

## TRUTHFUL LIES AND FANTASY REALISM: IRIS MURDOCH'S *UNDER THE NET* AND MURIEL SPARK'S *THE COMFORTERS*\*

REIKO NAKAGAMI

Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark have often been discussed alongside each other. We can certainly find quite a few overt similarities: they were born only a year apart (Spark was born in 1918, and Murdoch in 1919); their first novels were published around the same time (Murdoch published *Under the Net* in 1954, Spark following with *The Comforters* in 1957); both have been equally prolific, their careers extending well into the 1990's (and, in Spark's case, even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century; her latest novel, *The Finishing School*, just came out this March). Murdoch published 26 novels, and Spark 22 so far. Critics have also remarked their didacticism, their employment of demonic characters, their talent for comedy, and their indebtedness to French authors rather than to British ones. Murdoch's first publication was a philosophical study on Sartre, and she dedicated her first novel to Raymond Queneau. Spark, on the other hand, has named Proust as one of the major influences on her fictional writing, and her style reveals an unmistakable trace of Robbe-Grillet's.

What is more important, however, is that Murdoch and Spark have shared a certain attitude to literature, novels in particular, which strongly characterizes their works, and that this attitude, which has been both serious and rebellious, reflects the character of an age in which they have lived and written — which is indeed the age in which we live: the age of Liberalism, the age of technology, and, most importantly for them, the age in which the glorious idea of individual freedom has become our torment rather than our emancipation. The two authors both saw that fiction had lost its power to transform the lives of people, worn as it was through repetition and incapable of relinquishing entirely the traditional method of realism. And they both firmly believed that fiction had to regain this power — the power to influence, or, if possible, to better the real lives of the real people through fictional narratives — through a “pack of lies”, to use Spark's own phrase. They were by no means aestheticists, for they believed in this unique performative power, as it were, of fiction. Nor were they pessimists, for they believed in their own ability to restore or reinstate this power in their own fiction. That is not to suggest, however, that they were primarily political or religious writers who used their books as instruments by which to propagate their credos or faiths. (Though, unfortunately, Muriel Spark has never quite rid herself of the label, or almost a stigma, which was stuck on her at a very early stage in her career, that is to say, the label of a “Catholic writer”.)

This is, however, an argument that has been better described and communicated outside of their novels, that is to say, in their speech or essay, where they explicated their respective theories on life and fiction. In this paper, I would like to demonstrate how their theories on life

---

\* This article is based on a paper read at the 6th conference of The Iris Murdoch Society of Japan, held at the University of Tokyo on 9<sup>th</sup> October, 2004.

and literature appear in *The Comforters* and *Under the Net*, both of which, though ultimately irreducible to simple literary allegories, portray what Murdoch calls “a battle between real people and images” by providing their characters with allegorical aspects (“Against Dryness”, 16). I will try to show that both novels center around two important themes which modern fiction, by the inevitable demands of the society it seeks to portray, must face: the nature of narrative, and the representation of reality. In exploring these problems, I will also make an extensive reference to another text, a book written by an anthropologist and probably best classified as a medical or clinical study, but nevertheless addresses the same questions as Murdoch’s and Spark’s, that is, questions which ultimately concern the increasingly uncertain relationship between life and language, experience and narrative.

In a public speech she delivered in 1971, Spark made a warning remark against what she called “the desegregation of art” from the lives of people. What she meant by this term was that the fiction of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, while full of vivid and emotional portrayal of the “injustices of the world”, was in fact failing to awaken its readers into facing, courageously and responsibly, the cruel and absurd reality. Criticizing “the art and literature of sentiment and emotion”, she says:

For what happens when, for example, the sympathies and the indignation of a modern audience are aroused by a play or a novel of the kind to which I have referred? I don’t know for certain, but I suspect that a great number of the audience or of the readers feel that their moral responsibilities are sufficiently fulfilled by the emotions they have been induced to feel. (35)

In Spark’s view, superior art should promote a sense of morality in people and then induce them to act upon it, whereas the art of her time simply offers them consolation, and a false one at that, and helps them to evade the reality rather than to cope with it. Spark’s criticism is echoed in Murdoch’s 1961 essay “Against Dryness”, in which she speaks of “the temptation of art”. “The temptation of art,” she says, “a temptation to which every work of art yields except the greatest ones, is to console. The modern writer . . . attempts to console us by myths or by stories” (13; omission mine). Arguing that the 20<sup>th</sup>-century novels can be sorted into two categories, “journalistic” and “crystalline”, Murdoch voices a concern that is similar in part to Spark’s:

On the whole: [the modern writer’s] truth is sincerity and his imagination is fantasy. Fantasy operates with shapeless daydreams (the journalistic story) or with small myths, toys, crystals. Each in his own way produces a sort of “dream necessity”. Neither grapples with reality: hence “fantasy”, not “imagination”. (13)

Murdoch, too, finds an alarming rift between life and literature. For her, this has resulted from literature’s evasion or neglect of what is “contingent” and “particular” in life — an idea which is central to Murdoch’s novels, especially *Under the Net*. *Under the Net* and *The Comforters* thus express the authors’ critique of contemporary fiction, and embody their respective attempts to invent a new mode of fiction, which will perform its “task” (to use Murdoch’s term) or “special calling” (to borrow Spark’s phrase). Let us now turn to the actual texts.

According to Steven G. Kellman, *Under the Net* is a “self-begetting novel”, which he defines as a novel that is “at the same time an account of its own birth and of the rebirth of its principal protagonist as novelist” (and its prototype, he says, is Proust’s *A la recherche du*

*temps perdu*) — a definition which perfectly applies to *The Comforters* as well (Kellman 95). The protagonists of both novels are writers by profession, as Murdoch's hero Jake is a hack translator of cheap French fiction, and Spark's heroine Caroline a literary scholar working on a book of criticism. Both are psychologically unstable, introspective and prone to theorizing, and both discover, at the end of each novel, that their vocation is to write fiction. However, the two novels differ significantly in other respects,.

First of all, their depictions of characters, as well as of the backgrounds against which these characters operate, differ. Spark's characters, not excluding the heroine Caroline, are not "characters" in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century sense" to use Murdoch's phrase, and undeniably much "flatter" even than the characters in *Under the Net*, whose realness also does certainly differ from that of, say, those in books by George Eliot. And even though both stories take place mainly in London, the London in Spark's novel is hardly as real or alive as the city depicted in Murdoch's. It will be worth pointing out here that, interestingly, Spark has been much criticized all these years for her determined non-commitment to verisimilitude, which many critics saw as a sign of her lack of compassion towards real people, non-Catholic people in particular, whereas Murdoch has been attacked for her over-commitment to details and particularities, which was thought to be outmoded and unnecessary.

Second of all, and more significantly, the processes of the two protagonists' self-discovery are different — indeed, they are the exact reverse of each other. Spark's Caroline initially finds herself in a multi-perspective universe, where her voice and vision collide and compete with those of others (including that of the fictional author-narrator), but at the end of the novel she raises herself into a solipsistic universe of her own imagination, over which she, as the new author, will have absolute control. Murdoch's hero Jake, on the other hand, starts from his own universe in which other people appear to him as mere "inhabitants", but finally learns to step outside it and to see the world through the diverse viewpoints of various people. Now allow me to examine the plots and characters in more detail.

*Under the Net* takes the form of a first-person narrative told by Jake Donaghue, the English translator of a popular but second-rate French author. Jake's general habitat is London, though he never quite settles down in one place or another. The novel actually begins with a breakup between Jake and Madge, his girlfriend of a sort, initiated by Madge who has apparently found another man during Jake's absence and has decided to kick him out of her apartment, where he has inhabited in a practically parasitic manner for quite a while. So Jake, having just returned from Paris, has no time to relax "to bury my head so deep in dear London" before he is set on the move again, to find another temporary dwelling, possibly another girl and another mode of life (7).

What is notable about this opening is that Jake does not act by his own voluntary will, but is goaded into action, by the decision of another person, a woman whom he thought he knew but nevertheless, as he realizes when she tells him off, he never really did. The sudden loss of Madge bewilders but does not grieve Jake. Indeed he can't even be said to have lost Madge because obviously he has neither needed nor possessed her, so that her change of mind is nothing that can be called a real treachery, but a natural consequence of his inaction and inattention. Theoretically, therefore, Jake is goaded into action by his own inaction. As a matter of fact, Jake's inability to take decisive and significant action by his own will continues to force him into a series of adventures throughout the whole book, leading him from one place to another, from one person to another, without his ever quite knowing what he is looking for

or what he wants to do.

*Under the Net* is like any other traditional narrative, in that it is a tale of a quest, a search for what is missing — only, in Jake's case, what is missing is precisely a motive, a concrete intention to discover, obtain or conquer something or someone. In other words, the objective of Jake's physical and spiritual journey is to find out what he truly desires, the discovery of which might or might not tell him who he is. The paradox that an absence of a motive, which is usually the driving force behind a narrative, itself becomes the motive that sets the story of *Under the Net* in motion doubtlessly constitutes a central theme of the novel. The same paradox, however, can also be considered the novel's weakness, as indeed it is by Richard Todd, who comments:

The problem, in its general nature a recurrent one in Murdoch, is that Jake's actions seem to derive less from an authorial solicitation; the driving compulsiveness seems less Jake's than Murdoch's own. (Todd 31)

“Aujourd’hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas.” The protagonist of Camus' *L'Étranger*, who is unmoved by his own mother's death and, later, even by the fact that he has committed a murder, is neither as introspective nor as amiable as Jake, but is nevertheless the prototype of the latter, in that he, too, has somehow suffered a dislocation of desire. He exemplifies, in an extreme form, the apathetic state of mind into which an individual must eventually be led by the excruciating sense of total individual freedom.

What, or indeed who, other than the author can guide a “motiveless” protagonist's actions? This question, which presents itself in *Under the Net*, must have been also in Spark's mind when she wrote *The Comforters*, a novel about novel-writing, with a heroine who is aware of her puppet-like status inside a fictional universe controlled by an invisible author. *The Comforters* is, on one level, a metafictional autobiography of Spark, for Caroline Rose, the heroine, is in many ways a double of the young Spark, whose career as a novelist began almost simultaneously as her conversion to Catholicism, and who suffered from hallucinations in the years prior to the publication of *The Comforters*, partly due to the stress accompanying the change of religion and career, and partly to the malnutrition caused by her impecunious state at the time. It is no doubt from this experience that Spark derived the idea of making Caroline hear, soon after entering the Catholic church and in the middle of writing a book “on the twentieth-century novel”, the sound of a typewriter and the voice of an invisible narrator, who records or dictates her actions and speeches.

At the beginning of the novel, Caroline is, like Jake, quite at a loss as to what to do with her life. Her relationship with her boyfriend has come to an impasse, her book is not in progress (significantly, she has got stuck on “the chapter on realism”), and she is enormously disappointed, indeed repulsed, by a Catholic retreat house where she has vaguely hoped to find some kind of direction as to her future action. Only when she realizes that she is inside someone else's book, and that everything she says and does is controlled by someone else's intention, Caroline acquires something like a motive of her own, a desire to make significant and meaningful actions by and for herself. Feeling the need for “asserting free will”, Caroline starts resisting what seems to be the authorial intention and, without knowing it, begins slowly to take over the narrative (97). The narrator says:

Her sense of being written into the novel was painful. Of her constant influence on

its course she remained unaware and now she 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. (181)

In the meantime, the other characters in the novel dismiss Caroline's plight simply as paranoia, while they are obsessed with their own paranoid stories, their own conspiracy theories, their own equally odd versions of reality. One of them discovers, for example, that his homely grandmother leads a band of diamond smugglers (a story in the vein of detective fiction), while another is convinced that an acquaintance of his is a powerful practitioner of black magic (a story in the Gothic vein). Eventually, however, Caroline rises above all these characters and, therefore, her narrative comes to encompass theirs. At the end of the novel, Caroline takes leave, so to speak, of the novel's narrative, and it is reported that she has gone off to "write a novel" about "characters in a novel" — *The Comforters* itself, that is (202).

"Stories deal in motive", says anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly, author of an ethnographic study of "occupational therapists" and their interactions with patients who are severely disabled by illnesses or injuries (Mattingly 108). In her thoughtful and poignant book *Healing Dramas and Clinical Plots: The Narrative Structure of Experience* (1998), Mattingly shows how people whose bodies have been irrevocably damaged or deformed by serious diseases or accidents lose their ability to do what all of us are doing every day, without even being aware of it: namely, to see their own lives as narratives, to form stories out of the sequence of events that take place in their lives. Losing sight of any hopes for the future which they might have entertained prior to the accidents or the attacks of diseases, these patients are reduced to experiencing time as nothing other or more than the ticking of the clock, incapable as they have become of believing in their ability to bring something about, to cause something to happen — in short, to see themselves within narratives, of which they are both authors and readers, and in which they also act as characters.

The task of the occupational therapists is to reawaken these patients, as it were, to a sense of human time, time as experienced, time in which narratives take place, as opposed to mere chronological time, in which one thing simply follows another. Reviewing the history of narratology and drawing on the theories and methods of linguists, narratologists and philosophers including Aristotle, Heidegger, Propp, Jakobson, Hayden White, and Ricoeur, Mattingly examines various cases of occupational therapists treating patients who, for one reason or another, have become unable to see the connection between themselves and the world, between chronology and causality, between life and narrative.

Mattingly writes:

Formlessness is not so much a description of the structure of everyday life as a depiction of despair. The essence of meaninglessness is when lived experience seems to be driven by no form other than brute sequence. (47)

Despair takes people out of the rich current of emotion-laden time, a temporality which is inseparably tied to human activities. Time presents itself to these people as mere "brute sequence" in which there is no beginning, middle or end because "there is no story where there is no desire", as Mattingly says (94).

The ultimate task of the occupational therapists, therefore, is to "locate desire" in their patients (107). To put patients back into the flow of their own stories, therapists painfully, and

not always successfully, devise means to construct, together with the patients, plausible narratives which may lead them out of despair and, if possible, out of the hospital and back into the world outside. What can the therapists do to persuade these people, for whom it is often difficult enough to find life livable, to find a reason for staying alive at all? What kind of stories can they build with these patients which are at once plausible and desirable, and that offer not false consolation but genuine hope and courage? For it seems that the temptation of therapy, too, is to console. Mattingly introduces one unsuccessful case of therapy in which the therapist perceived a patient as being “similar” in character and background to a patient she had treated before, and attempted to impose on him the same “therapeutic story” (as Mattingly calls it) that had “worked” with the previous one. The failure of this therapist shows how, in therapy as well as in everyday life, “prehensions”, which often take the form of prejudices, are formed by previous experience, which guides our understanding of what is plausible and what is possible, as well as of what is doable and what is desirable. “A therapeutic plot”, Mattingly says, “occurs in a kind of gap, a space of desire created by the distance between where the protagonist is and where she wants to be” (70).

I do not, of course, wish to assert that clinical therapy and literature are directly comparable to each other in terms of their methods and contents, or that the goals of therapists and those of novelists are the same. It does seem, however, that some of the questions which the therapists are asking in their everyday encounters with their patients are also crucial for both Murdoch and Spark. How can we understand, form theories about, or represent the “universal” condition of human beings without losing respect for the uniqueness of each individual and situation? When is it that creative imagination, which has the power to inspire people into inventing new ways to cope with the harsh reality or, to borrow Jake’s expression, to make life “endurable”, degenerates into fantasy, which confines an individual in his/her own small universe instead of pushing them out into the wide, open space called the world? Neither Jake nor Caroline is an “invalid” in the sense that they are physically disabled. Endowed with brilliant minds and perfectly healthy bodies, (though they both have a tendency to nervousness, as already noted), they have nothing to seriously despair over, as they are free in a way that the patients in Mattingly’s book can never dream of becoming ever again. And yet, there is no doubt that Jake and Caroline are at a loss. For we are *all* at a loss, regardless of whether we are intellectuals or whether we are in good health — absolutely lost in our sense of absolute freedom.

Let us now return to Jake, the allegorical hero of our time, who must set out on a quest for desire, which has somehow been misplaced and has to be retrieved. In his case, as in the case of the severely ill or disabled patients in Mattingly’s study, the space of desire is not only untraversed but uncreated at the outset, as Jake the protagonist has no idea where or what he wants to be as yet. It is true, of course, that he does have two obsessions, that is, two persons whom he believes, though he can’t explain how or why, are connected with his “destiny”: Hugo Belfounder and Anna Quentin. Hugo, Jake’s one-time mentor (though Hugo himself has no conception of this), insists that “the whole language is a machine for making falsehoods” (60). He disbelieves in the power of words to capture any fragments of the essence or nature of things or people in the world. For Hugo, any attempt at generalization, or even those at description, are doomed to fail. In his endless discussion with Jake (which, of course, is a linguistic activity, as he acknowledges laughingly at one point), he delivers the following much-quoted speech:



All theorizing is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try as it were to crawl under the net (81).

Denying the possibility of describing “people’s feelings” accurately, Hugo says: “All one could say ... would perhaps be something about one’s heart beating” (59, omission mine). Indeed, at the end of the novel he goes off to become a manufacturer of objects that do not speak but only produce sounds similar to that of the beating heart: watches. Hugo’s decision to become a watchmaker is profoundly symbolic, as it suggests that his rejection of the uniquely human need to “narrativize” life is linked to his rejection of the concept of human time (to use Mattingly’s term), or time as experienced, and his endorsement of the clock time, of time in which one thing simply follows another. Though profoundly impressed by Hugo and his thought in this vein while under the latter’s spell, Jake ultimately rejects Hugo’s view. It is only after thus shaking off Hugo’s influence that Jake really becomes sure of his vocation as a novelist.

Jake’s other obsession, Anna, takes a far less substantial part than Hugo in the novel’s plot. In fact, she appears in the story in person only once (not counting the scene in Paris where Jake spots her from a distance and, following her far into the Tuileries gardens, discovers that it is not her but a stranger). For the rest of the narrative, she is present as a kind of “dream object” of Jake’s, an icon symbolizing, contradictorily, both art and inartificiality, the beauty of human utterance (at the end of the novel she enchants Jake as a singing voice on the radio) and its impossibility to utter any kind of truth. We as readers cannot but see that Jake actually wishes her to remain this “image” rather than embracing her real person, for, in his pursuit of her, he repeatedly allows her to slip out of his reach. The scene in the Tuileries is the best example; while claiming that he is “not a fetishist” and “would rather hold a woman any day than her shoes”, Jake chooses to pick up Anna’s (or perhaps not even Anna’s) shoes and holds onto them, while letting the actual woman walk on ahead of him, obviously reluctant to disturb his dream-image of her, his myth, his Cinderella (194). Only when, near the end of the novel, it is revealed that Anna has loved not himself but Hugo, is Jake finally forced to see her as the “other”:

It seemed as if, for the first time, Anna really existed now as a separate being and not as a part of myself. . . . Anna was something which had to be learnt afresh. (238)

Even as Jake pursues, almost with the blind tenacity of one possessed, Anna and Hugo, his pursuit is in fact a flight from the real Anna and Hugo, both of whom Jake himself shunned at one point in his past relationships to them.

It is important to note that the word “destiny”, which recurs throughout the novel, becomes a tricky substitute for desire. In Spark’s short story “The Fortune-Teller” (1983), the narrator, the fortune-teller, distinguishes between “destiny” and “destination” and prefers to use the latter word when telling fortune by cards, arguing that

any destiny I might take from the cards would be prematurely conceived and would fail to allow for a client’s probable divergence from his present destination. Circumstances change. There can be a change of heart. Human nature is essentially unpredictable in the long run. But “destination” none the less answers for destiny. (328)

Here Spark contrasts and then, cleverly though trickily, resolves the conflict between the two opposing forces which govern any narrative: determinism and free will. On the one hand, destiny must, by definition, be a static thing, something unchangeable, in which therefore temporality has no significance, because anything that takes place in any moment will be known at the end to have been decided all along, all the way from the beginning. The word “destination”, on the other hand, is suggestive of mobility, of a journey which takes place and unfolds in time, and, therefore, is subject to surprises and changes. In other words, it creates a “space of desire” which can be widened or narrowed, explored or abandoned according to the actant’s will.

After *The Comforters*, Spark went on to write many novels in which the question of teleology became a central theme, particularly during the 1970’s when she wrote *The Driver’s Seat* (1970), *Not to Disturb* (1971) and *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973). All these novels are structured so that they seem as if to be written backwards, with characters reminiscing about the future, and anticipating the past. In each of these novels, as in *Under the Net* and *The Comforters*, the ending is presented in such a way that would, instead of reviewing and affirming the entire narrative, question, relativize or indeed even negate it. The meaning suggested by these “self-deconstructive” finales is perhaps best described by, again, Mattingly:

Life in time is a place of possibility; it is this structure which narrative imitates. For narrative does not tell us that what happened was necessary but that it was possible, displaying a reality in which things might have been otherwise. (96)

The ambiguous endings of *Under the Net* and *The Comforters* both endorse this indeterminist theory, as it were, of narrative. While it cannot be said that either Caroline or Jake undergoes any spiritual transformation — they both remain as selfish and single-minded as they are at the beginning — both do eventually learn that any narrative is merely a possibility among many others, not dictated by necessity but by mere chance. This awareness, I believe, is what the artist needs to dispel the temptation of art, and it is what Jake finds in the end, instead of his desire — indeed, his retrieval of desire is postponed; his quest is not over, but will most likely be continued in his own writing. The same goes for Caroline.

Our ability to envision various destinations for ourselves, to construct, and then devise imaginative means of carrying out, narratives of our own lives, is one and the same as our vulnerability to regrets and uncertainties about our past actions. “What if I hadn’t done that”, we ask ourselves, “what would have happened then? Where would I be now?” Faced with an infinite number of possibilities in every single moment we live, we become overwhelmed by the multitude of potential narratives, which constantly threaten to seduce us into the consoling but closed realm of myths and fantasies. If we are to make life endurable as well as meaningful, however, we must not cease in our struggle to seek what Murdoch calls the “hard idea of truth”, and, to quote from A. S. Byatt, “to order [our] experience . . . with the transcendent “reality” (Byatt 12). At the same time, we must wage the same battle which the occupational therapists and their patients wage, the “battle against despondency” (Mattingly 107), and in order to do that we need constantly to create a new space of desire for ourselves and then traverse it, only to create another one, and so on forever. This is not a pleasant prospect, to be sure; our search will be endless and, ultimately, even aimless. But at least, as the novels of Murdoch and Spark tell us, we are not truly alone in our journeys.



HITOTSUBASHI UNIVERSITY

### WORKS CITED

- Byatt, Antonia Susan, *The Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1965.
- Kellman, Steven G., "Under the Net: The Self-Begetting Novel". in Harold Bloom ed. *Iris Murdoch*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986. pp. 95-104.
- Kermode, Frank, "Muriel Spark's House of Fiction." in Joseph Hynes ed. *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*. New York: Macmillan, 1997. pp. 29-32.
- Mattingly, Cheryl, *Healing Dramas and Clinical Plots: The Narrative Structure of Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Murdoch, Iris, "Against Dryness". in Harold Bloom ed. *Iris Murdoch*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986. pp. 9-16.
- , *Under the Net*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963.
- Spark, Muriel, "The Desegregation of Art". in Joseph Hynes ed. *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*. New York: Macmillan, 1997. pp. 33-7.
- , *The Comforters*. New York: New Directions, 1994.
- , "The Fortune-Teller". *The Collected Stories*. London: Penguin, 1994. pp. 326-35.
- Todd, Richard, *Iris Murdoch*. London: Methuen, 1984.