that it stands to mean 'Purgation.' This annotation likely results from the discussion that follows a few pages later in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, where Abercrombie emphatically discounts interpretations of catharsis as a mode of either moral purification or intellectual clarification in favour of a reading rooted in ancient Greek medicine:

[I]t seems certain that "purification" is not what [Aristotle] himself meant by *Katharsis*. Whenever he alludes to the tragic *Katharsis*, this is evidently identical with the mere fact of rousing pity and fear. [...] In Greek medicine, an organism could be purged of any undesirable product by the administration, in judicious doses, of something similar: as in modern homeopathy, "like cures like." Excess of any kind was unwholesome; health could be secured by purgation of anything which tended to be present in excess. This seems to be what Aristotle meant by *Katharsis*. Tragedy effected the purgation of pity and fear, by its administration of these very emotions. [...] Aristotle regarded the function of tragedy as something medical: the pity and fear of tragedy were the doses by which the tragic poet homeopathically purged his audience into emotional health.<sup>135</sup>

While the physiological interpretation of Aristotelian catharsis as a homeopathic regulation of fearful and pitiful emotions (as formulated in an influential 1857 essay

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<sup>135</sup> Abercrombie, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, pp.107-8.

by the philologist Jacob Bernays)<sup>136</sup> has attracted varying degrees of scepticism from contemporary scholars,<sup>137</sup> it evidently captured the interest of Spark, who filled an additional folder of research notes with related details from Abercrombie’s study.<sup>138</sup> Spark’s engagement with this reading has notable implications for our understanding of her protagonist’s self-directed death. Lise’s intention, we might infer, is to attempt to remedy a life suffused with an ‘unwholesome’ excess of what she terms an “‘inconceivable sorrow’” (*DS*, p.96) by bringing about its purgation through her own tragic performance.<sup>139</sup> Her elaborately stage-managed murder can thus be seen to reenact and communicate a sense of the alienated and anonymous death-in-life she has already endured; the neckties that render her body immobile are connotative of the stifling patriarchal order that has robbed her of agency, for instance, whereas the knife which pierces her throat replicates the forceful silencing of her voice that occurred long before her murder took place.

Like one of the titular tragic ‘Messengers’ in Spark’s 1967 poem, who bring ‘a folded meaning home / Between the lines, inside the letter,’ Lise (‘they read’) presents her bound and brutalised corpse – displayed ceremonially in the grounds of a pavilion – as a monument to her misery, intended to articulate and thus exorcise that which has

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<sup>136</sup> Jacob Bernays, ‘Outlines of Aristotle’s Lost Work on the Effects of Tragedy, Section IV,’ trans. James I. Porter, in Joshua Billings and Miriam Leonard, eds., *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp.315-28.

<sup>137</sup> For comprehensive overviews of critical responses towards the work of Bernays and the physiological interpretation of catharsis more generally, see, for example: Leon Golden, ‘Towards a Definition of Tragedy,’ *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (October-November 1976), pp.21-33; Noreen W. Kruse, ‘The Process of Aristotelian Catharsis: A Reidentification,’ *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (May 1979), pp.162-71; James I. Porter, ‘Jacob Bernays and the Catharsis of Modernity,’ *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity*, pp.15-41.

<sup>138</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘Aristotle [unnumbered handwritten notes, c.1969],’ Muriel Spark Papers, Box 83, Folder 10, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

<sup>139</sup> Lise’s words are prompted by the sight of a closed restaurant, with its “‘chairs piled up at night’” (*DS*, p.96). The vacant space, which bears more than a passing resemblance to Lise’s seemingly ‘uninhabited’ home (*DS*, p.15), becomes, as Patricia Waugh asserts, an ‘objective correlative for all of her own derealised and unfelt’ despair (‘Muriel Spark and the Metaphysics of Modernity,’ p.68).

defined her existence.<sup>140</sup> Having decided upon a suitable killer in Richard, a man whose discernible ‘madhouse tremble’ (*DS*, p.102) comes to signify his propensity to murder, Lise directs him to the grounds of the pavilion and orders him, in the dead of night, to kill her in precisely the manner she specifies:

“Tie my hands first,” she says, crossing her wrists. [...]

He ties her hands, and she tells him in a sharp, quick voice to take off his necktie and bind her ankles.

“No,” he says, kneeling over her, “not your ankles.”

“I don’t want any sex,” she shouts. “You can have it afterwards. Tie my feet and kill, that’s all. They will come and sweep it up in the morning.”

All the same, he plunges into her, with the knife poised high.

“Kill me,” she says, and repeats it in four languages.

As the knife descends to her throat she screams, evidently perceiving how final is finality. She screams and then her throat gurgles while he stabs with a turn of his wrist exactly as she instructed. Then he stabs wherever he likes and stands up, staring at what he has done. He stands staring for a while and then, having started to turn away, he hesitates as if he had forgotten something of her bidding. Suddenly he wrenches off his necktie and bends to tie her ankles together with it.

He runs to the car, taking his chance and knowing that he will at last be taken, and seeing already as he drives away from the Pavilion and away, the sad little office where the police clank in and out and the type-writer ticks out his unnerving statement: “She told me to kill her and I killed her. She spoke in many languages but she was telling me to kill her all the time. She told me precisely what to do.” [...] He sees already the gleaming buttons of the policemen’s uniforms, hears the cold and the confiding, the hot and the barking voices, sees already the holsters and epaulets and all those trappings devised to protect them from the indecent exposure of fear and pity, pity and fear. (*DS*, pp.106–07)

Just as Lise appears to recognise that her tragic tableau will amount, in the object-oriented realm of the *nouveau roman*, to little more than an “‘it’” to be disposed of unceremoniously the following morning (‘waiting for tomorrow’s garbage-men’ [*DS*, p.97], her bloodied body-as-text is merely an undesirable blemish upon the clean and uncluttered surfaces of the anti-novel), her killer ‘sees already’ that his interrogation will be conducted by figures clinically protected ‘from the indecent exposure of fear

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<sup>140</sup> Spark, ‘The Messengers,’ ll.3-4.

and pity, pity and fear.’ These chiasmic closing lines suggest the simple deflection of tragedy’s intended effects against the protective surfaces of the ‘sad little office,’ and by extension the sad little world within which *The Driver’s Seat* takes place. The novel’s concluding scene thus acts as an unlikely counterpart to its seemingly unremarkable *in media res* opening, where Lise listens to a saleswoman expound the virtues of stain-resistant fabrics. What first appeared as inconsequential sales patter (“‘Specially treated. Won’t mark. [...] Won’t hold the stain’” [DS, p.1]) can be read, in light of the ending, as indicative of an entire object world militantly resistant to the traces of individual subjectivity, figurative meaning or poetic expression.<sup>141</sup> Such a world appears to have been built in accordance with Robbe-Grillet’s conceptualisation of the *nouveau roman* as a literary ‘mopping-up operation,’<sup>142</sup> which is committed, as Kristin Ross asserts, to eradicating the ‘tell-tale stains’ left by ‘any analogical or emphatic trope that renders the world of objects tragic or conducive of any human significance whatsoever.’<sup>143</sup> In an alternative draft of the final scene, Spark concluded her novel not with a proleptic glimpse of the police interrogation, but rather a present tense description of Richard, who, having murdered Lise, ‘stands and looks at what he has done’ while ‘the headlights of the cars light up their spot as the stain spreads.’<sup>144</sup> In deciding against an ending that highlights – quite literally – Lise’s ‘tell-tale stains’ in favour of one which focuses on a world “[s]pecially treated” against them, Spark underscores the oppressive ‘neutrality’ of her own version of the anti-novel, which remains pointedly and unnervingly stain-free.

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<sup>141</sup> With this in mind, we might also revisit the novel’s oddly prescriptive narration of Lise’s apartment, in which ‘the lines of the room are pure,’ and where ‘nothing need be seen, nothing need be left lying about’ (DS, p.14).

<sup>142</sup> Robbe-Grillet, ‘Nature, Humanism, Tragedy,’ p.57.

<sup>143</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, p.75.

<sup>144</sup> Muriel Spark, Loose draft fragment [1969-70] in ‘Handwritten notes and draft fragments [*The Driver’s Seat*],’ McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.



We might surmise from the novel's unnervingly muted ending that Lise's death-bound journey has had little effect: Richard 'plunges into her' despite her protestations; the policemen are seemingly impervious to the effects of tragedy; 'tomorrow's garbage-men' will soon arrive to remove the stain. 'While there is a certain amount of pity, I think, to be read through the lines,' Spark commented in the 1996 BBC *Bookmark* documentary, 'The Elusive Spark,' 'the novel is, in the end, very cold, yes.'<sup>145</sup> However, it is the very *coldness* of *The Driver's Seat* – its narrator's failure, for example, to comprehend Lise and her tragic plot, to 'read through the lines' and recognise her interiority – that affords the protagonist with a unique power to unsettle, even after her death. By breaking from an existence that has long been characterised by its rigid, unnatural order, where every aspect of her appearance and actions could be measured and assessed by an exacting and objectifying narrative gaze, Lise has come to make herself strange and inscrutable, transforming her legible life into a mystery without an apparent solution (or what she herself describes as a "“whydunnit”" [DS, p.101]). The narrator's relentless focus on exteriors now becomes a weak spot, as Lise's intent is made maddeningly inaccessible. In the following chapter, I further explore Lise's role as an agent of textual disorder, who purposefully disrupts the 'clean-lined and clear' world she inhabits by unsettling the narrative gaze (which, I shall propose, is designed specifically as *male*) and provoking within her narrator a debilitating sense of interpretive anxiety. In so doing, I argue, Lise destabilises her narrator and secures the driver's seat at last for herself.

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<sup>145</sup> 'The Elusive Spark,' *Bookmark* (BBC Scotland, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1996). I am grateful to the director, Eleanor Yule, for providing me with a copy of her documentary.

### Conclusion: ‘A certain detachment’?

In an interview with Israel Shenker published in September 1968, shortly before she would begin initial work on *The Driver’s Seat*, Spark spoke of Robbe-Grillet with a mixture of admiration and disdain. ‘I’ll always read Robbe-Grillet,’ she remarked, before insisting that she ‘wouldn’t like to write like that [her]self.’ Moreover, *For a New Novel* had proven ‘a pain in the neck’ to read; its essays, she complained, were ‘terribly insular and arrogant,’ their focus restricted to a ‘quite obscure’ set of contemporary French authors at the expense of ‘Moravia, Hemingway [...] [or] anyone in that generation, [or] anyone outside of France.’ ‘But,’ she reasoned, ‘he is doing something new.’<sup>146</sup> Unlike contemporaries such as B. S. Johnson, for example, who claimed to have taken “‘the English path for the *nouveau roman*” in his own novel-writing,<sup>147</sup> or Christine Brooke-Rose, who analysed the *nouveau roman* reverently and at length in various works of literary criticism, Spark responds to Robbe-Grillet with a measure of caution (if not outright cynicism), never subscribing wholeheartedly to his ethos or aesthetic despite her evident familiarity with both.<sup>148</sup> ‘All I have from him,’ she maintained in one of her final interviews, ‘is a certain detachment.’<sup>149</sup>

The present chapter has sought to examine manifestations of this ‘certain detachment’ across three novels which, grouped together, make unlikely bedfellows. Each is attributable to a distinct phase in Spark’s literary career: *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* to an early era of short, sharply observed and thematically contained

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<sup>146</sup> Israel Shenker, ‘Portrait of a Woman Reading,’ p.2.

<sup>147</sup> Quoted in Guy, ‘Johnson and the *nouveau roman*,’ p.35.

<sup>148</sup> See, for example, the following essays by Christine Brooke-Rose: ‘The Real as Unreal: Robbe-Grillet,’ in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp.291-310; ‘The Author is Dead, Long Live the Author,’ in *Invisible Author: Last Essays* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2002), pp.130-55.

<sup>149</sup> Hosmer, ‘An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark,’ p.135.

social satires; the expansive, multi-plotted *The Mandelbaum Gate* to what Spark described, at the time of its composition, as her ongoing ‘Mrs Tolstoy’ phase;<sup>150</sup> *The Driver’s Seat*, which Spark named in 2002 as her ‘best novel to date and the creepiest,’ to a series of taut and enigmatic fictions influenced most directly by the anti-novel.<sup>151</sup> Despite obvious differences in style, form and subject matter, these works can nevertheless be read alongside one another as evolving stages in Spark’s conceptualisation and appropriation of Robbe-Grillet’s ‘special [...] drama of exact observation.’<sup>152</sup> In *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, the invocation of the detached and seemingly depthless aura of the *nouveau roman* allows Spark to cultivate an ironic distance from which narrator, reader and central protagonist can survey the novel’s characters and depicted scenarios with wry suspicion. In *The Mandelbaum Gate*, on the other hand, direct references to the anti-novel serve to evoke a profound psychological disengagement from human suffering, which Barbara registers not only in the banal evil of Eichmann and others like him, but also in herself, having been subjected (like Spark) to his oblique and obfuscatory testimony. In both texts, the *nouveau roman* is either mimicked or mentioned for the purpose of producing a rhetorical sense of depthlessness, be it in the Bergsonian comedy of Trevor Lomas’s ‘somnambulistic sway’ (*BPR*, p.57), or in Eichmann’s disturbing (and equally Bergsonian) status as a ‘failed self, one lacking in capacity to think about others or himself with any insight.’<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Frank Kermode, ‘Muriel Spark’s House of Fiction,’ in Joseph Hynes, ed., *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992), pp.29-32 (p.30). Interview excerpted and reprinted from Frank Kermode, ‘The House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists,’ *Partisan Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Spring 1963), pp.61-82.

<sup>151</sup> McQuillan, “‘The Same Informed Air,’” p.229.

<sup>152</sup> Toynebee, ‘Interview with Muriel Spark,’ p.73.

<sup>153</sup> Richard H. King, *Arendt and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p.197. Here, King is describing Eichmann, as perceived by Arendt.

A similarly unsettling imperviousness is conveyed throughout *The Driver's Seat*, which teems, as Cheyette observes, with 'characters who treat people, as did Eichmann, as if they were objects drained of their humanity.'<sup>154</sup> Combining an externalised narrative perspective similar to that adopted throughout *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* with a thematic focus on extreme and dehumanising order, *The Driver's Seat* bears the influence of its author's prior novelistic engagements with the *nouveau roman*, while its self-reflexive approach to matters of plot-making and self-destruction reveals a further development in Spark's relationship with the anti-novel. Despite her insistence that she 'wouldn't like to write like [Robbe-Grillet] [her]self,' *The Driver's Seat's* tragic study of a character desperate to assert her subjectivity and evade narrative control happens to align Spark more closely with Robbe-Grillet than she perhaps anticipated; his fiction-writing, as I have discussed, is marked by a deep distrust of artificial orders, informed at least in part by his own traumatic exposure to fascist ideology. Although she might have believed otherwise, the 'certain detachment' that Spark claimed to have gained from Robbe-Grillet comes to reveal a deeper affinity between both authors.

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<sup>154</sup> Cheyette, 'Writing Against Conversion,' p.109.

## **‘A study, in a way, of self-destruction’: *The Driver’s Seat* and the Impotent Gaze**

[T]he art of the popular detective novel derives from the rhythm of desire. That is, it begins by stimulating desire, proceeds to tease it through a technique of progressive revelation interrupted by systematic digression, and finally satisfies it [...] in an end that reveals all.

[The antidetective novel] ends not with a solution but with mystery enhanced, not with a *dénouement* that functions as a closure [...]. The end offers not the assertion of mastery and a return to order but *the surprise of impotence*. [...] [T]he recognition scene is also the scene of suffering.

– Dennis Porter, ‘Antidetection’ (1981)<sup>1</sup>

The previous chapter discussed Lise’s self-directed murder as an implicitly metafictional gesture, through which she seeks to counter the dehumanising gaze of her narrator by articulating her subjectivity and invoking the purgative effects of tragic catharsis. The present one shifts focus away from what is told to the nature of *its telling*, to consider the destabilising effects of Lise’s actions upon the narrative itself. In artfully engineering her own mysterious death, I argue, Lise purposefully provokes a powerful sense of interpretative anxiety within her narrator, who, once able to monitor her body and behaviour with apparent ease, now struggles in vain to comprehend her. Lise’s transformation of her meticulously ordered and eminently legible existence into an enthralling yet opaque drive to death effects something of a crisis of storytelling; her actions, that is, come to disorientate the objectifying gaze that has long been trained upon her, causing her narrator to spiral into impotent

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Porter, ‘Antidetection,’ in *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1981), pp.245-59 (pp.245-6; p.256, emphasis mine).

obsession. My analysis thus entails a thorough reevaluation of *The Driver's Seat's* critical reception, its approach to the inextricable relationship between gender, narrative perspective and power, its subversive treatment of the conventions of the traditional detective story, and the significance of its peculiar temporal structure.

Although numerous readings of *The Driver's Seat* have interpreted Lise's plot-making as a provocative and self-reflexive bid for narrative control, many have judged her actions to be the arrogant and misguided efforts of a fictional character to overthrow her author and thus assume an unwarranted level of authorial power. This, such readings have argued, constitutes a sin for which Lise is duly punished with sexual assault at the novel's conclusion, when her murderer, having 'stab[bed] with a turn of the wrist exactly as [Lise] instructed,' proceeds to 'plung[e] into her with the knife poised high' (*DS*, p.107). Across two separate discussions of the novel, for example, Bryan Cheyette identifies Lise as a 'one-eyed writer's *manqué* [...] who mistakenly think[s] that [her] myth-fictions can determine reality,'<sup>2</sup> and whose killer consequently 'rapes her so as to reveal with brutal precision her ultimate inability' to do so.<sup>3</sup> Echoing Cheyette's analyses, Maria Fackler aligns Lise with 'the artist *manqué*' for her 'presumptuous attempt to appropriate godlike authority and direct the narrative,' and cites *The Driver's Seat* as an example of a text in which 'Spark's characters [...] are punished for their artistic pretensions, for their appropriation of the authority and power that constitute the special provenance of the novelist.'<sup>4</sup> Fackler

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<sup>2</sup> Bryan Cheyette, 'Writing Against Conversion: Muriel Spark and the Gentile Jewess,' in Martin McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction* (London: Palgrave, 2002), pp.95-112 (p.96).

<sup>3</sup> Bryan Cheyette, *Muriel Spark* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2000), p.78.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Francesca Fackler, 'Imagining Female Authorship After 1945: Lessing's and Spark's Portraits of the Artist *Manqué*,' in Robert DeMaria Jr., Heesok Chang and Samantha Zacher, eds., *A Companion to British Literature, Volume IV: Victorian and Twentieth-Century Literature 1837-2000* (Chichester, Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp.367-84 (p.372; p.375).

thus identifies Lise's rape as an act designed to undermine her apparent hubris, in that it 'simultaneously ends Lise's direction of the narrative and reinstates Spark as director.'<sup>5</sup> The rapist, having wilfully ignored Lise's loudly-proclaimed 'aversion to sex' as a component of her murder, is therefore understood to be 'the novelist's agent,' who delivers the protagonist her necessary 'come-uppance' for her audacious efforts to 'wrest narrative control from her creator.'<sup>6</sup> *The Driver's Seat*, concludes Fackler, 'casts Lise's narrative drive – her desire to impose a pattern on her life – as an act punishable by graphic sexual assault,' which demonstrates in the process that 'the ultimate arbiter of her fate [...] is *Spark*, who masquerades as a detached and limited narrator throughout.'<sup>7</sup> For Gerard Carruthers, Lise's sexual violation similarly 'represents a particularly bleak puncturing of the non-omnipotence of the individual human,'<sup>8</sup> which, argues Norman Page, holds a valuable didactic purpose: 'ultimately, Lise has been unable, as we all are, to control her own destiny, to write the script of her own life and death.'<sup>9</sup>

Of added value to each of the above readings is Spark's Catholicism, and specifically the related notion that her fiction makes characteristic use of what Lorna Sage terms 'Almighty irony' – the sense, as outlined in my Introduction, that the machinations of Spark's characters, however covert or confounding, are anticipated, contained and ultimately undermined within a divine 'plot' of their creator's devising.<sup>10</sup> Spark's fiction-writing might thus be understood as a 'Catholic practice,'

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.377.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.378, emphasis mine.

<sup>8</sup> Gerard Carruthers, 'Muriel Spark as Catholic Novelist,' in Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp.74-84 (p.83).

<sup>9</sup> Norman Page, *Muriel Spark* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p.79.

<sup>10</sup> Lorna Sage, *Women in the House of Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p.142.

in that its purpose, as Carruthers contends, is to ‘acknowledge an omnipotent God, sometimes mimicked in the fabric of her novels by the narratorial or authorial character, whose implied perspective is supposed to overarch all human perspective.’<sup>11</sup> In *The Driver’s Seat*, this perceived ‘Catholic practice’ is associated chiefly with the novel’s well-documented use of prolepsis, whereby the narrator breaks habitually from the perspectively limited narrative present to impart details concerning the near future. One of the novel’s first instances of prolepsis occurs at the beginning of its third chapter. As Lise prepares to board a plane, the intended outcome of her journey still unknown to the reader, the present tense is interrupted by the following admission:

She will be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab-wounds, her wrists bound with a silk scarf and her ankles bound with a man’s necktie, in the grounds of an empty villa, in a park of the foreign country to which she is travelling on the flight now boarding at Gate 14. (*DS*, p.25)

Similar examples abound throughout the text, each related either explicitly or tangentially to the future police investigation, and media reportage, of Lise’s murder. A seemingly unremarkable description of the size of the protagonist’s nose, for instance, adjoins with the startling revelation that it is ‘wider than it will look in the likeness constructed partly by the method of identikit, partly by actual photography, soon to be published in the newspapers of four languages’ (*DS*, p.18). What such digressions might imply, as David Lodge remarks of prolepsis more generally in *The Art of Fiction* (1992), is ‘the existence of a narrator who knows the whole story,’ and who is thus rather like the ‘omnipotent God’ described by Carruthers.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Carruthers, ‘Muriel Spark as Catholic Novelist,’ p.83.

<sup>12</sup> David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.75. In her analysis of the novel, Maria Fackler asserts that ‘the play with time’ indicates ‘a kind of omniscience.’ The narrator, she argues, ‘is all-knowing in terms of time and chronology [...] and insists on time as a whole, rather than as a series of episodic moments’ (‘Imagining Female Authorship After 1945,’ p.378). Similarly, Lorna Sage notes



Theological interpretations of *The Driver's Seat's* prolepses have proven remarkably popular among critics, including even those more attentive to the more experimental facets of Spark's fiction.<sup>13</sup> Despite her keen focus on Spark's various literary innovations in *Metafiction*, for example, Patricia Waugh finds the novel's repeated contrasts between present tense and proleptic narration to be analogous and thus reducible to the difference between limited human knowledge and divine omniscience. Here Waugh asserts that, while 'the present-tense narrative describing Lise in search of a man to murder her suggests that Lise is in control, is creating her own history,' it is nevertheless 'counterpointed' by 'the future tense which reveals her "end" to the reader (and the "end" of Spark's plot).' These future tense passages can thus be seen to function 'ironically' by revealing that, despite her apparent agency in the narrative present, 'Lise's "script" exists within a larger "script" (Spark's) which exists within a final script (God's).'<sup>14</sup> Offering a near-identical reading to Waugh, Aidan Day perceives the protagonist as a minor authorial figure who finds herself enveloped within a *matryoshka*-like nesting pattern of plots both authorial and divine,

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that the author's 'cruelly predestined narratives' are often delivered in a 'present tense that allows the future to seep, as it were, into the present, and the present into the past' ('Female Fictions,' in Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer, eds., *The Contemporary English Novel* [London: Edward Arnold, 1979], pp.67-88 [p.79]). James Wood also draws upon Spark's distinctive use of prolepsis to argue that 'Spark always exercises ruthless control over her fictional characters.' Her 'flash-forwards' thus 'remind us that Muriel Spark has powers of ultimate control over her creations' (*How Fiction Works* [London: Jonathan Cape, 2008], p.89).

<sup>13</sup> In her 1993 essay, 'A Writer's Constraints,' Christine Brooke-Rose offers a brief but provocative analysis of *The Driver's Seat* in relation to the constrictive narrative methods encountered in the fiction of Robbe-Grillet. Having acknowledged a likeness between the 'minute-by-minute' narration of Spark's novel and the similarly concurrent style adopted by Robbe-Grillet, Brooke-Rose identifies *The Driver's Seat's* apparently 'omniscient prolepses,' which are concerned with 'telling us that the protagonist will be found stabbed to death' as the feature which distinguishes Spark's 'theological thriller' from the works of the *nouveau romancier*. Robbe-Grillet, she concludes, 'would have kept [to] the present tense,' remaining faithful to the human limitations of his narrators ('A Writer's Constraints,' *Invisible Author: Last Essays* [Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 2006], pp.36-52 [p.40]). As the present chapter argues, however, *The Driver's Seat's* complex temporal design comes to reflect a consciousness that is as human, limited and prone to obsession as any found in a *nouveau roman*.

<sup>14</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp.121-2.

so that ‘behind Lise’s plot stands the author’s and the author’s perspective is subsumed by God’s.’<sup>15</sup> Long before her sexual assault, both readings suggest, Lise’s control of the ‘script’ of her life is placed firmly in doubt by proleptic indications of her ultimate powerlessness.

In light of such interpretations, it is perhaps unsurprising that *The Driver’s Seat*’s conclusion, read as an unnerving extension of the proleptic undermining of Lise’s carefully organised plot, has attracted notable criticism. For Aileen Christianson, the apparently didactic sexual violence that attends Lise’s final moments as divine and authorial retribution for her ‘temerity to attempt control of [her] life’ only ‘excuses and underplays the ferocity of male violence against women’ in society at large.<sup>16</sup> In her study of contemporary, women-authored gothic novels, *Femicidal Fears* (2001), Helene Meyers levels similar criticisms rather more abruptly; ‘the story of Lise,’ she asserts, ‘suggests that women who choose this strategy [to attempt to assume autonomy over their lives] are fucked by both God and men.’<sup>17</sup> Patrick Parrinder, writing before Christianson and Meyers in 1983, dismissed the ending outright as ‘a slap in the face to feminists and anti-rape campaigners.’<sup>18</sup> Such condemnations are understandable. If we are to read the ending as others have, its apparently offhand allusion to rape seems an extravagantly cruel way of destabilising the protagonist’s appropriation of authorial power, which trivialises sexual assault by reducing it to the brutal punchline of what Paddy Lyons terms the novel’s ‘theological

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<sup>15</sup> Aidan Day, ‘Parodying Postmodernism: Muriel Spark (*The Driver’s Seat*) and Robbe-Grillet (*Jealousy*),’ *English*, Vol. 56, No. 216 (Autumn 2007), pp.321-37 (p.333).

<sup>16</sup> Aileen Christianson, ‘Muriel Spark and Candia McWilliam: Continuities,’ in Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden, eds., *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp.95-110 (p.100).

<sup>17</sup> Helene Meyers, *Femicidal Fears: Narratives of the Female Gothic Experience* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), p.84.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Parrinder, ‘Muriel Spark and Her Critics,’ *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (June 1983), pp.23-31 (p.26).

twist.’<sup>19</sup> As a consequence, *The Driver’s Seat* has come to be viewed as Spark’s most bitter and starkly drawn parable of human fallibility versus divine omniscience, dictated by a pitiless author whose fingernails are not pared, but rather sharpened and poised to attack.

My own analysis differs markedly from those referenced above in that it does not involve attributing to Spark’s narrator the properties of godlike omniscience, nor does it read the sexual violence inflicted upon Lise as a mode of punishment meted out by a vengeful authorial surrogate in service of ‘Almighty irony’ or a particular didactic purpose. Most importantly, my reading rejects the idea – expressed most prominently in the work of Day, Carruthers and Waugh – that Lise’s self-directed plot is neatly contained and controlled within the extradiegetic and existential ‘scripts’ of her narrator and God. My interpretation of the narrator is therefore closer to the model proposed by Bran Nicol, who notes how, throughout the novel, ‘Lise’s actions come across as being observed by someone following her,’ so that the narration ‘resembles a less supernatural, more sinister, voyeuristic practice, like stalking.’<sup>20</sup> Nicol’s description of the narrative as emanating from ‘a small-scale, prurient, menacing entity’ has significant implications not only for our understanding of the narrator’s character and capabilities – it accounts, for example, for the narrative’s obsessive and unwavering focus on the minutiae of Lise’s appearance and movements, as well as its failure to provide psychological insight (‘Who knows her thoughts? Who can tell?’ [*DS*, p.50]) – but also its diegetic position.<sup>21</sup> A narrator who is ‘more like a stalker than a deity,’ that is, is necessarily situated *within* the diegesis, *loitering with intent*

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<sup>19</sup> Paddy Lyons, ‘Muriel Spark’s Break with Romanticism,’ *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, pp.85-97 (p.94).

<sup>20</sup> Bran Nicol, ‘Reading Spark in the Age of Suspicion,’ in David Herman, ed., *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp.112-28 (p.123).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p.113.

within the same storyworld inhabited by Lise, rather than surveying her actions from a lofty diegetic remove.<sup>22</sup>

How might these limited capabilities be reconciled, however, with the narrative's frequent flashforwards, which pepper the ambiguous present with certainties from the near future, and thus appear to confirm the existence of extradiegetic knowledge? One explanation, offered earlier by Fackler, and related to Sage's notion of 'Almighty irony' or the 'theological twist' outlined by Lyons, is that Spark's supposedly godlike narrator is merely feigning the non-omniscience exhibited for much of the text, only to emphasise the opposite via proleptic digressions designed to demonstrate that Lise's sense of authorial control was always, in fact, hopelessly misguided. This would mean that the majority of *The Driver's Seat* is narrated from what Judith Roof describes as 'the vantage point of a disingenuous present marked by a certain dissimulation,' before the author's hand is revealed.<sup>23</sup> This reasoning is plausible, yet somewhat unsatisfactory. For one, the novel's glimpses of the future are not expansive or particularly detailed, but are limited instead to the discovery of Lise's corpse the following morning and the initial stages of the ensuing police investigation and media coverage; the reader never discovers, for instance, how Lise's murderer fares in court, or how her family or work colleagues react to the news of her death. Similarly, the narrator's professed uncertainties regarding Lise's thoughts and motivations (or even mundanely tangible details concerning her exact age or natural hair colour) are never elucidated in the prolepses. If Spark's intention had been to illustrate the containment of Lise's self-spun plot within various existentially and epistemologically superior 'scripts,' then this is hardly an effective means of doing so.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Roof, 'The Future Perfect's Perfect Future: Spark's and Duras's Narrative Drive,' *Theorising Muriel Spark*, pp.49-66 (p.55).

To the end, Lise remains unknown and unknowable.

An alternative, and arguably more convincing, interpretation would consider the narrator to be situated firmly within the diegesis (as implied in Nicol's reading), and aware of the investigation into Lise's murder not through powers of omniscience, but because it is *this* moment which in fact constitutes the narrative present. The seemingly concurrent narration of Lise's behaviour can thus be reread as a retrospective retracing of the hours preceding her death, so that the prolepses come to return the narrator to the present moment, during which time the police investigation is underway. This (re)conceptualisation of *The Driver's Seat's* narrative and temporal design has notable implications for our understanding of the narrator's relationship to the protagonist. No longer are Lise's present plans thought to be anticipated and undermined by her narrator's proleptic digressions; instead, the narrator can be seen to be preoccupied with the ambiguous and unsettling nature of Lise's *prior* actions and thus compelled to return continually to the recent past, replaying previously witnessed scenes and dialogue in the vain hope of elucidation. This sense of an investigative consciousness caught spiralling between present and past is even alluded to in one of the future tense passages, wherein 'the interrogators' in the 'sad little office' go 'round and round again [...], always bearing the same questions like the whorling shell of a snail' (*DS*, p.105). The same 'whorling' pattern is replicated in Spark's narrative; we might observe, following the proleptic leap to Lise being 'found tomorrow morning dead' in the passage quoted earlier, the occurrence of a backwards spatial and temporal *rewinding* from 'the 'grounds of an empty villa' to the 'foreign country to which she is travelling,' and to 'the flight now boarding at Gate 14,' only to be followed by another future-tense projection (and subsequent rewinding) some

pages later.<sup>24</sup>

The ‘whorling,’ shell-like structure of Spark’s narrative demonstrates an immediate continuity between its present tense and proleptic dimensions, so that the narrative resembles something akin to a Möbius strip, whereby past and present (configured in the novel as present and future, respectively) are shown to intertwine inexorably and obsessively. This is the very opposite of omniscience: the narrator can claim no authority over, nor cleavage from, the subject of narration, and is condemned instead to spiral fascinatedly around Lise, in thrall to her mystery. As such, the obsessive, fraught and ultimately inconclusive circularity of *The Driver’s Seat* only reaffirms the influence of Robbe-Grillet, who insisted that, in each of his novels, ‘it is a *man* who sees, who feels, who imagines, a man situated in space and time, conditioned by his passions,’ so that ‘the book reports nothing but his experience, limited and uncertain as it is.’<sup>25</sup> It was this aspect of the author’s prose that Spark most admired; in her interview with Israel Shenker, she claimed to have been fascinated by Robbe-Grillet’s novelistic expressions of ‘a train of consciousness that doesn’t necessarily wind up to a pretty end.’<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For a further example of the narrator’s restless ‘whorling’ back to the living Lise, we might observe the following sentence: ‘So [Lise] lays the trail, *presently* to be followed by Interpol and elaborated upon with due art by the journalists of Europe for the few days it takes for her identity to be established’ (*DS*, p.52, emphasis mine). Here, the present tense description of Lise’s behaviour while alive is juxtaposed with the ongoing efforts of Interpol and the journalists to investigate her death. The narrator, this and other passages suggest, is speaking *after* Lise’s murder, yet fixates upon her past actions with an intensity that imbues them with the urgency of the moment at hand.

<sup>25</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘New Novel, New Man,’ in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), pp.133-43 (p.139). In contrast to his conception of the narrator as ‘a *man*,’ argued Robbe-Grillet, was the God-like narrator encountered in Balzacian realism: ‘Who is describing the world in Balzac’s novels? Who is that omniscient, omnipresent narrator appearing everywhere at once, simultaneously seeing the outside and the inside of things, following both the movements of a face and impulses of conscience, knowing the present, the past, and the future of every enterprise? It can only be a God’ (pp.138-9).

<sup>26</sup> Israel Shenker, ‘Portrait of a Woman Reading: Muriel Spark Interviewed by Israel Shenker,’ *Book World*, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1968, p.2.

Perceived in this way, the balance of power between character and narrator shifts dramatically, so that the future tense digressions are not, as A. S. Byatt remarked in one of the novel's earliest reviews, 'cool prophetic forecasts' emanating authoritatively 'from outside, [from] the film-director's view-point, or God's,' but reflective instead of a narrating consciousness that is located *inside* the storyworld, and anxiously preoccupied with the recent past.<sup>27</sup> This chapter explores this drastic shift by moving away from previous readings of Lise as the hopeless object of a godlike narrative perspective, and considering her instead as a captivating figure who, even after death, commands the epistemologically limited gaze of her hopelessly fascinated narrator-voyeur. What Spark presents in *The Driver's Seat*, I wish to suggest, is not simply the story of a woman determined to assert control over her life by plotting its end, as so many critics have argued, but also one of narrative mediation, epistemological impotence and, as I shall demonstrate with reference to the author's manuscripts, a specifically *masculine* anxiety to penetrate the mystery of the female Other. Spark's description of the novel as 'a study, in a way, of self-destruction' can thus be seen to relate not only to Lise's drive to death, but to the unravelling of the narrating 'self,' which finds itself tormented and undone by its perennially unknowable subject.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> A. S. Byatt, 'A Murder in Hell [Review of *The Driver's Seat*],' *The Times*, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1970, p.14.

<sup>28</sup> Ian Gillham, 'Keeping it Short: Muriel Spark Talks about Her Books to Ian Gillham,' *The Listener*, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1970, pp.411-3 (p.412).

**“A whydunnit in q-sharp major”’: (De)feats of Detection and ‘experiment[s] with anxiety’**

What magic you have, and what a crazy bitch you have created!

– Alfred A. Knopf, Letter to Muriel Spark (1970)<sup>29</sup>

In his biography of Spark, Martin Stannard identifies as the ‘germ’ of *The Driver’s Seat* a newspaper article encountered by the author during a period of ‘obsessive reading’ in June of 1969.<sup>30</sup> The article, which Stannard describes in detail but does not cite directly, reportedly concerned the rape and murder of a German woman who had been travelling alone in Rome, and whose garishly-attired body was later discovered in a park in the city.<sup>31</sup> While the influence of the story ought not to be overlooked – garish clothing, sexual violence and a foreign location (and, specifically, a park as the site of a murder) all feature prominently in Spark’s novel – its status as *The Driver’s Seat*’s ‘germ’ should be discounted. A folder of the author’s research material, consulted in the present study, reveals that a slightly earlier news report had first captured Spark’s attention as she began to conceptualise the novel. This was a *Times* article from the previous March, which detailed an alleged ‘invitation to murder’ offered by a British woman to her male murderer. The woman, Brenda Gibson, had been strangled to death with a necktie after her murderer, Frank Hatton, had reportedly refused her initial request to be killed with an axe. As well as a necktie, Gibson had supplied Hatton (and, presumably, the authorities who would later

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<sup>29</sup> Letter from Alfred A. Knopf (of the Knopf publishing house, Spark’s American publisher), to Muriel Spark, 26<sup>th</sup> May 1970, Acc.10607/46: General Correspondence, 1970, Muriel Spark Archive, National Library of Scotland.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009), pp.363-4.

<sup>31</sup> It is likely, in fact, that the article was one of several similar news reports encountered by Spark during the ‘obsessive’ period of reading that Stannard describes. As Spark would recall in a 1971 television interview with W. Gordon Smith for the BBC’s *Scope* programme, her ideas for the novel had developed ‘from reading about so many girls killed in parks’: ‘Muriel Spark,’ *Scope* (BBC, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1971) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12211.shtml>> (accessed 2nd October 2014).



investigate her death) with a handwritten note, reading simply: ““I want Frank Hatton to kill me – Brenda.”” Spark had underlined this, along with the article’s concluding sentences:

Counsel said that the accused told police that he declined the invitation to axe Mrs Gibson to death, and had tried to strangle her. “But I couldn’t do it, because she was looking at me,” he added.

The alleged statement added: “She then gave me a black and yellow tie. I put it around her neck and pulled it until it snapped.

I was only doing it as a favour. I only did it because she asked me to.”<sup>32</sup>

The circumstances surrounding Gibson’s death, discussed in the *Times* as ‘a most extraordinary case,’ share a number of immediate similarities with Spark’s depiction of Lise and the nature of her murder.<sup>33</sup> The women are not only of a similar age (Lise is described imprecisely as being ‘as young as twenty-nine or as old as thirty-six, but hardly younger, hardly older’ [*DS*, p.18], while the *Times* article lists Gibson’s age as thirty-three), but both supply their chosen male murderers with neckties as weapons, and offer explicit instructions that they wish to be killed. More significant is the manner in which both the novel and article end; each concludes with the ‘unnerving statement’ of each woman’s killer (*DS*, p.107), as well as an enduring sense of mystery. Despite a number of established details concerning the identities of murderer and victim, the exact methods of killing and the items used as weapons (the knowledge of which would likely comprise the satisfying solution of a traditional detective story), the motivations behind each woman’s prearranged death remain unanswered. What the newspaper report appeared to offer Spark was an example of a

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<sup>32</sup> ‘Note an invitation to murder, QC says,’ *The Times*, 20<sup>th</sup> March 1969, p.2, in Muriel Spark, ‘Handwritten notes and draft fragments [*The Driver’s Seat*; 1969-70],’ Muriel Spark Papers, Box 16, Folder 8, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

mystery without a clear solution, wherein the accumulation of knowledge fails to amount to a sense of either clarity or closure.

*The Driver's Seat*, described by David Lodge as 'a crime story turned inside out,' is by no means a straightforward fictionalisation of the *Times* article, however, but rather a self-reflexive play on its ambiguous subject matter.<sup>34</sup> Lise, I wish to suggest, exists in the novel as a metafictional version of Gibson herself; her actions, that is, are geared not only towards bringing about a violent murder that is notably similar to the one inflicted upon her real-life counterpart, but are designed purposefully to captivate and confound her narrator's investigative and objectifying gaze. Throughout the novel, Lise demonstrates an acutely self-reflexive awareness that her death will come to be looked upon, much like Gibson's, as 'a most extraordinary case' which defies easy comprehension, and thus undermines any sense of objectifying power or epistemological mastery her narrator might have been thought to possess. Before boarding her flight at the beginning of the novel, for example, she purchases a paperback from the airport bookshop, which she clutches to her chest for the remainder of her journey, even appearing 'to display it deliberately' at various intervals (*DS*, p.39). The book, which remains unopened and unread, and which sports a brightly-coloured dust-jacket that matches Lise's own gaudy exterior, functions as a *mise en abyme* of its enigmatic owner, and, by extension, her captivating yet ultimately impenetrable self-directed plot.<sup>35</sup> When Lise hands the book to a hotel porter before heading, finally, to the site of her murder, her description of the text as "'a whydunnit in q-sharp major'" (*DS*, p.101) underscores her own status

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<sup>34</sup> David Lodge, as quoted on dust-jacket blurb for Muriel Spark, *The Driver's Seat* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

<sup>35</sup> The paperback's cover, an illustration of naked lovers holding bunches of sunflowers, also parallels the holiday romance that Lise's quest (geared towards locating the man she names her "'type'" [*DS*, p.43]) comes to parody.

as a mystery without a tangible resolution, the key to which lies remotely outside the diatonic scale.

*The Driver's Seat* is itself, of course, a text for which the label “‘whydunnit’” takes precedence over the conventional *whodunnit*. Indeed, that Lise’s eventual murderer turns out to be Richard (instead of any other man from the novel’s roll-call of undesirables, including the lecherous garage owner, Carlo, and the equally unsavoury businessman, Bill) seems almost incidental against the greater, unresolved mystery of Lise’s origins and intent. This shift in emphasis – from unmasked murderer to still-elusive motive – aligns the novel with what has been termed the metaphysical detective story.<sup>36</sup> Such a story, Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney explain in the introduction to their edited collection, *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism* (1999), ‘parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions – such as narrative closure and the detective’s role as surrogate reader’ in order to generate ‘questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot.’<sup>37</sup> While Merivale and Sweeney acknowledge that examples of metaphysical detective fiction can be traced back to Poe’s ‘self-reflexive, philosophical, consciously literary detective stories of the 1840s,’ they attribute a groundswell of critical discourse on the

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<sup>36</sup> Or the ‘antidetective’ story, to use the term applied by Dennis Porter in *The Pursuit of Crime* (1981), quoted in the epigraph to this chapter.

<sup>37</sup> Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, ‘The Game’s Afoot: On the Trail of the Metaphysical Detective Story,’ in Merivale and Sweeney, eds., *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp.1-26 (p.2). Among the wide range of authors discussed in the essays included in Merivale and Sweeney’s edited collection are Robbe-Grillet, Vladimir Nabokov, Paul Auster, Iris Murdoch, Graham Greene, Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino. Spark’s omission is surprising, given that a great number of her novels and short stories (including *The Driver’s Seat*, *Not to Disturb*, *Robinson*, *A Far Cry from Kensington*, *The Comforters*, *Memento Mori*, ‘The Thing About Police Stations’ [1963], ‘The Girl I Left Behind Me’ and ‘Chimes’ [1995]) allude to and subvert the conventions of the traditional detective story or murder mystery. For an example of a text which *does* consider Spark’s inventive treatment of the detective genre, see Allan Pero, “‘Look for One Thing and You Find Another’: The Voice and Deduction in Muriel Spark’s *Memento Mori*,’ *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Autumn 2008), pp.558-73.

genre during the late 1960s and early 1970s to literary theorists' efforts to conceptualise broad differences between modernist and postmodernist literature.<sup>38</sup> If the traditional detective novel, defined by Brian McHale as 'the epistemological genre *par excellence*,' appeared to encapsulate modernism's broadly epistemological concerns (its faith, for instance, on positivism, teleology and totalisation), its metaphysical successor signals a shift to an ontological dominant, so that mystery spins out into mystification.<sup>39</sup> Such were the claims of Michael Holquist's influential 1971 essay, 'Whodunit and Other Questions,' which discussed the parodic, self-reflexive and inconclusive detective text as a reaction against 'the narcotising effect of its progenitor; instead of familiarity, it gives strangeness [...], instead of reassuring, they disturb. They are not an escape, but an attack.' The metaphysical detective story, argues Holquist, 'is non-teleological,' and 'is not concerned to have a neat ending in which all the questions are answered, and which can therefore be forgotten'; by 'jumbling the well-known patterns of classical detective stories,' such texts '*dramatise the void*,' so that 'if, in the detective story, death must be solved, in the metaphysical detective story it is *life* which must be solved.'<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Merivale and Sweeney, 'The Game's Afoot,' p.4.

<sup>39</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London; New York: Routledge, 1987), p.9. Similarly, William Spanos argues that the 'paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern literary imagination is the anti-detective story,' because of its tendency to frustrate readerly expectations by refusing to offer either a solution to its central mystery (if indeed it presents one to begin with) or a final, coherent picture of a world with order and logic restored: 'The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination,' *boundary 2*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1972), pp.147-68 (p.154).

<sup>40</sup> Michael Holquist, 'Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction,' *New Literary History*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Autumn 1972), pp.135-56 (pp.153-5), emphases mine. Alison Lee similarly conceptualises the 'anti-detective novel' as an 'attack' on a 'genre which is a model not only of ideological hegemony, but of literary conservatism.' An 'innately conservative genre,' the traditional detective novel, argues Lee, treats the criminal act as 'not just a crime against an individual, but against a whole social order of communication and signification. Through reason and empirical research, of course, the univocal truth will be told and order restored.' The act of detection, then, represents 'a promise of closure, linearity, and a return to common sense' (*Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* [London; New York: Routledge, 1990], pp.67-8).

A discussion of detective novels that are jumbled and inconclusive, and which narrativise the collapse of logic and linearity, sends us ‘whorling’ back once more to Robbe-Grillet. In a *prière d’insérer* for the first edition of his first published novel, *The Erasers*, the author describes the text that follows as ‘a detective story event – that is, there is a murder, a detective, a victim. In one sense their roles are conventional: the murderer shoots the victim, the detective solves the problem, the victim dies.’<sup>41</sup> In the novel’s tale of the doomed quest of Special Agent Wallas to solve the mystery surrounding a political assassination, however, these components are radically rearranged. Wallas’s search proves not only fruitless (much of it is spent walking in circles around an unspecified Flemish city, while straining to interpret a series of tenuous signs as vital clues) but also self-destructive; ultimately, and with Oedipal circularity, it is *he* who commits the murder that he has been sent to investigate, after shooting Professor Dupont, who he had presumed already dead. The reported death, apparent resurrection and subsequent killing of Dupont, whose name pointedly evokes that of Poe’s detective hero, C. Auguste Dupin, can be read as an acknowledgement of Poe’s influence on the novel’s tricky, disorienting application of the detective plot. ‘In a very Poesque way,’ writes Stefano Tani in his aptly-titled study, *The Doomed Detective* (1984), ‘the confrontation [in metaphysical detective fiction] is no longer between a detective and a murderer, but between the detective

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<sup>41</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, qtd. in Jeanne C. Ewert, “‘A Thousand Other Mysteries’: Metaphysical Detection, Ontological Quests,” in Merivale and Sweeney, *Detecting Texts*, pp.179-198 (p.186). Robbe-Grillet would discuss his subversive approach to the detective genre at length in an interview with the *Paris Review*: ‘It seems that the structure of police investigation is very close to the technique of modern novels, in particular the non-resolved investigation [...]. The difference is that in the traditional detective novel there *must* be a solution, whereas in ours there is just the principle of investigation. Detective novels are consumer products, sold by millions, and are made in the following way: there are clues to an event, say a murder, and someone comes along and puts the pieces together in order that truth may be revealed. Then it all makes sense. In our novels what is missing is “sense.” There is a constant appeal to sense, but it remains unfulfilled, because the pieces keep moving and shifting and when “sense” appears it is transitory. Therefore, what is important is not to discover the truth at the end of the investigation, but the process itself’: Shusha Guppy, ‘The Art of Fiction 91: Interview with Alain Robbe-Grillet,’ *Paris Review*, Iss. 99 (Spring 1986) <<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2819/alain-robbe-grillet-the-art-of-fiction-no-91-alain-robbe-grillet>> (accessed 11th April 2015).

and reality, or between the detective's mind and his sense of identity, which is falling apart, between the detective and the "murderer" in his own self.'<sup>42</sup>

The implosive 'confrontation [...] between the detective and reality' is nowhere more apparent in Robbe-Grillet's oeuvre than in *Jealousy*, where, as the previous chapter began to discuss, an investigative point of view surveys with mounting delirium the dimensions and positionings of the crops of a banana plantation, the architecture and furnishings of a plantation house, the changing physical dimensions of a venomous centipede, and the body and behaviour of A..., as she spends time alone or in the company of her neighbour, Franck. While less explicit in its appropriation of detective story elements than *The Erasers* or *The Voyeur* (in which a series of similarly forensic descriptions come to imply the concealed murder and sexual assault of a teenage girl), *Jealousy* retains the epistemological methods encountered in those texts only to further frustrate them, by training the investigative gaze not upon a crime scene, but repetitive, prosaic sequences of hair-brushing and table-setting, the significance of which remains either unfathomable or non-existent to begin with. Robbe-Grillet would himself insist that, contrary to the *chosiste* idea that his aim in *Jealousy* was to conjure a 'serene, whitewashed world in which man seems perfectly reconciled with his environment,' his intention was to do 'exactly the opposite,' and that the novel, in fact, constitutes '*an experiment with anxiety*.'<sup>43</sup> In the absence of any of the hallmarks of a conventional mystery, however (such as a crime, corpse or vital clue), *Jealousy* prompts its readers to query why the narrator's suspicion and anxiety should be aroused to begin with. A popular interpretation, first elaborated upon at length by Bruce Morrissette, posits that 'the story with its three

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<sup>42</sup> Stefano Tani, *The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p.76.

<sup>43</sup> Guppy, 'The Art of Fiction 91: Interview with Alain Robbe-Grillet,' emphasis mine.

characters – the husband, the wife, the presumed lover [Franck] – is “narrated” by the husband [...] who, from the vantage points in his banana plantation house [...] suspiciously keeps watch over his wife.’<sup>44</sup> If such a reading is to be accepted – and recent analyses by Brian Richardson, Peter Toohey and Maria Mäkelä have each made convincing cases in its favour – then it is through the obsessive, anxious quality of novel’s prose that, as Mäkelä observes, ‘the helpless figure of the cuckolded voyeur emerges.’<sup>45</sup>

By exposing its readers to the troubled cogitations of a ‘cuckolded voyeur’ (as opposed to the assurances of a perceptive sleuth, for instance) *Jealousy*’s ‘experiment with anxiety’ constitutes its author’s most drastic subversion of the detective story and, in particular, the genre’s archetypal protagonist. In the introduction to her study of feminism and crime fiction, *Murder by the Book?* (1994), Sally Munt characterises both the form and content of the traditional detective story as ‘iconically masculine,’ describing the typical (and typically male) ‘detective hero’ as the ‘focus of morality,’ and ‘the controlled centre surrounded by chaos.’ An ‘effective reading’ of such a text, she argues, ‘must involve identification with this mediator of action, truth, and finally pleasure and relief through closure.’<sup>46</sup> To read *Jealousy* is, by contrast, to read *jealously*. It is to read in uneasy identification with a narrative consciousness whose

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<sup>44</sup> Bruce Morrissette, *The Novels of Robbe-Grillet* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp.112-3.

<sup>45</sup> Maria Mäkelä, ‘Navigating – Making Sense – Interpreting (The Reader behind *La Jalousie*),’ in Markku Lehtimäki, Laura Karttunen, and Maria Mäkelä, eds., *Narrative, Interrupted: The Plotless, The Disturbing and the Trivial in Literature* (Berlin; Boston, MA: Walter de Gruyter GmbH), pp.139-152 (p.147). Similarly, Brian Richardson argues convincingly that, in *Jealousy*, ‘the inferred perceiver, the jealous husband, is certainly the sole focaliser of the text’ (*Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* [Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 2006], p.8), whereas Peter Toohey asserts that, by ‘reporting the tiniest details of [A...’s] movements,’ Robbe-Grillet ‘captures perfectly the obsessively studious psychology of the jealous individual,’ who ‘constantly replays what he has seen and what he suspects’ (*Jealousy* [New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2014], p.11).

<sup>46</sup> Sally R. Munt, *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), p.1.

covetous desire for knowledge and mastery will remain frustrated and unfulfilled. Whereas Munt's 'detective hero' guides his reader authoritatively away from chaos and uncertainty and towards closure and epistemological plenitude, *Jealousy*'s impotent investigator remains caught in a feedback loop of obsessive paranoia, replaying scenes until they acquire an undue significance. In *Reading Unruly* (2014), Zahi Zalloua articulates the effect that this comes to have on the reader:

The circular structure of [*Jealousy*] ultimately short-circuits any definitive sense of closure, halting any progression from textual obscurity to interpretive clarity. Moreover, in the absence of a linear unfolding of the narrator's jealousy, we could say that the reader enters the state of jealousy, itself a state of anxiety and irresolution, *in media res*.<sup>47</sup>

*Jealousy*'s inconclusive circularity and '*in media res*' anxiety are mirrored in *The Driver's Seat* by the restless 'whorling' of its narrator's attention between present and past. What distinguishes Spark's novel from Robbe-Grillet's is its narrator's knowledge of the end; whereas *Jealousy*'s narrator-voyeur scrutinises the actions of A... for possible evidence of a past transgression, or to determine her propensity to commit one, Spark's narrator is in no doubt that the journey undertaken by Lise will conclude with the crime of her murder, and thus necessitates investigation. Rather than affording the narrator any sense of epistemological mastery, however, the novel's overdetermined ending functions – to return to Holquist's earlier definition of the metaphysical detective story – to further 'dramatise the void' by foregrounding crucial gaps in its narrator's knowledge. The narrative's 'acknowledgement of having knowledge,' notes Judith Roof, establishes within it a 'doubled consciousness – a consciousness of telling a story and a consciousness of the story's shape,' which

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<sup>47</sup> Zahi Zalloua, *Reading Unruly: Interpretation and Its Ethical Demands* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), p.122.



‘makes telling itself the subject of the novel.’<sup>48</sup> As this process of telling never comes to align the reader with any definite comprehension of Lise’s thoughts or desires, however, the clearly-demarcated ‘shape’ of her story remains curiously hollow, so that a series of effects are presented without their attendant causes. *The Driver’s Seat* is thus less a novel about telling, as Roof would insist, than the failure to do so with any accuracy or authority. The novel’s concern, that is, is with that which eludes and undermines the grasp and gaze of the teller. ‘I admire good detective stories, their lack of frills and nonsense,’ Spark told Robert Hosmer in 2005, before describing her long-held ‘fascinat[ion] [with] suspense, on which many detective stories lean. I think suspense is often heightened if the author “gives away” the plot from the beginning.’ By learning of what is to come, she explained, ‘the reader is then all the more anxious to find out how the conclusion came about.’<sup>49</sup> It is to the novel’s generation of suspense, which in turn foregrounds the interpretative anxiety experienced by its narrator (an anxiety shared by the extratextual reader), that my analysis will now turn.

### **‘Who knows her thoughts? Who can tell?’: Doomed Deduction in the Tense Present**<sup>50</sup>

In a 1993 profile piece for *The New Yorker*, Spark was asked about what her interviewer, Stephen Schiff, described as her ‘utterly unconventional’ tendency to ‘create suspense not by hiding a secret and building toward its discovery but by giving all her secrets away, again and again.’ Of the untimely revelations Schiff had in mind

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<sup>48</sup> Roof, ‘The Future Perfect’s Perfect Future,’ p.53.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Hosmer, ‘An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark’, *Salmagundi*, Vol. 146/147 (Spring/Summer 2005), pp.127-58 (p.146).

<sup>50</sup> I borrow ‘Tense Present’ from a chapter heading in Peter Kemp’s *Muriel Spark* (London: Paul Elek, 1974), p.113, under which Kemp groups Spark’s then-recent experimental novels: *The Public Image*, *The Driver’s Seat*, *Not to Disturb* and *The Hothouse by the East River*. Kemp’s title refers both to Spark’s characteristic use of the present tense at this point in her career, as well as the unsettlingly suspenseful tone and subject matter of such novels.

– the future betrayal of Jean Brodie; the eventual martyrdom of Nicholas Farrington in *The Girls of Slender Means* – it was Lise’s heavily forecasted murder in Spark’s ‘spiny and treacherous masterpiece’ that he would cite most reverently.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps to Schiff’s surprise, however, Spark admitted that she had adopted the technique not from the experimental temporalities encountered in the works of postmodern contemporaries such as Brooke-Rose or Robbe-Grillet, but rather the gentle authorial assurances interspersed throughout the narratives of Anthony Trollope:

I’ll tell you what gave me that idea of giving things away. [...] I read that Trollope used to write some of his books in serial form for magazines. [...] And people wrote to him - young ladies wrote to him and said, “Oh, please don’t let the hero die or be banished or let her marry the man she doesn’t love.” So he began one serial saying, “Fair reader, do not be dismayed. She will marry the hero in the end, but just be patient while I tell you about it.” And it didn’t at all take away from the suspense. They still went on reading it. It was a very interesting thing to me. I thought, well, suspense isn’t just holding it back from the reader. Suspense is created even more by telling people what’s going to happen.<sup>52</sup>

For an example of one of Trollope’s amiable authorial intrusions, designed to placate readers by revealing the ending far in advance, we might look to the benevolent address which concludes Chapter Fifteen of the first volume of *Barchester Towers* (1857). Here the author assures his ‘gentle-hearted’ audience of the heroine’s happy fate, while insisting on the importance of transparency in ‘the art of telling tales’:

[L]et the gentle-hearted readers be under no apprehension whatsoever. It is not destined that Eleanor shall marry Mr. Slope or Bertie Stanhope. And here, perhaps, it may be allowed to the novelist to explain his views on a very important point in the art of telling tales. He ventures to reprobate that system which goes so far to violate all proper confidence between the author and his readers, by maintaining nearly to the end of the third volume a mystery as to

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<sup>51</sup> Stephen Schiff, ‘Muriel Spark Between the Lines,’ *The New Yorker* (24<sup>th</sup> May 1993), pp.36-43 (p.42).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

the fate of their favourite personage.

[...]

Our doctrine is that the author and the reader should move along together in full confidence with each other. Let the personages of the drama undergo ever so complete a comedy of errors among themselves, but let the spectator never mistake the Syracusan for the Ephesian; otherwise he is one of the dupes, and the part of a dupe is never dignified.<sup>53</sup>

Keen to spare his readers the indignity of playing ‘the part of a dupe,’ Trollope’s narrator, as Meir Sternberg observes, ‘elevat[es] [them] to his own level of awareness from the beginning’ by sharing with his audience ‘his overwhelming advantage over the characters.’ It is by way of a ‘rigorous abstention from withholding information through chronological displacements,’ notes Sternberg, that ‘the narrator ensures that we shall be at every point in possession of all the material that is necessary for such a full comprehension of the present state of affairs as none of the agents [characters] can ever dream of attaining to.’<sup>54</sup> In Spark’s novel, however, any similar sense of superiority proves illusory. Having determined that ‘telling people what’s going to happen’ might heighten suspense just as easily as relieve it, Spark locates subversive potential in Trollope’s magnanimous ‘doctrine’; the epistemological ‘advantage’ that the reader may sense that s/he possesses over a character, she recognises, can be threatened and undermined by a narrative which fails to make good on its promise.<sup>55</sup>

In *The Driver’s Seat*, Spark’s own ‘chronological displacements’ – her rendering of the past as an uncertain present which unfurls before a future that is already known and set in place – come to highlight her narrator’s failure of comprehension by undermining the sense of clarity and coherence that is often

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<sup>53</sup> Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.155.

<sup>54</sup> Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1978), p.271.

<sup>55</sup> Most subversive of all, of course, is the notion that the reader’s anxieties should be placated not through the promise of a happy fate (like that which shall greet Eleanor Bold in *Barchester Towers*), but rather the grim assurance of Lise’s eventual murder.

implicit in the retrospective mode. Barthes, in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), identifies the French preterite (the tense otherwise known as the past perfect or past historic) as the ‘cornerstone of narration’ and ‘the ideal instrument for every construction of a world’:

[T]he preterite [...] is the unreal time of cosmogonies, myths, History and Novels. It presupposes a world which is constructed, elaborated, self-sufficient, reduced to significant lines and not one which has been set sprawling before us [...]. Behind the preterite there always lurks a demiurge, a God or a reciter. The world is not unexplained since it is told like a story [...], and the preterite is precisely this operative sign whereby the narrator reduces exploded reality to a slim and pure logos, without density, without volume, without spread, and whose sole function is to unite as rapidly as possible a cause and an end.<sup>56</sup>

(Re)configured in Spark’s novel as a ‘sprawling’ present, the preterite lacks the sense of certainty, causality and narrative mastery at the hands of ‘a demiurge, a God or a reciter’ that Barthes describes. Instead, the narrated past resembles most closely the ‘exploded reality’ of the unprocessed moment at hand. For large portions of its prose, in fact, the novel assumes the qualities that the narratologist Uri Margolin would attribute to concurrent narration, where ‘the narrator does not possess [...] any temporal distance from the actions and events, no external later point of vantage from which s/he could survey and define the structuredness of the reported sequence as one integrated whole.’ In the concurrent mode, Margolin explains, ‘the narrated domain is a world in the process of becoming, progressively taking shape as it is being narrated, not a bounded whole,’ so that ‘it is not yet possible [...] to elicit a pattern from the succession,’ or to ‘describe it in terms of macro-coherence, plot or narrative theme.’<sup>57</sup>

This is nowhere more evident than when, while retracing Lise’s movements across the

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<sup>56</sup> Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), pp.30-31.

<sup>57</sup> Uri Margolin, ‘Of What Is Past, Is Passing, or to Come: Temporality, Aspectuality, Modality, and the Nature of Literary Narrative,’ in David Herman, ed., *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), pp.142-66 (p.152).

foreign city to which she has travelled, the narrator fixates on a procession of figures emerging from the entrance of a hotel:

There emerge down the steps of the hotel two women who seem to be identical twins, wearing black dresses and high-styled hair, followed by an important-looking Arabian figure, sheikh-like in his head dress and robes [...]. Two black-robed women with the lower parts of their faces veiled and their heads shrouded in drapery then make their descent, and behind them another pair appear, men-servants with arms raised, bearing aloft numerous plastic-enveloped garments on coat-hangers. [...] [T]wo ramshackle young Arabs with rumpled grey trousers and whitish shirts end the procession, bearing two large baskets, each one packed with oranges and a jumbo-sized vacuum flask which stands slightly askew among the fruit. (*DS*, pp.83-4)

This prolonged, bewildering narrative detour runs on exhaustively until each of the pairs, and several more besides, have completed the short journey down the steps. Instead of identifying with an authoritative investigative gaze, which might facilitate narrative progression and an increasing sense of clarity, the reader shares the narrator's passive abandonment to the moment at hand. Everything is described successively, without the assurance that might be appended to retrospective narration (the two women only 'seem' to be identical twins, for example, while the 'Arabian figure' is described as vaguely 'important-looking'). As a draft version of the same scene shows, Spark had originally presented the sequence in more concise, and considerably less ambiguous, terms:

The newly-dethroned potentate leaves the Hilton accompanied by three men, ten suits on hangers, a wife, two daughters, two baskets containing two jumbo-sized vacuum flasks, and twenty-five other people, one a black-yashmaked woman. There is a man wearing a fez, and six crates of oranges.<sup>58</sup>

Less 'a world in the process of becoming' (in Margolin's words) than one 'reduced to significant lines' (in Barthes's), Spark's original rendering of the scene does much of

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<sup>58</sup> Spark, Loose handwritten fragment in 'Handwritten notes and draft fragments [*The Driver's Seat*],' Muriel Spark Papers, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

the interpretive work on the reader's behalf. Here, the 'important-looking Arabian figure' is presented as a 'newly-dethroned potentate,' who 'leaves the Hilton' accompanied by, among other people, his wife and daughters. These small details provide the scene with a motivation and *telos* that is entirely absent from the blankly successive procession of figures and objects narrated in the final version of the text; having been stripped of his title and power, one might infer, the now deposed leader, along with his family and aides, appears to be fleeing his residence to seek exile elsewhere. Similarly, the narrator's precise description of the veiled woman as 'black-yashmaked' – a detail which recognises her niqab specifically as the type worn by Muslim women of Turkey – reveals a depth of knowledge that is unparalleled in the published novel, where the more ambiguous 'black-robed' and 'drapery' appear instead. In removing these specificities, Spark is effectively covering her authorial tracks, and confining knowledge and attention purely to the moment at hand.

Such revisions are consistent with Spark's conception of her narrator as an entity who speaks purely 'from the point of view of someone who doesn't know what anyone is thinking, but who can see, who can observe.'<sup>59</sup> Rather like the enfeebled figure of the 'newly-dethroned potentate,' her narrator is reduced bathetically from an apparent source of wisdom and mastery (as suggested by the novel's first proleptic leap, evocative as it is of a Trollopean assurance) to a hopeless gazer, unable to offer more than a running commentary on each unfolding scene. This, as I have discussed, is a recognisable feature of the fiction of Robbe-Grillet, to whom Spark referred admiringly as a 'sighter.'<sup>60</sup> As several critics have observed, the perceptual and

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<sup>59</sup> Sarah Frankel, 'An Interview with Muriel Spark,' *Partisan Review*, Vol. 54 (1987), pp.443-57 (p.454).

<sup>60</sup> 'Sighter' is an appropriate description; the *nouveau romanciers* as Suzanne Fleischman notes, 'have often been referred to as *l'école du regard*, a label that derives from a particular way of looking at the

epistemological limitations placed upon the Robbe-Grilletian narrator (particularly as encountered in *Jealousy*) come to enhance readerly identification with the disturbed source of the gaze. The author, argues Wayne C. Booth of *Jealousy*, ‘wants us to receive the very touch and feel’ of the novel’s titular mental state ‘with an intensity that is almost unbearable’:

Simply by confining us to the sensations and thoughts of the disintegrating husband in *Jealousy*, Robbe-Grillet can make us experience a concentration of sensation impossible in any other mode. He has, in fact, added a new fillip to this effort; by never describing the person, actions, or thoughts of the husband, but simply leaving us to infer his reality through what is left out, he locks us inside the camera box, as it were, more completely than in any previous fiction. [...] The effect of such a novel is of an extended dramatic monologue, an intense expression of one quality of mind and soul, deliberately not judged, deliberately left unplaced, isolated from the rest of human experience.<sup>61</sup>

Over forty years after Booth’s analysis, Tom McCarthy would return to the ‘camera box’ analogy as a means of articulating the disquieting effect produced by *Jealousy*’s intensely insular narrative. Through the novel’s domestic setting, he asserts, travels ‘a camera and mic-like “node” of seeing and hearing,’ which produces ‘the effect of stating the hero’s subjectivity negatively, by implication rather than affirmation.’ McCarthy locates a number of cinematic parallels for this ‘eerie and troubling’ subjective presence, including the sinister perspective of ‘The Shape’ in John Carpenter’s 1978 horror, *Halloween*, which the audience are forced to adopt during the film’s first few minutes, as well as the viewpoint of the unidentified, crepuscular voyeur in David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (1997), who prowls the hallway and bedroom of a maritally troubled home ‘armed with a camera’ (the apparatus

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world that excludes anything beyond what the eye can see’ (*Tense and Narrativity: From Medieval Performance to Modern Fiction* [Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1990], p.302).

<sup>61</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (London; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961), pp.62-3.

through which Lynch's viewers watch the scene).<sup>62</sup> Such a sensation is only heightened by the paratext provided in English editions of *Jealousy* – a highly detailed floor plan of the novel's plantation house setting, not unlike those drawn up by architects, or perhaps used to scrutinise crime scenes. As Dorrit Cohn observes, this visual aid, which allows the more assiduous reader to determine with queasy accuracy the exact position of the narrator's 'node' in relation to A..., 'prompt[s] the reader to postulate a human eye (and 'I') behind the [narrative] voice – *not just a camera eye*.'<sup>63</sup> Such an approach may well have informed Spark's own writing practice. Her meticulous depictions of *The Driver's Seat*'s various interiors were often modelled on the layouts and dimensions of real examples. Spark used a floor-by-floor guide of Rome's La Rinascente department store, for instance, to map with perfect precision Lise's movements during her shopping trip with her temporary travelling companion, Mrs Fiedke.<sup>64</sup> Her narrator, these aids suggest, is constructed as an investigator-cum-voyeur – a strictly surveillant entity able to capture Lise's every action and movement with painstaking exactitude from a set of specific vantage points, and yet incapable, like *Jealousy*'s frustrated observer, of accessing and assessing her state of mind.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Tom McCarthy, 'The Geometry of the Pressant,' *Artforum International*, Vol. 46, No. 10 (Summer 2008), pp.392-5 (p.392). We might add another cinematic parallel to McCarthy's list: Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960). During the film's memorably unsettling opening sequence, viewers unwittingly adopt the perspective of the murderous protagonist, Mark Lewis (who has yet to be introduced as a character), who advances towards his unassuming female victim before murdering her. For a fascinating study of Powell's film in relation to the perspective adopted by (or enforced upon) the viewer, see Jeremy Hawthorn, 'Can You Guess How You'd Look? Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*,' in *The Reader as Peeping Tom: Nonreciprocal Gazing in Narrative Fiction and Film* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2014), pp.181-207.

<sup>63</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton; Guildford: Guildford University Press, 1978), p.207, emphasis mine.

<sup>64</sup> Spark, Loose note entitled 'Rinascente,' in 'Handwritten notes and draft fragments [*The Driver's Seat*],' McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa. This detail might offer decisive proof that *The Driver's Seat*'s unspecified setting is indeed Rome, as various readings of the novel have speculated.

<sup>65</sup> As with critical commentary on *Jealousy* (and Robbe-Grillet's fiction generally), numerous analyses of *The Driver's Seat* have remarked on its filmic quality. 'The *Driver's Seat* is written as if to be filmed,' observes Ian Rankin, who notes the novel's preoccupation with surface 'layers of outward presentation' ('Surface and Structure: Reading Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*,' *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, Vol. 15, No. 2 [Spring, 1985], pp.146-55 [p.147]). Similarly, Jonathan Kemp writes of the novel that 'everything is described externally, as if it were being viewed through a camera lens' ("Her Lips are Slightly Parted": The Ineffability of Erotic Sociality in Muriel Spark's *The*



At occasional intervals throughout *The Driver's Seat*, the narrator pauses to acknowledge the limits of looking. A description of Lise 'lifting the corners of her carefully packed things' after arriving at her hotel room, for instance, adjoins with the speculation that she does so 'as if in absent-minded accompaniment to some thought, who knows what?' (*DS*, p.49). While such questions pass without further reflection in the published text (indeed, some critics have claimed their inclusion to be purely rhetorical, designed to express an air of cool indifference towards Lise's inner life),<sup>66</sup> this is not the case in some of the draft passages written in the author's notebooks. In one such passage, intended to appear during the narration of Lise's flight abroad, Spark has her narrator digress from a seemingly detached description of the interaction between Lise and Bill, who are seated beside one another on the plane, to expound self-consciously and at length on the impossibility of reading her mind:

(Her thoughts) - Who knows? Largely, all that we have to go on, we of the ethos of human individuality, when summing up a passing stranger, are sound-effects and visual appearances. At this present moment, when Lise sits by Bill in the plane, it is not permissible to approach another member of our species as do cats, who not only prick their ears for sound and watchfully fix their eyes, but also cautiously smell, who perhaps rub against each other and lick each other, all by way of conquering the unknown by all five senses. With us, after the formal handshake, which generally tells us nothing except whether the hitherto unknown person shakes too roughly, has clammy hands, or is nice enough to take our hand and respond in a simple, unremarkable way. In love-affairs and in marriage, there all our five senses sooner or later begin to penetrate the other's mystery. But even then, who in our civilisation has not been left wondering still?<sup>67</sup>

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*Driver's Seat*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 3 [2008], pp.544-57 [p.544]). Bran Nicol, in a reading that bears a great similarity to McCarthy's analysis of *Jealousy*, compares the narrator of *The Driver's Seat* to a 'mobile camera, tracking the heroine wherever she goes' ('Reading Spark in the Age of Suspicion,' p.122). There is, however, a strong subjective presence behind the narrative 'lens,' as the present chapter argues.

<sup>66</sup> See, *inter alia*, Marina MacKay, 'Catholicism, Character, and the Invention of the Liberal Novel Tradition,' *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Summer, 2000) pp.215-38 (p.236).

<sup>67</sup> Spark, 'Handwritten notes and draft fragments [*The Driver's Seat*],' McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa. The use of parenthesis appears in the original.

What is encountered here is neither the objective, dispassionate mode of narration outlined in a *chosiste* interpretation of the *nouveau roman*, for example, nor the assured proclamation of an omniscient observer. Instead, Spark's narrator is cast as an anxious and eminently fallible entity, who, being 'of the ethos of human individuality,' is capable only of producing limited, subjective recordings of various 'sound-effects and visual appearances.' There is something clumsy and convoluted about these phrases, which betray their speaker's discomfort at being faced with the mystery of 'another member of our species.' It is perhaps understandable, then, that the narrator should entertain the idea of 'conquering the unknown' with the heightened sensory perceptivity of a cat. In the published text, as I discussed in the last chapter, similar animal sensitivities are assigned to Lise herself: 'she is a stag scenting the breeze,' notes her observer (with a degree of envy, we might now infer), 'moving step by step [...], search[ing] for a certain air-current, a glimpse and an intimation' (*DS*, pp.72-3). This rare, and ultimately expunged, instance of narratorial self-reflection, in which the 'absent-I' of the *nouveau romancier* gazes fretfully inward, articulates most clearly what I have claimed to be the novel's central concern: the investigator-narrator's anxious and unsatisfied desire to gain epistemological purchase by 'penetrat[ing] the other's mystery.'

*The Driver's Seat* is thus a text which functions, as both Spark's debt to Trollope and the content of the above passage indicate so persuasively, as a fictional account of thwarted reading and doomed detection. To an extent, the novel is self-reflexive in the sense that Garrett Stewart, in his 1996 study, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, claims novels by authors including Trollope, Austen and Dickens to be. Through their production of 'narrative

parables of which reading is itself the subject,' argues Stewart, such authors position their readers 'to extrapolate some adjusted orientation towards the continuing event of reading.'<sup>68</sup> Readers of *The Driver's Seat* – finding themselves positioned indeterminately between the nineteenth-century and the *nouveau roman* – are oriented instead towards the continued *failure* of the 'event of reading.' By revealing its ending up front, before confining its audience to a dilated narrative present which fails to offer more than a surface-level account of the various sights and sounds registered by a narrator 'of human individuality,' Spark's novel (an 'experiment with anxiety' just as unnervingly resistant to comprehension as *Jealousy*) can be seen to first invite, then drastically and deliberately frustrate, its own investigatory premise. What this uncomfortable imbrication of certainty and doubt comes to foreground, of course, is the essential illegibility of Lise herself. The narrator can but look on in bemusement as Lise forges determinedly ahead – a closed and unreadable book; a detective in her own right, her senses attuned to a frequency to which her narrator lacks access – to a certain yet perplexing *dénouement*. Spark's foregrounding of the ending, from which the investigation ensues, thus induces an estrangement in Brechtian terms (another 'certain detachment') that makes readers recognise their own voyeuristic positioning.

### **Taking the Reins: The Gaze and its Return**

Who sees in *The Driver's Seat*? Who strives and strains to scrutinise Lise's image and actions in the hope of 'penetrat[ing] [her] mystery'? To compose the novel, Spark told one interviewer, had entailed 'finding the tone, deciding who the unseen, invisible

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<sup>68</sup> Garrett Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp.343-4.

narrator *is*, and what role he's going to play.'<sup>69</sup> Although it remains unclear as to whether Spark's use of 'he' points to a specifically *male* narrator, there are reasonable grounds for suspecting this to be the case. Indeed, the diegetic world of *The Driver's Seat* – within which, argues Bran Nicol, the novel's narrator lurks 'like a stalker'<sup>70</sup> – is positively *defined* by male perspectives, teeming as it does with men who view Lise with varying degrees of fear, desire, opprobrium, bewilderment and revulsion. The novel begins, for example, with a description of the 'frightened eyeglasses' of Lise's 'quivering [male] superior,' who looks on in horror as his obstreperous employee erupts into fits of laughter and tears, 'all in a flood' (*DS*, p.9). Lise later becomes a source of untrammelled lust for men including Bill, whose expressions of rabid licentiousness remind her of "Red Riding-Hood's grandmother" ("Do you want to eat me up?" she responds, returning his gaze – *all the better to see him with* – with a raised eyebrow and a mocking laugh [*DS*, p.27]). She is to Carlo the hideous yet covetable product of generations of prostitution and infidelity – appearing simultaneously as an 'exotic [...], clearly available treasure,' and a whore 'conceived in some ditch and born in another,' her grandfather having been 'ten times cuckolded' long before (*DS*, p.75) – who not only escapes his predatory sexual advances, but vanishes from view having stolen his car. To Richard, she is a tempting yet terrifying reminder of his own murderous capabilities, a living Medusa who 'cause[s] a kind of paralysis' (*DS*, p.27) when her eyes look back at his (we might here recall Frank Hatton's remark, underlined in the *Times* article kept by Spark, that he had initially struggled to murder Brenda Gibson "because she was looking at me").

Perhaps most prominent among the novel's numerous anxious and anguished

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<sup>69</sup> Frankel, 'An Interview with Muriel Spark,' p.454.

<sup>70</sup> Nicol, 'Reading Spark in the Age of Suspicion,' p.113.

male gazes, however, are those belonging to ‘the policemen,’ whose ‘hot and [...] barking voices’ resound throughout their ‘sad little office’ as they struggle to retrace Lise’s movements and uncover her motives (*DS*, p.107). As I earlier suggested, the office is a space in which the novel’s proleptic digressions (concerned as they are with the discovery and investigation of Lise’s murder) might find their diegetic locus, making the viewpoints of such men fundamental to the production and progression of the narrative itself. While critical analyses have largely neglected such an interpretation,<sup>71</sup> preferring instead to consider how Lise’s death might look from the lofty perspectives of her god and/or author, cinematic and theatrical adaptations of the novel have brought it to the fore. In Giuseppe Patroni Griffi’s ambitious yet critically maligned 1974 film, *The Driver’s Seat* (released in some countries as *Identikit*, a title which underscores the centrality of the police investigation to the progression of its plot), the on-screen action is regularly halted by freeze-frames, so that the once moving colour image, now presented as a monochrome still, is recontextualised as an item of evidence on the male detectives’ office wall.<sup>72</sup> A similar approach is taken in Laurie Sansom’s 2015 theatrical adaption, which utilises a series of staging techniques, including live video projections, transparent partition walls, and revolving stage sets, to foreground the ongoing nature of the men’s discussions, from which the on-stage performance appears to germinate as both collaborative, piecemeal recollection and dramatic reconstruction.<sup>73</sup> To borrow a term applied by Thomas Elsaesser in his analysis of the disorienting framing and reframing devices

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<sup>71</sup> A notable, albeit problematic, exception is encountered in Martin McQuillan’s brief discussion of the novel. ‘From here,’ McQuillan suggests of the final scene, ‘the whole of the novel, with its cool as marble depthlessness and its refusal to engage with the emotions or motivations of its characters, can be read as an unnerving police report’ (‘Introduction: “I Don’t Know Anything About Freud”’: Muriel Spark Meets Contemporary Criticism,’ in McQuillan, ed., *Theorising Muriel Spark*, pp.1–31 [p.3]). McQuillan’s conceptualisation of the novel as a ‘cool’ and completed ‘report’ is flawed, however; as the present chapter demonstrates, Spark’s endlessly spiralling narrative points to a narrating consciousness that is very much in flux, and still anxiously attempting to ‘solve’ the mystery of Lise.

<sup>72</sup> See Appendix, Figure 2.

<sup>73</sup> See Appendix, Figure 3.

encountered in Michael Haneke's psychological thriller, *Hidden* (2005), the recontextualisation of on-screen events as police evidence in Patroni Griffi's film and Sansom's play constitutes a major 'ontological switch.' This effect, achieved by way of 'editing, camera movement, [and] framing' in Haneke's film, induces 'a particular kind of vertigo' within the viewer, who must suddenly adjust his or her orientation towards what has been viewed.<sup>74</sup> A similar effect can be seen to be produced in the final scene of Spark's novel, which suggests that the preceding narrative emanates from a space *within* the story, rather than an omniscient, authoritative external position.

To (re)conceptualise *The Driver's Seat* as a text which emerges metaleptically from the 'sad little office' – spilling, perhaps, from the 'type-writer' that 'ticks out' details of the inconclusive investigation (*DS*, p.107) – is to align the fictive gaze that orders novelistic narration with the investigative (and emphatically masculine) one depicted within the story. Lise is thus presented to readers as the elusive, and therefore unnerving, object of male perception, whose behaviour confounds and unsettles her narrator in much the same way it does the various men she encounters over the course of her journey. Consequently, the novel's subversive power emerges through its presentation of an act of apparent masculine dominance – the subjection of a woman to an intense and exacting narrative gaze – as one which exists, in fact, in an uneasy dialectic with the feminine, indecipherable sight/site of visual fascination. In this

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Performative Self-Contradictions: Michael Haneke's Mind Games,' in Roy Grundman, ed., *A Companion to Michael Haneke* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp.53-74 (p.64). Elsaesser is referring specifically to *Hidden*'s famous opening sequence, in which a long, static shot of the exterior of an apartment is shown to suddenly freeze, ripple and rewind. This moment of metaleptic reframing (in which the seemingly concurrent action is reconceptualised as documentary evidence produced *within* the diegetic world) disorients the viewer by revealing what has s/he had taken to be a neutrally-observed establishing shot as something altogether more sinister. From the outset, therefore, Haneke's 'ontological switch' makes viewers complicit in *Hidden*'s interrogation of voyeurism and guilt.

respect, the novel invites further comparison with *Jealousy*, whose ‘husband-narrator,’ as Jeremy Lane argues, is transformed into an ‘anxious subject of desire’ when confronted with A...’s enduring mystery.<sup>75</sup> The narrator’s exhaustive efforts to locate conclusive evidence of A...’s ‘brazen sexuality,’ Lane continues, should thus be read as a series of ‘displacements of a more general anxiety about the potential for boundary loss and loss of male control,’ which bear particular relevance to the novel’s ‘colonial context.’<sup>76</sup> Zahi Zalloua, noting that ‘jealousy’ is ‘etymologically derived from the ancient Greek *zelos*,’ similarly argues that Robbe-Grillet’s narrative is driven by ‘a fervent desire or *zeal* [...] for an object that lies beyond [the narrator’s] mastery,’ which ‘robs the narrator’s gaze of its habitual sense of power.’<sup>77</sup>

A striking parallel emerges here between the staging, in each novel, of an objectifying masculine perspective that is directed towards a threateningly enigmatic female figure, and the conceptualisation of the male gaze as a sadistic scopic drive in Laura Mulvey’s seminal 1975 essay, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.’<sup>78</sup> With

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<sup>75</sup> Jeremy F. Lane, ‘The Stain, the Impotent Gaze, and the Theft of *Jouissance*: Towards a Žižekian Reading of Robbe-Grillet’s *La Jalousie*,’ *French Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 2, pp.193-206 (p.199).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.201. A thorough and incisive reading of the novel’s ‘colonial context’ is provided in Jacques Leenhardt, *Lecture politique du roman ‘La Jalousie’ d’Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1973). For Leenhardt, *Jealousy* functions as an allegory of France’s waning colonial power, poised on the precipice of the 1960 accessions to independence in West Africa. Leenhardt’s analysis of the novel, Zahi Zalloua writes, thus treats ‘the narrator-husband’s obsessive gaze’ as ‘symptomatic of his uneasiness and loss of footing in the changing field of power [...]. Accordingly, *La Jalousie*’s realism [...] lies not so much in the evocation of the narrator’s psychic reality than in the novel’s representation of a colonial mentality, or more precisely, in its staging of the ideological tension inherent in the devolution and devaluation of Western colonialism’ (*Reading Unruly*, pp.113-4). Echoing Zalloua, Adam Shatz argues that, in the novel, ‘published the same year as the Battle of Algiers, the loss of control over a woman seeped into a more generalised fear of colonial disorder. Its dispassionate yet obsessional prose [...] suggested a latent violence, hidden by a great labour of repression’ (‘At the Crime Scene,’ *London Review of Books*, Vol. 36, No. 15, 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014, pp.21-6 [p.25]).

<sup>77</sup> Zalloua, *Reading Unruly*, pp.119-20.

<sup>78</sup> The applicability of cinematic analysis to the study of literary texts has been acknowledged by numerous scholars of film and literature. Beth Newman, for example, notes how ‘visual metaphors’ (among them ‘point of view,’ ‘focalizer [sic],’ and references to a narrator who ‘sees’) have ‘thoroughly pervaded our theoretical vocabulary for the novel,’ and thus ‘implicitly invoke a gaze [...] whose perceptions organise the story.’ It is because of this, Newman argues, that literary analyses of aspects such as narrative perspective and reader-identification can draw productively from film theory

her own gaze trained upon the workings of classical Hollywood cinema, Mulvey utilises aspects of Lacanian psychoanalysis to analyse the ways in which such films come to reproduce and reaffirm structures of patriarchal authority and male narcissism by reconstituting their viewers as omnipotent masculine subjects (regardless of the individual viewer's gender). The filmic spectator, argues Mulvey, identifies with the central male protagonist and 'projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.'<sup>79</sup> The plot and action of traditional Hollywood narratives, therefore, are the exclusive domain of male characters, whereas women appear as the subservient spectacles of masculine desire; the viewer's gaze is thus scopophilic in the sense outlined by Freud, who 'associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.'<sup>80</sup> In a sexually imbalanced world, Mulvey asserts, 'pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female,' so that 'the determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure,' who finds herself 'simultaneously looked at and displayed, with [her] appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that [she] can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.'<sup>81</sup> This privileged, 'active' and heterosexual male gaze, Mulvey argues, is dictated by Oedipal anxieties concerning loss and castration, which revolve around the threatening figure of the female Other.<sup>82</sup> Such anxieties, she asserts, are resolved through the psychic mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism. Whereas the former is

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('“The Situation of the Looker-On”: Gender, Narration, and Gaze in *Wuthering Heights*,’ *PMLA*, Vol. 105, No. 5 [October 1990], pp.1029-41 [p.1029]). For similar arguments, see Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp.194-236, and Brian Finney, ‘Suture in Literary Analysis,’ *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory*, Vol. 2 (1990), pp.131-44.

<sup>79</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,’ in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989), pp.14-26 (p.20).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19, emphasis in original.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p.22.



related to the scopophilic desire to investigate the hitherto unknown Other from a vantage point of privilege and power, the latter seeks to avoid investigation entirely by transforming the source of anxiety into an unthreatening object of desire. Hollywood cinema is thus shown to abound with imaginary strategies and scenarios geared towards achieving either end – from voyeuristic narratives of investigation and detection, to the fetishistic fragmentation of the female body through close-up shots and nimble editing techniques. We can see a fluctuation between these two strategies in both *The Driver's Seat* and *Jealousy*. In each text, the female protagonists are figuratively and fetishistically dismembered by an objectifying narrative gaze; A...’s narrator fixates obsessively on her ‘black mass’ of hair, for example, while Lise’s makes exhaustive references to her ‘slightly parted’ lips.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, both A... and Lise are subjected to an investigative viewpoint which seeks to ‘solve’ their central mystery and establish their guilt or madness. Such techniques might work to allay, as Mulvey contends, the masculine fear of castration and disempowerment.

In the decades since its emergence, Mulvey’s thesis has been criticised for its rigid representation of the woman on screen as an objectified ‘Other,’ its deterministic application of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and its constrictive view of masculinity as only ever prevailing and possessive.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, given the Oedipal anxieties which underpin it, Mulvey’s theory offers scant exploration of the male gaze as vulnerable, fearful or impotent, nor does it consider either the numerous cultural, social and historical factors which might differentiate masculinities, for example, or the

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<sup>83</sup> Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Calder, 1959), p.66.

<sup>84</sup> See, for example: Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1984); Mary Ann Doane, ‘Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator,’ *Screen*, Vol. 23, No. 3-4 (1982), pp.74-87; Candida Yates, *Masculine Jealousy and Contemporary Cinema* (Houndmills; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); David Greven, *Psycho-Sexual: Male Desire in Hitchcock, De Palma, Scorsese, and Friedkin* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2013).

existence of a specifically female or *feminine* gaze in place of her own model's inflexibly gendered binary of active/passive looking.<sup>85</sup> It is for reasons such as these that Alice Ferrebe, in an incisive essay on scopic power and sexual politics in the fiction of John Fowles, chooses to 'quibble with the nomenclature of Mulvey's "male gaze" in Hollywood cinema.' Here Ferrebe cites not only 'the essentialism inherent in the adjective "male"' (a charge levelled by numerous other critics),<sup>86</sup> but also 'the fact that, striving as it does to transfer all intimations of weakness to the subaltern characters within the diegesis, it is in fact panicked, fraught with inadequacy.' What Mulvey might define as an 'omniscient, omnipotent, objectifying mode of looking' is thus, for Ferrebe, 'looking at its most *lacking*.'<sup>87</sup>

Ferrebe's reassessment of Mulvey's 'male gaze' as ultimately 'panicked, fraught with inadequacy' and 'lacking' is especially pertinent to my own examination of the anguished and epistemologically limited perspective of Spark's narrator.<sup>88</sup> Rather than simply expose such limitations, however, Spark has Lise anticipate and ironise the machinations of the male, investigative gaze that will later struggle to comprehend her. As she heads defiantly towards her tragic *dénouement*, Lise assumes and discards public images and identities at will. She speaks, as she prepares to board her flight at the beginning of the novel, in a naïve and docile 'little-girl tone' (*DS*, p.19), and then

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<sup>85</sup> Mulvey sought to address the latter issue in her 1981 essay, 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946), in Sue Thornham, ed., *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), pp.122-31. Among other matters, the essay proposes that narrative film is constructed upon 'the never fully repressed bed-rock of feminine neurosis' (p.124), and that melodrama might thus invite the identification of the female viewer.

<sup>86</sup> I am thinking specifically of Candida Yates in *Masculine Jealousy and Contemporary Cinema*. Following a thorough assessment of Mulvey's thesis, Yates concludes that, while '[t]he notion of "the male gaze" has been central in setting the terms of the debate about gender and spectatorship,' Mulvey 'present[s] an image of patriarchal masculinity as only powerful and possessive. There is little space for images of male vulnerability' (p.49).

<sup>87</sup> Alice Ferrebe, 'The Gaze of the Magus: Sexual/Scopic Politics in the Novels of John Fowles,' *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Summer, 2004), pp.207-26 (pp.207-9, emphasis mine).

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.208.

in a ‘foreignly accented English’ while masquerading, shortly thereafter, as an effervescent holidaymaker who claims to be “‘look[ing] for a gay time’” (*DS*, pp.22-3). Some hours later she will adopt the invented persona of a widowed New Jersey schoolteacher, before switching to that of ‘a temptress in the old-fashioned style’ (*DS*, p.78). At other intervals she will accost a policeman with a handgun, make a public display of discarding her passport, become embroiled in a student demonstration, shriek angrily at a chambermaid, perform a rendition of a nursery rhyme, and – perhaps most incongruously of all – scrawl an obscure message in lipstick across a pair of gift-wrapped slippers. Lise’s shape-shifting efforts are even aided, to some extent, by the various oppressive and essentialising cultural standards to which women in *The Driver’s Seat* are subjected; if, in the Northern European city where the novel begins, her outlandish outfit marks her out as a madwoman and therefore deserving of ‘the high, hacking cough-like ancestral laughter of the streets’ (*DS*, p.17), it signifies that she is ‘of the street prostitute class’ (*DS*, p.51) when she arrives in Southern Europe.<sup>89</sup> As she transitions between various voices, guises and spaces, Lise (whose name reads anagrammatically as ‘lies’) skillfully manipulates her ‘*to-be-looked-at-ness*’ so that she may hide in plain sight, wearing ‘a look of satisfaction at her own dominance over the situation’ all the while (*DS*, p.9). In doing so, she eludes and undermines the multiple, suspicious gazes of the men around her, while ironically offering scraps of these invented identities to the devouring gaze of her narrator (none of which will, of course, reveal anything of her essential self).

Rather like the dazzling dress that she tries on in the novel’s opening scene – its

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<sup>89</sup> ‘Skirts are worn shorter here in the South,’ remarks the narrator. ‘Just as, in former times, when prostitutes could be discerned by the brevity of their skirts compared with the normal standard, so Lise in her knee-covering clothes at this moment looks curiously of the street prostitute class beside the mini-skirted girls and their mothers whose knees at least can be seen’ (*DS*, p.51).

disorienting pattern of ‘green and purple squares on a white background, with blue spots within the green squares, cyclamen spots within the purple’ proving ‘too vivid for most customers’ taste’ (*DS*, p.1) – Lise blinds her narrator with a kaleidoscopic procession of mesmeric, fabricated selves. As a consequence, she casts doubt upon any simple correlation between scopic apprehension and epistemological power; to see, her actions imply, is not necessarily to comprehend and control, but rather to risk succumbing to endless fascination. In her essay, “‘The Situation of the Looker-On’”: Gender, Narration and Gaze in *Wuthering Heights*’ (1990), Beth Newman follows Mulvey in claiming the gaze as ‘the privilege of a male subject, a means of relegating women (or “Woman”) to the status of object (of representation, discourse, desire, etc.).’<sup>90</sup> Newman qualifies this stance, however, with reference to the Medusa – described elsewhere as ‘a spectacular subject of the gaze, the ultimate example of the terrible effects of looking, a prime example of male gazing with potentially fatal results.’<sup>91</sup> What makes the Medusa so threatening to her spectator, Newman suggests, is the spectator’s ‘knowledge that the other sees and therefore resists being reduced to an appropriable object,’ thus ‘disturbing the pleasure the male subject takes in gazing and the hierarchical relations by which he asserts his dominance.’<sup>92</sup> Here Newman engages with Stephen Heath’s reading of Lacan’s seminars on the gaze, in which Heath argues that woman is absent as the subject of the gaze *except* when she ‘sees herself seeing herself’ – when she recognises herself, that is, as the object of the gaze. ‘If the woman looks,’ argues Heath, ‘the spectacle provokes, castration is in the air, the Medusa’s head is not far off; thus, she must not look, is absorbed herself on the

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<sup>90</sup> Newman, “‘The Situation of the Looker-On’”, p.1031.

<sup>91</sup> David Greven, ‘In a Pig’s Eye: Masculinity, Mastery, and the Returned Gaze of *The Blithedale Romance*,’ *Studies in American Fiction*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Autumn, 2006), pp.131-59 (p.137).

<sup>92</sup> Newman, “‘The Situation of the Looker-On’”, p.1031.

side of the seen.<sup>93</sup>

As evinced by her interactions with the likes of Richard, Carlo and Bill, Lise is extraordinarily adept at unsettling these ‘hierarchical relations’ by anticipating and returning the gazes directed towards her. The same is true on a metafictional level; no longer a submissive spectacle “‘absorbed [...] on the side of the seen,’” or flattened into what Hanna Meretoja has called the *nouveau roman*’s depthless ‘thing-world,’ Lise demonstrates, through her incongruous exhibitionism, an acute awareness of her status as the fascinating subject of an incomprehensible mystery.<sup>94</sup> Her behaviour thus amounts to a destabilising *returned gaze*, in that it confronts the narrator (and, by extension, the extratextual reader) with her radical resistance to ‘representation, discourse, desire.’<sup>95</sup> As Newman asserts, ‘when a woman looks back she asserts her “existence” as a subject, her place outside the position of object to which the male gaze relegates her and by which it defines her as “woman.”’<sup>96</sup> With this in mind, we might briefly observe the ironic tendency, among male critics in particular, to attempt to definitively *solve* Lise by minimising the components of her self-spun mystery to a set of uncomplicated indicators of mental illness: ‘Lise’s terrible outfits are clues to her derangement,’ deduces John Lanchester in his introductory essay to a 2006 edition of the novel;<sup>97</sup> ‘Throughout the novel,’ observes Norman Page, ‘[Lise] complains, quarrels, speaks *more loudly than is normal* [...] and this behaviour is [...] evidence

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<sup>93</sup> Stephen Heath, ‘Difference,’ *Screen*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1978), pp.51-112 (p.92), qtd. in Newman, “‘The Situation of the Looker-On’”, p.1031. Discussing Heath’s reading of Lacan, Newman explains that ‘the subject’s pleasure in looking (without being seen) may defer his necessary confrontation with the “fact” of castration, because such undisturbed looking returns the subject to the sense of completeness associated with the scopophilic pleasures of the mirror stages.’ The ‘returning look,’ however, ‘disrupts this sense of wholeness’ (p.1031).

<sup>94</sup> Hanna Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory: The Crisis and Return of Storytelling from Robbe-Grillet to Tournier* (London: Palgrave, 2014), p.94.

<sup>95</sup> Newman, “‘The Situation of the Looker-On’”, p.1031.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1032.

<sup>97</sup> John Lanchester, ‘Introduction,’ in Muriel Spark, *The Driver’s Seat* (London: Penguin, 2006), pp.i-xv (p.x).

of her serious mental instability’;<sup>98</sup> ‘[Lise] is committing suicide,’ Ian Rankin surmises from a scant selection of details concerning the protagonist’s private life, ‘because she has been a lonely anonymous woman.’<sup>99</sup> Each reading constitutes a vain attempt to discern and dictate the meaning of Lise’s quest, and thus betrays an anxious refusal to attend to the significance of her defiant inscrutability.

Spark would make Lise’s subversive resistance to the gaze rather more explicit in drafted dialogue between the protagonist and her father, who never appears in the published text. In a telephone conversation between the pair, Lise’s father berates his daughter for her alleged history of waywardness and sexual promiscuity, before reminding her of the duty she owes to both her family and her faith. Immediately afterwards, Lise dismisses her father’s orders as ridiculous in a call to her aunt, who is sympathetic to her grievances and mindful of her absent mother. Quoted in full below, these exchanges take place the evening before Lise’s journey, the first beginning – like her interaction with the shop assistant at the start of the novel – *in media res*:

Her father’s voice says on the telephone, “With Margot and with me. Your father and your sister. You should be home to join your sister after she has been away at school all these months. She looks for you and you’re never here. You want to go on your own to meet men. Men all the time – you will never meet a good man going through the streets like a...”

She laughs happily and waits for him to go on. “Your poor little sister, and your brother, his two lovely children. Suppose you take ill?”

“You say all this every time I go abroad,” Lise says.

“Suppose you take ill?”

“I can speak four languages.”

“You will never prosper, Lise. A daughter. God knows your heart. The Lord is at the helm. The Lord holds the reins. You will never go against the Lord.”

She says, “What about modern travel? Is the Lord in the pilot’s cabin and in the driver’s seat, or did it all stop with ocean voyages?”

“What do you say? I don’t understand you?”

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<sup>98</sup> Page, *Muriel Spark*, p.72, emphasis mine.

<sup>99</sup> Rankin, ‘Surface and Structure,’ p.154.

“I’ve got to go now, Pa.” She laughs and hangs up. For a second. Then she dials another number and the voice answers.

“Auntie Bell?”

“Lise. You’re off tomorrow.”

“Yes, early. I’ve just had a call from Pa. He’s crazy.”

“What can you do?” says the aunt.

“You can’t take him seriously,” says Lise. “Religious mania.”

“Your poor mother,” says her aunt, “is well out of it.”

“Absolutely.”<sup>100</sup>

In the published version of *The Driver’s Seat*, Spark replaced these exchanges with two brief and uneventful telephone calls: one with Margot (who, the above passage reveals, is in fact Lise’s sister – a detail that the novel neglects to mention), concerning the banal practicalities of the coming day’s journey, and another with an unidentified well-wisher, who asks Lise to send a postcard from her travels. In contrast, the conversations with Lise’s father and aunt possess far greater significance in terms of what they reveal about the life and authority that she is preparing to leave behind. What Lise refers to as her father’s “[r]eligious mania” concerns his belief that her intentions are known to both himself and God, neither of whom she will dare disobey. In proclaiming (incorrectly, as it will transpire) his knowledge of Lise’s desire for sexual liaisons with men, the father paraphrases from the Book of Jeremiah:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.<sup>101</sup>

‘Reins’ is an archaic term for the kidneys, which, in conjunction with the heart, are referred to throughout the Bible as the figurative locus of the desires, thoughts and

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<sup>100</sup> Spark, Loose handwritten fragment in ‘Handwritten notes and draft fragments [*The Driver’s Seat*],’ McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

<sup>101</sup> Bible (Jeremiah 17: 9-10).

emotions that constitute ‘the central essence of a person.’<sup>102</sup> As internal organs, the reins are ‘hidden from view but accessible to the look of God,’ who may examine them in order to judge the purity of the mortal soul.<sup>103</sup> Drawing a connection between the apparent visibility of Lise’s desires and her powerlessness before God, her father switches to the more conventional usage of ‘reins,’ having reminded his daughter that “‘the Lord is at the helm.’” Lise responds by co-opting the metaphor – *taking the reins*, as it were – with literal references to the modes of “‘modern travel’” by which she will make her journey, and of which, she suggests, the Lord is not in command. This playful and cryptic response, which bemuses her father and cuts dead his castigation,<sup>104</sup> is also notable for its mention of “‘the driver’s seat,’” a phrase which is never uttered by Lise or any other character in the published text.<sup>105</sup> Although the novel’s title might seem a rather uncomplicated metaphor for personal autonomy and free will, its use here suggests, more specifically, Lise’s rebellious assertion of her essential *illegibility* to man (or to *men*) and God alike. While her father associates God’s scrutiny of one’s ‘reins’ with the divine ‘reins’ that keep her or him under control, Lise’s stated possession of “‘the driver’s seat’” articulates her steadfast rejection of both principles.

More intriguing still is the possibility, raised during her telephone call with

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<sup>102</sup> Garabed Eknayan, ‘The Kidneys in the Bible: What Happened?’, *Journal of the American Society of Nephrology*, Vol. 16, No. 12 (2005), pp.3464-71 (p.3468).

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Of a similarly cryptic nature is Lise’s mention of her ability to speak four languages. While this detail might appear, to the father, as a sign of his daughter’s ability to cope with any difficulties that might arise from travelling alone in a foreign country, readers of *The Driver’s Seat* discover its morbid intended purpose: Lise has learnt to scream “‘Kill me’” [...] in four languages’ (*DS*, p.106), just in case her chosen killer does not speak English.

<sup>105</sup> The only appearance of the phrase in the novel occurs when Lise steals Carlo’s car: ‘She runs and makes a grab for the door of the driver’s seat [...], she gets in, starts up, and backs speedily out of the lane. [...] And then she is away, well clear of him’ (*DS*, pp.81-2). A link between control and visibility is present even in this prosaic and literal reference, however; Lise takes ‘the driver’s seat’ so that she may be ‘well clear’ of Carlo’s predatory gaze, leaving him stranded, enfeebled and symbolically blinded.



Auntie Bell, that Lise is not the first in her family to seek to evade the father's scrutiny; Lise's "poor mother," remarks her aunt, is now "well out of it." While it is conceivable that Lise's mother has chosen of her own volition to live contentedly apart from the family unit, Auntie Bell's sympathetic use of "poor" may indicate that she is dead or in some way ill or incapacitated, and yet still better off for being free of the father. The mother's absence is detectable in the father's anxious demand that Lise return to look after her younger sister, and thus perhaps occupy a newly vacant maternal role. This ambiguous fate raises further questions concerning the motivation behind Lise's journey: is Lise, in rejecting her daughterly responsibilities and engineering her own mysterious and violent death, attempting, perhaps like her mother before her, to escape the persistent, judgemental gaze of her father by making herself strange and unknowable? If Lise is a "spectacle [who] provokes," then her mother is one who vanishes altogether. In both cases, the father's control is lost, and the reins (in both uses of the word) are obscured and out of reach. The spectre of jealousy/*Jealousy* is evoked once more; the voyeuristic threat, as in Robbe-Grillet's novel, is installed within the family unit, and linked closely to a diminished masculine authority and to an anxiety over a steadily waning influence.

Although Spark chose to remove the father's voice and other details concerning Lise's family from the published text, a similarly anxious interplay between spectator and spectacle is discernible in the narrator's intense preoccupation with keeping Lise permanently in view, accessing her thoughts, and uncovering her secrets. In this sense, the narrative can be read in its entirety as an extended attempt, on the narrator's part, to guard against the threat of the female Other by investigating and objectifying her, after which she may be put finally to rest. This endeavour, as we have seen, results

only in continued failure and frustration. In anticipating and returning the male gaze with her own spectacular display, Lise effects the Medusa-like paralysis of her observer; instead of telling her story and making it – and her – his own, the narrator is frozen in fascination, and tortured by a maddening inability to ‘penetrate the other’s mystery.’ We might thus read the novel’s deeply unsettling ending, in which Richard ‘plunges into’ Lise against her will, in terms of this unfulfilled masculine desire to ‘penetrate’ and possess. Treated here as a vile assertion of phallic power, the act of rape becomes a pathetic retaliation against a threatened castration, which makes explicit the psychosexual dimensions of the male gaze. This applies not only to Richard, who seeks to overpower Lise’s emasculatory ability to return his gaze and instruct him on how to murder her, but also the narrator, whose grim fixation upon the attacker’s penetrative ‘plunge’ betrays his own frustrated need to comprehend and control her. Far from demonstrating Lise’s failure, as an artist *manqué*, to avoid having her plans be scuppered by superior creative forces, the closing scene depicts the endless collapse of the fictive gaze – a scopic drive that is masculine, vulnerable and eminently self-destructive.

**Conclusion: “In the driver’s seat?”**

“Is the Lord in the pilot’s cabin and in the driver’s seat?”

While Lise’s question to her father (along with the rest of the terse exchange shared between the pair) never found its way into *The Driver’s Seat*, its implications ironically anticipate the predominant tone of the novel’s critical reception. Indeed, if

the majority of readings of *The Driver's Seat* are to be accepted, the answer to her question is an emphatic *yes*. The novel, such readings contend, is concerned almost exclusively with the containment of Lise's 'plot' within a divine 'script' over which she lacks any control. Lise's macabre machinations, such readings assume, occur within a still-unfolding narrative present, yet are known to – and even anticipated by – an existentially and epistemologically superior narrator, who stands rather uncomplicatedly for both her mighty author and almighty God. A thorough reevaluation of this longstanding interpretation, the present chapter has argued, is long overdue. Spark's narrator is neither assured nor authoritative, and the text's proleptic digressions demonstrate little in the way of omniscience. What is more, Lise remains utterly inscrutable, even as her journey reaches its end.

In place of the popular interpretation outlined above, I have claimed Lise's death-bound journey to be a source of debilitating anxiety for her bewildered narrator. Contrary to the assumption that her plot-making is contained, comprehended and consequently undermined by the revelation of a wider temporal frame, Lise's practice of fashioning her life and death into an unfathomable mystery comes to hold her narrator in rapt fascination. The narrative, then, can be seen to fixate obsessively and unwaveringly on Lise's actions, rather than demonstrate their insignificance in relation to a greater 'script.' The narrator – something of a cross between *Jealousy's* disintegrating husband and the disoriented investigator of a metaphysical detective text – is doomed to remain caught on her trail, repeating a story that moves in a shell-like spiral rather than towards a definitive, illuminating conclusion. A similar effect is transferred to the audience; seduced by Spark's textual machinations, the reader is lulled into a false sense of mastery, believing erroneously that s/he possesses an

advantage over Lise by knowing the ending in advance. The seemingly climactic moment of Lise's murder arrives, however, without elucidation. We are soon back to the 'sad little office,' where her steps shall be retraced once more.

Given her association with death, deviance and secrecy, Lise can be aligned quite comfortably with the femme fatale, described in Mary Ann Doane's influential study of feminism and classical Hollywood cinema, *Femmes Fatales* (1991), as 'the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma,' whose 'most striking characteristic, perhaps, is that she never really is what she seems to be.'<sup>106</sup> For Doane, films featuring the femme fatale tend to be concerned with 'transforming the threat of the woman into a secret, something which must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered,' thus ensuring that 'the figure is fully compatible with the epistemological drive of narrative, the hermeneutic structuration of the classical text.'<sup>107</sup> Amending one of the central tenets of Mulvey's thesis in light of Doane's, Katherine Farrimond proposes that 'the femme fatale [...] is presented not merely as to-be-looked-at, but as to-be-solved.'<sup>108</sup> Lise, however, inhabits no such 'classical text,' and no conventional femme fatale role. Her self-described "'whydunnit'" remains clasped tightly shut, her 'slightly parted' lips refuse to tell her secrets, and

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<sup>106</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York; London: Routledge, 1991), p.1.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Katherine Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema* (New York; London, Routledge, 2017), p.16, emphasis mine. What Farrimond terms the 'to-be-solved-ness' of the femme fatale has always been implicit in theories of the gaze. In Freudian theory, as Candida Yates reminds us, 'scopophilia is associated with the controlling, sadistic gaze of the voyeuristic subject who looks unseen at his object from a safe distance. The underlying motivation of the voyeur is the need to ward off castration anxiety by returning to the "trauma" of the primal scene, to investigate from a distance and from a position of power, the original scene of trauma, to possess and punish the m/other for her Oedipal infidelity and difference. The voyeuristic pleasure in scrutinising the object from a distance has much in common with the obsessive jealous stalker, who wants to possess and punish his chosen object of possession and desire' (*Masculine Jealousy and Contemporary Cinema*, pp.47-8, emphasis mine).

any act of ‘unmask[ing]’ only reveals a proliferation of other masks layered beneath.

Her elusive presence thus evokes Doane’s discussion of the masquerade:

The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. [...] The masquerade’s resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself [...]. To masquerade is to manufacture lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one’s image.<sup>109</sup>

In this sense, Lise is the ultimate embodiment of what Ruth Whittaker terms ‘the Sparkian woman’ – one who is a masterful ‘creator of fictions,’ and who ‘efficiently reorganises events in her favour.’<sup>110</sup> Intended by Spark to appear as a ‘destiny-driven creature,’ preoccupied with ‘going direct’ to the ending that she has so clearly envisaged, Lise fosters the same sense of ‘discursive unease’ described by Doane by making herself illegible (‘manufactur[ing] lack’) and thus evading control.<sup>111</sup> This ‘unease’ remains pointedly unrelieved, as Lise’s mesmeric drive to death comes to subsume the ‘epistemological drive’ through which narrator and reader each attempt to solve her mystery. Indeed, in deciding against including details of Lise’s domineering father and mysteriously absent mother, Spark further frustrates the readerly desire for origins and interpretive ‘keys,’ so that her text becomes instead an encounter with loss – of knowledge and bearings, beginnings and conclusions. It is grimly fitting, then, that Spark’s bewildering chronicle of a death foretold should close not with a restoration of logic and order, but rather a desperate stab in the dark.

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<sup>109</sup> Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, pp.25-6. Doane’s analysis draws here upon Joan Riviere’s ‘Womanliness as a Masquerade’ (1929).

<sup>110</sup> Ruth Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p.113.

<sup>111</sup> Frankel, ‘An Interview with Muriel Spark,’ p.452. In writing the novel, Spark may have even tapped into the disturbingly ‘driven’ and ‘direct’ energy of her protagonist. Writing quickly and compulsively, she completed *The Driver’s Seat* in only a few weeks, but the experience left her ill and unsettled: ‘I frightened myself by writing it, but I just had to go on. I gave myself a terrible fright with it. I had to go into hospital to finish it’ (Gillham, ‘Keeping it Short,’ p.413).

## Conclusion: Leaving the Hothouse

If it were only true that all's well that ends well,  
if only it were true.  
– *The Hothouse by the East River* (p.1)

This thesis seeks to end well by way of a brief examination of Spark's most extravagant work of metafiction, *The Hothouse by the East River*, as a means of uniting the various strands of literary experimentation, satire, subversion and social critique discussed over the course of the preceding chapters. First, however, I wish to focus on an obscure and hitherto unexamined byproduct of that novel's tortuous gestation. *Hothouse* was written over the course of seven years, an unprecedented amount of time for Spark to spend on a novel (*The Mandelbaum Gate*, her previous longest, had taken a little over two). Within this lengthy period of writing and rumination, Spark conducted extensive research into an eccentrically diverse selection of subjects – among them, the pathophysiology of electric shocks, the specificities of hotel cuisine, the workings of telephone wires, and the hatching of silkworm eggs<sup>1</sup> – that bear only tangential relevance to the content of the novel that she eventually wrote. Spark also composed strange fragments of poetic verse during this time, which she compiled among her ever-growing collection of notes and research for *Hothouse*. One such fragment, quoted in full below, depicts a world of desperate squalor and contamination, which the poem's speaker looks upon with apparent confusion and despair:

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<sup>1</sup> See Muriel Spark, 'Research Material Including Café Menu on the Beaux-Arts Hotel, etc. [*The Hothouse by the East River*, 1968-73, 158 pieces],' Muriel Spark Papers, Box 28, Folder 2, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

Who are there that contaminate the spring.  
That bring lousy associations to the nightingales  
And who follow not even the laws of the Congo jungles  
of the world, but of the treacherous gutter  
the gutter of diphtheria, the gutters of profound contagion  
and polluted words?<sup>2</sup>

The poem fragment may seem to be little more than a scrap of marginalia, and thus inconsequential to the end result of Spark's years-long project. What this fragment reveals, in fact, is a subject that would become central to the published novel: the destruction of a seductive ideal by a force of 'profound contagion.' The nature of that ideal is represented by the nightingales, whose appearance calls to mind the theme and content of John Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819). In Keats's poem, the titular bird appears to sing from beyond the parameters of human life, and thus entices the speaker with the prospect of 'transgress[ing] the melancholy laws of mortality' and arriving in an idealised imaginative realm far removed from human suffering and death.<sup>3</sup> The speaker envisages how, following his own death, his body shall merge into the earth while the nightingale's eternal song plays on without pause:

While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
In such an ecstasy!  
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—  
To thy high requiem become a sod.<sup>4</sup>

In Spark's verse, by contrast, something is unnervingly amiss. The nightingale, described by Keats as an 'immortal Bird' who 'wast not born for death,' here inhabits

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<sup>2</sup> Muriel Spark, Untitled poem (typed, loose fragment), 'Typed and Carbon Copy Typed General Notes [*The Hothouse by the East River*, 1968-73, 89 pieces],' Muriel Spark Papers, Box 28, Folder 4, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p.200.

<sup>4</sup> John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale,' in Nicholas Roe, ed., *Selected Poems* (London: Everyman, 1995), p.214, ll.56-8.

a fetid, ‘contaminate[d]’ world where it finds itself infested with ‘lousy associations.’<sup>5</sup> The dream of transcendence is now diseased and dying, the ‘spring’ of eternal life having since degraded into the dismal ‘gutter of diphtheria.’ Whereas ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ entertains the possibility of escaping into an idyllic realm far removed from mortal concerns, Spark’s poem fixates instead on the foul stagnancy that follows after ‘pouring forth thy soul abroad.’ How did this awful state come to be? Crucially, ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ ends with Keats *rejecting* the idealism captured in the bird’s song (‘Adieu!’ he cries to the nightingale, ‘the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf’), leaving the creature to depart to ‘the next valley-glades’ to enthrall another passing poet.<sup>6</sup> Spark’s poem suggests the opposite; the ‘deceiving elf’ of the imagination has taken over, producing a false and ‘treacherous’ unreality built entirely from ‘polluted words.’

Much like Spark’s untitled, unpublished and likely unfinished poem, *The Hothouse by the East River* concerns itself with a fantasy of ‘transgress[ing] the melancholy laws of mortality’ that has since run rampant and turned toxic and grotesque. The novel narrates a posthumous fever dream emanating from the unquiet spirit of Paul Hazlett (his surname, ‘has let,’ indicates his mind’s submission to an unruly fiction),<sup>7</sup> who has denied the plain fact of his death with a placatory vision of eternal life, abundant wealth, omniscient control and a subservient wife. As he and the reader discover simultaneously at the end of the novel, Paul had been killed in a V-2

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1.61.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., ll.73-4; 1.78.

<sup>7</sup> Paul’s surname is also, perhaps, an allusion to William Hazlitt’s *Liber Amoris; or, The New Pygmalion* (1823). Hazlitt’s narrative, described as ‘one of the first extended treatments in a line of modern writing on men who try to make women fit their illusions,’ retells the Pygmalion legend as a man’s attempt to force the object of his affections ‘into the mold of a goddess’ (Robert Ready, ‘The Logic of Passion: Hazlitt’s *Liber Amoris*,’ *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 14, No. 1 [Winter 1975], pp.41-57 [p.46; p.42]). While Paul cannot be said to love or indeed idolise his wife, his entrapment of Elsa within a rigid role inside the hothouse of his spectral imagination bears a certain similarity to the themes at play in Hazlitt’s text (and the Pygmalion legend).



blitz of London in 1944, when a bomb obliterated the train in which he and his wife Elsa were preparing to leave the city. What precedes this illusion-shattering revelation is a dream of life in 1970s New York, where Paul and Elsa (along with their two invented children, Pierre and Katerina) live affluently in a luxurious apartment ‘fourteen stories above everything’ (*HER*, p.14).<sup>8</sup> The eye snags on Spark’s spelling of ‘stories,’ which is incongruous in a text that otherwise adheres to the conventions of British English; Paul, her choice of word signifies, resides above New York inside an exceedingly *tall tale* of his own construction. This is the novel’s second clue that all is not as it seems. The first arrives in the form of Elsa’s shadow, which falls toward the sun rather than against it. By defying the physics of light, the shadow’s strange angle poses a nagging challenge to the validity of the (un)reality that Paul has summoned into being. Not that Paul is prepared to take notice of this: ‘Paul cannot acknowledge it,’ remarks the narrator, ‘[a] mirage, that shadow of hers. Not a fact’ (*HER*, p.8).

Paul can only ignore Elsa for so long, however. No longer content with using her errant shadow to spoil the contents of the family photographs that decorate the apartment, she now seeks to demolish Paul’s edifice of world-sustaining ‘stories’ with destabilising tales of her own devising. At the outset of the novel, Elsa deliberately incites her husband’s jealousy with news of a recent encounter with Helmut Kiel, a German prisoner of war with whom she had an affair while she and Paul were stationed at a Political Intelligence compound during wartime. Paul denounces her claims as nonsensical, knowing Kiel to have died in the intervening years, but soon

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<sup>8</sup> Paul’s fantasy thus constitutes an example of ‘spectral incognisance,’ as defined earlier by Aviva Briefel (‘What Some Ghosts Don’t Know: Spectral Incognisance in the Horror Film,’ *Narrative*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp.95-108). The entire novel, in fact, bears an uncanny similarity to one of the films discussed in Briefel’s essay, Adrian Lyne’s *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990). As with *The Hothouse by the East River*, Lyne’s film narrates the gradual destruction of a dream of extended life in contemporary New York, emanating from the unquiet spirit of a man killed during the war (in this case, the Vietnam War).

descends into a state of febrile paranoia. Attempts at interrogating Elsa only exacerbate Paul's latent fears; his wife responds to his questions by communicating in arcane metaphors and oblique literary allusions, thus contaminating Paul's self-made and eminently legible universe with a series of threateningly impenetrable mysteries. Submitting Elsa to psychoanalysis results in further failure and frustration. "He hasn't got his material yet," Elsa remarks gleefully of her bemused analyst, Garven: "He's looking for the cause, and all I'm giving him are effects. It's lovely" (*HER*, p.48). In instances such as these, Elsa, with her indecipherable language and her swooping, scythe-like shadow, lacerates Paul's dream of eternal life and omniscient control with fleeting reminders of the reality of his death:

His heart thumps for help. "Help me! Help me!" cries his heart, battering the sides of the coffin. "The schizophrenic has imposed her will. Her delusion, her fragment, her nothing-there, has come to pass." (*HER*, p.15)

His heart's panic begins to rotate: I'm on the wrong train, he silently screams, an express train going miles in the opposite direction from where I want to go, and I can't get off. (*HER*, pp.85-6)

How long, cries Paul in his heart, will these people, this city, haunt me? (*HER*, p.88)

In this respect, Elsa's attempts to mystify and disempower Paul furnish further significance to the themes at play in Spark's strange poem. Like the lice-ridden nightingales described in its second line, the poem is itself infested with references to the disquiet and confusion caused by human utterances ('lousy associations,' 'treacherous gutter,' 'polluted words'), which have caused the utopian spring to spoil. By muddying the waters of Paul's world with her cryptic comments, as well as distressing allusions to her past treachery and present deathliness, Elsa articulates her resistance to the normative family fiction in which she has been expected to assume a silent, passive role.

In the figure of Elsa, whose very name (so redolent of ‘else’) signifies her radical alterity, Spark thus forges a link between errant femininity and narrative disintegration. Having co-opted Paul’s phallogentric ‘master’ narrative of elongated existence, rigid ‘fact[s]’ and epistemological control, she announces mockingly that her own “‘psyche is [now] like a skyscraper, stretching up and up, practically all glass and steel so that one can look out over everything, and one never bends”” (*HER*, p.85). Elsa does not aspire to such qualities, of course, but is instead ridiculing the fantasy of perfect omniscience that she has so successfully dismantled (“‘It was you with your terrible and jealous dreams,”” she later tells Paul, “‘who set the whole edifice soaring”” [*HER*, p.95]). Her ridicule does not end there, however. When she and Paul attend a bizarre theatrical production of J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan; or, the Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up* (1904), in which a group of geriatrics are cast as the Lost Boys, Elsa chucks rotten tomatoes at the players in mockery and disgust. That the decaying fruit is retrieved from inside her ‘big crocodile bag’ (*HER*, pp.92-3) is far from incidental; in Barrie’s play (and his 1911 novel), the crocodile contains within its stomach an audibly ticking clock, the sound of which comes to terrify Captain Hook far more than the ferocious creature who swallowed it. In her riotous tomato-hurling display, Elsa similarly calls time on the ridiculous New York Neverland within which her spirit has festered for far too long. If Peter Pan’s slippery shadow marks his happy separation from (and denial of) his mortality, the wayward direction of Elsa’s guides her decisively toward her own.

Associated throughout the novel with sweltering temperatures and blazing fires (she dresses in a ‘flame-coloured’ evening gown [*HER*, p.85], for instance, and

insists that the central heating in her and Paul's home is set at the highest possible level), Elsa exists in stark contrast to her permanently wintry surroundings, her fiery presence indicating the strain she exerts on a story that struggles to contain her. When the apartment's excessive heat causes a maid to suffer a 'brainstorm' and drop a tray of afternoon tea, for example, the narrative is forced to switch focus from a scene of controlled decorum to an account of the 'wreckage on the carpet,' involving 'the silver teapot on its side oozing leafy tea, the cream crawling its way among the jagged fragments' of broken china, and 'the sugar cubes scattered over the carpet like children's discarded playing-blocks seen from a far height' (*HER*, p.39). An assortment of luxury brands ('Coalport china, [...] petit-fours and scones from Schrafft's, Fifth Avenue, [...] pineapple preserves from Charles's, Madison Avenue' [Ibid.]) find themselves juxtaposed with language which recalls the 'laws of the Congo jungles' described in Spark's poem ('oozing,' 'leafy,' 'crawling'), thus evoking a sense of the wild disorder that lurks just beneath the idyllic surface of Paul's meticulously arranged and placidly narrated existence. This 'wreckage' of 'jagged fragments' and 'scattered' sugar cubes prefigures the altogether more drastic destruction of Paul's 'stories' that arrives at the novel's close, when the titular 'Hothouse' of stifling fictions is at last demolished to make way for real death:

[Paul and Elsa] stand outside their apartment block, looking at the scaffolding. The upper stories are already gone and the lower part is a shell. A demolition truck waits for the new day's shift to begin. The morning breeze from the East River is already spreading the dust.

Elsa stands in the morning light reading the billboard. It announces the new block of apartments to be built on the old.

"Now we can have some peace," says Elsa. (*HER*, pp.139-40)

I have chosen to conclude this thesis with a short discussion of *The Hothouse by the East River* because in this, by far the most outlandish of all of Spark's fictions,

aspects of each of the experimental, defamiliarising strategies discussed in the preceding chapters can be identified. Like *The Driver's Seat* almost immediately before it, *Hothouse* stages the operation and gradual deconstruction of a masculine ideal of all-knowing omnipotence. Much in the same way that Lise evades and consequently undermines the objectifying impulse of her own narrator (whose gaze, I have argued, mirrors those of the men depicted within the diegesis) by fashioning her final days into an enduringly mystifying spectacle, Elsa's predilection toward manifesting indecipherable "effects" over readily comprehensible "causes" comes to destabilise her husband's powers of deduction, causing him to spiral into impotent obsession before his edifice of 'stories' crashes into rubble. Before this point, Paul has enjoyed exploiting the kind of manipulative authority exhibited by the likes of *The Public Image's* Frederick Christopher, *Not to Disturb's* Baron Klopstock, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye's* Mr Druce, and *Doctors of Philosophy's* Charlie Delfont. Like the female characters in those texts (Annabel Christopher, Baroness Klopstock, Merle Coverdale and Leonora Chase, most notably), Elsa has come to languish within a narrow, preconstructed role, before seizing her opportunity, as Leonora and Annabel do, to abandon it entirely. The cataclysmic consequences of Elsa's refusal to participate in her husband's fantasy can thus be read as an extreme realisation of the warning issued by Charlie of recalcitrant women like Leonora: 'Once they break out, they break out' (*DP*, p.5).<sup>9</sup>

As well as exhibiting a recognisably subversive approach to aspects of plot, narration and characterisation, *The Hothouse by the East River* seeks to effect 'a

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, one of Paul's fearful remarks concerning Elsa's newfound recalcitrance bears a distinct similarity to Charlie's comment about Leonora. Elsa, Paul tells Garven, "is a development of an idea, that's all. She's not my conception anymore. She took a life of her own. She's grotesque" (*HER*, p.129).

certain detachment' between reader and text that is comparable to Spark's earlier experiments with the conventions of the ghost story. In *The Comforters*, I earlier observed, the self-reflexive spooking of Caroline Rose (and her retaliatory haunting of her Typing Ghost) initiates the metafictional unravelling of the text itself, by laying bare the various narrative contrivances that would have otherwise reduced Caroline to a bit player in what she refers to as a "cheap mystery piece" (*TC*, p.93). Spark's supernaturally-inflected short stories gear their hauntings toward more pointed instances of gendered social critique, from the stifling conditions of colonial life that are examined so sharply in 'Bang-Bang You're Dead,' to the themes of female subservience and self-alienation explored in 'The Girl I Left Behind Me.' In this respect, *Hothouse* can be seen to combine both aspects of Spark's earlier ghost stories. Paul's spectral fantasy of omniscient control, eternal life and infinite wealth operates, for instance, rather like the suffocating script dictated by Caroline's Typing Ghost, with rigidly defined characters and a leaden, carefully controlled plot (one need only think of those extravagantly dull afternoon teas). The implications of such a fantasy, furthermore, are undoubtedly gendered; for his 'stories' to remain strong, Paul requires the participation of a servile spectre of his wife, as opposed to the feisty and libidinous flesh-and-blood woman he once knew. As in 'Bang-Bang You're Dead' and 'The Girl I Left Behind Me,' Elsa's ghostliness is communicated by way of her silence and passivity – attributes she need not be physically dead to possess. Ironically, it is when she transforms into a more morbid, grotesque presence (with her uncanny shadow, burning flesh and decaying fruits, for example) that Elsa seems most riotously alive; much like Needle in 'The Portobello Road,' Elsa's awareness of her own ghostliness provides her with the key to upending the 'master' narrative which once defined her, so that she may finally "have some peace."

Spark's longstanding interest in the style and ethos of the *nouveau roman*, meanwhile, is discernible throughout *Hothouse*, set as it is within an antiseptic afterlife of geometric glass and steel structures seemingly lifted from the pages of an anti-novel (in a fittingly spooky coincidence, in fact, a sense of the novel's spectral setting is captured in the title of Robbe-Grillet's 1976 novel, *Topology of a Phantom City*, published three years later). As with Spark's earlier explorations of the humorous and horrific potentialities of Robbe-Grillet's 'certain detachment' in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and *The Mandelbaum Gate* respectively, *Hothouse* examines the unsettling absurdity of a world operating in outright denial of human mortality and self-scrutiny. Rather like Lise before her, Elsa manages to evacuate such a world by articulating her subjectivity and confronting her husband with the tragedy of the pair's untimely deaths. A 'Sparkian woman' every bit as resistant to control as Caroline, Needle, Leonora, Annabel or Lise, she disrupts the eerily depthless and dispassionate narration of Paul's stultifying Neverland (described as a 'sedative chamber where you don't think at all [...] and talk your head off all day, all night' [*HER*, p.76]) with scenes of lively chaos and wild fury. The novel thus constitutes an experiment with form in the double sense outlined in my Introduction; Elsa, a force of 'profound contagion / and polluted words,' flouts the 'sterile, descriptive rigour' of the anti-novel into which she has been written, while also articulating her unwillingness to remain a subservient, spectral participant within an oppressive family fiction.<sup>10</sup>

This thesis, as the preceding few paragraphs demonstrate, has sought to examine the various experiments with form that came to preoccupy Spark during the

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<sup>10</sup> Adam Shatz, 'At the Crime Scene,' *London Review of Books*, Vol. 36, No. 15, 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014, pp.21-6 (p.24).

first two decades of her fiction-writing career. If the eccentric, genre-busting approach taken in *The Comforters* constitutes a ‘joyful,’ irreverent exercise in ‘break[ing] the obvious rules of fiction and get[ting] away with it,’ then subsequent works like *Doctors of Philosophy*, *The Mandelbaum Gate* and *Not to Disturb* can be seen to combine formal innovation with a decidedly more serious interrogation of contemporary concerns, from sexual politics to postwar political realities and the machinations of the modern media.<sup>11</sup> In retaining a degree of the derisory wit advocated by Spark in ‘The Desegregation of Art,’ such works can be said to be ‘disorienting,’ to return to the content of Christine Brooke-Rose’s letter, in that they elude easy classification while possessing the power to unnerve and undermine (‘to put out, disconcert, embarrass’).<sup>12</sup> The temporal scope of this thesis should certainly not be taken as an indication that Spark ceased to experiment with the form and purpose of fiction after the publication of *Hothouse*. Later texts, including 1981’s playfully metafictional *Loitering with Intent*, and 1990’s multi-plotted meditation on intersubjectivity and individual free will, *Symposium* (1990), undoubtedly continued the author’s innovative streak over the decades that followed. In the earlier fictions that I have chosen to discuss, however, Spark’s self-declared intention to ‘write fiction [...] with all the intensity that [she is] capable of concentrating on the idea of fiction’ is at its most pronounced, subversive and politically-engaged.<sup>13</sup>

The present study does not seek to provide the last word on Spark’s strange and self-reflexive body of fiction (her so-called ‘author’s ghosts’ would surely thwart

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<sup>11</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘Breaking the Novelist’s Rules,’ *The Observer*, 21<sup>st</sup> June 1959, p.18.

<sup>12</sup> ‘dis’orient, v.’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, <<http://www.oed.com/sheffield.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/54878?redirectedFrom=disorient#eid>> (accessed 20<sup>th</sup> December 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Muriel Spark, Loose handwritten note entitled ‘Author’s Note,’ in ‘Handwritten notes and draft fragments, 44p. [*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*; 1960-61],’ Muriel Spark Papers, Box 59, Folder 1, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.



any such attempt, anyway). I have sought instead to plot an alternative route through the first two decades of Spark's fiction-writing by deviating from the enduring myth of the author as a 'Catholic comic writer'<sup>14</sup> committed to a narrowly-didactic mode of writing, and instead tracing her evolving and expansive attempts at realising 'an honest creative process' born of a 'rediscovery of form' and a refinement of 'the arts of pretence and counterfeit.'<sup>15</sup> There of course remains more to be said of Spark. More demands to be written of her literary inheritances (the influence of the Scottish border ballads, in particular), her work as a poet and playwright, her interest in writing for radio, her archived correspondence with contemporaries including Christine Brooke-Rose and Doris Lessing, the impact of her varied and mobile life on her writing, her enduring influence on contemporary authors such as Ali Smith and A. L. Kennedy, as well the numerous novels, short stories, poems, plays and screenplays that were left unfinished, unpublished, or were used instead as starting points for all manner of alternative creative projects.<sup>16</sup> These and other potential areas of study will inevitably return, however, to Spark's endlessly inventive approach to form – her eagerness, that is, to collapse and rebuild the story being told, to depict the entrapment and possible

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<sup>14</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, 'Muriel Spark's Fingernails,' in Joseph Hynes, ed., *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (New York: Hall, 1992), pp.187-93 (p.187).

<sup>15</sup> Muriel Spark, Loose handwritten note entitled 'Author's Note,' in 'Handwritten notes and draft fragments, 44p. [*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*; 1960-61],' Muriel Spark Papers, Box 59, Folder 1, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa; Letter from Muriel Spark to John Masefield, 26<sup>th</sup> May 1951, from 8 Sussex Mansions, 65 Old Brompton Road, London. Muriel Spark Archive, Acc.10607/89, National Library of Scotland.

<sup>16</sup> I am thinking specifically of *Watling Street*, the aborted yet extensively researched historical novel detailed in the Introduction to the present study. Alongside this more substantial work, it is likely that Spark's enormous Tulsa and Edinburgh archives contain additional unpublished poems, plays and short stories than those I encountered over the course of my research. Another potentially fruitful area of archival research concerns Spark's active role in devising adaptations of her fiction for film, stage, television, radio and even opera. In my analysis of *Not to Disturb*, I discussed how Spark commissioned three playwrights to submit scripts for a proposed theatrical adaptation. Alongside evidence of this, her correspondence reveals her interest in working alongside the classical composer, Thomas Ades, to adapt either *Not to Disturb* or *The Abbess of Crewe* as an opera. The Edinburgh archive also contains a screenplay, written by Spark herself, for a film version of *The Takeover*; this came to nothing following the death of the film's proposed director, Joseph Losey. Closer scholarly attention to these and other aspects of Spark's diverse body of work would advance the task of 'desegregating' the author from the rigid mode of criticism that has traditionally been applied to her fiction.

metamorphosis of her characters, to subvert the conventions of genre and plot, to shake the scenery and question seemingly stable structures of narrative authority. Like Elsa, Spark was permanently seeking ways of evacuating the stale air of the hothouse, and of demolishing old stories.

Shortly before writing her first short story, the shape-shifting ‘The Seraph and the Zambesi,’ Spark completed a poem entitled ‘Chrysalis’ (1951). The following few lines, which fixate on ‘the scene of the small violence’ in which a new form emerges from its ‘broken shell,’ would define the following half-century of its author’s literary career, and therefore seem a fitting place at which to conclude:

There was the broken shell with what was once  
The head askew; and what was once the worm  
Was away out the window, out of the warm,  
Out of the scene of the small violence.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘Chrysalis,’ in *All the Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), p.64, ll.9-12.







Figure 1:4: Muriel Spark, 'A Dangerous Situation on the Stairs,' p.4.

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But they went obviously.

Every day, he was somewhere else, NOT on the staircase, but in his study, or calling out to her from some other room upstairs. "You know your way up," he said, "I know my way up," and after that the woman was silent for a week or two. She was somewhere in the house, doing something, but waiting for him. He knew as if he knew how to keep a hotel, he understood that the household scene had to come to an end if he was to hold her interest.

"We must be careful," she said, "let's go somewhere quiet for days and write to each other." "Dear me," he said, "but then what?" "Very well, very well, what a time you've been!" "I had to keep myself busy, I'm afraid." There was a telephone call from the office. "Any news?" "Yes, very nice." "Any?" "Yes for her, will you? I wish I'd be back in a moment." She sits and stretches out her hand, pressing the button. Soon the housekeeper will phoed up the stairs, a woman of forty five, pretending to be sixty, with a certain confidence she followed the way by Sarah, respectfully, for she was beginning to think she might as well get on with Sarah, it looked as if she might be able to call, although now and then she thought she might, and if the worst came to the worst she would have to make her own way. Sarah looked at her and began to pour. The housekeeper plucked said, "But watch again."

In March the housekeeper said was saying, "You know your way up," "That it was a job by and Sarah the woman looked at her, at a loss and somewhat surprised to tell her Sarah about her work, how it had always fallen. The chatter went on for some minutes, but Sarah's love was not waiting particularly for her, but so it did not matter. After he was out and left a message saying when he would be back. Sarah made herself comfortable, meanwhile, and they went out openly to dinner. They are, however, long and appeared, they would be married quietly, what was the danger? Sarah said to herself: "That's what I can't understand, she pointed - it is not thought of as a danger. And she felt that she was for the departed autumn, the streamer that was gone from the world, the possibility of both the household, so dangerous and the changes of the heart's dining."

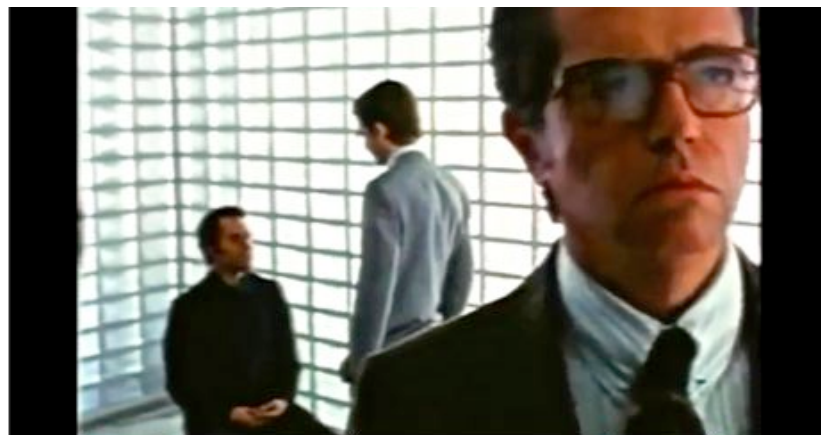
I followed Sarah, looking for a moment at the stairs, but she was not there.

I had we needed to be ready, as we would have to be.

**Figure 2:1:** *The Driver's Seat* (1974), Dir. Giuseppe Patroni Griffi. A monochrome freeze-frame recontextualises the ongoing, in-colour plot as an item of evidence on the male detectives' office wall.



**Figure 2:2:** *The Driver's Seat* (1974). The detectives inside 'the sad little office' (*DS*, p.105).



**Figure 3:1:** *The Driver's Seat* (2015), Dir. Laurie Sansom. Lise's death-bound journey is shown to emerge from the male detectives' conversations as a partial, piecemeal construction.



**Figure 3:2:** *The Driver's Seat* (2015). The detectives interview a suspect, from whose responses Lise appears to 'emerge.'



Photographs by Tommy Ga-Ken Wan (2015).



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