

An Allegory for the New Reader :
Muriel Spark's
"Desegregation of Art"
and
The Comforters

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"I would hope that everything I write changes something, opens windows in people's minds, something. I do want to do *that*, to clarify."

—Muriel Spark, in an interview
with Martin McQuillan

I

The novel-writing career of Muriel Spark, formerly a poet, literary critic and biographer, began with the publication of *The Comforters* in 1957. In spite of the fact that she has produced twenty more novels since, the reputation she acquired as a writer of fiction through her first full-length work (and the problem of interpretation it provoked) has remained remarkably unchanged up to the present day. Critics have struggled over the past half-century to draw an outline of this "puzzling" author in one way or another, whether by conferring on her the not very elucidating title of a "Catholic novelist" or by trying to read her books from political/theoretical perspectives.

The critical tradition which describes her as a Catholic novelist, established by

Frank Kermode and supported by David Lodge and Malcolm Bradbury, has seen both Spark and her works almost exclusively in the light of her religious identity, i.e., as a Catholic convert. While it is undoubtedly these distinguished critics who helped secure Spark's place in the British literary mainstream in the late 50's and the 60's, they are also largely responsible for the still conspicuous tendency in Spark criticism to label anything incongruous or incomprehensible in her fiction "Catholic". The more recent attempts to "politicize" Spark, culminating in *Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction* (2002), a collection of critical essays edited by Martin McQuillan, suggests the possibility of reading Spark from feminist, Marxist, Lacanian, deconstructionist, lesbian or postcolonial perspectives. Unfortunately, it seems to me that the book is hardly less "reductive" than the early criticism in that, though ambitious and full of variety, it nevertheless creates the impression that the issues it so enthusiastically examines are imposed on, rather than discovered in, Spark and her works.

Between these two temporal and attitudinal extremes, other critics have endeavored to find in Spark's fiction a unity, or at least a balancing, of the moral and the formal, the perverse and the profound, wit and religion, fact and fantasy. Alan Bold, himself a poet, has presented her as "poet and dreamer" (a title Spark once gave herself), and drawn attention to her use of poetic language and imagery. Joseph Hynes, with his distinction between the real and the realistic in Spark and his notion of the "aesthetic truth" that underlies them, has made an effective counterargument to those who accuse Spark of being primly indifferent to, if not gloating over, the sorrows and anxieties of fellow (non-believing) mortals. Both Hynes and Velma Bourgeois Richmond have rightly argued that reading Spark requires an altogether different set of assumptions from those we usually, albeit unconsciously, apply in reading novels. Jennifer Lynn Randisi and Judy Little, another two of the few women critics to take Spark seriously, have focused respectively on satire and comedy in her novels.

While the work of these scholars has contributed significantly to Spark criticism, their contribution takes the form of complementing and building up on, rather than departing from, the readings by Kermode, Lodge and Bradbury. They are all alike in that they painfully attempt to extract moral as well as religious

messages, pointers to “absolute truth”, from among Spark’s nonsense plots and maniacal characters. But what if these readers are swimming and struggling in a river, as indeed two characters in *The Comforters* are seen to do at the novel’s climactic moment, when we are really supposed to stand aside and laugh at those who drown—and then to contemplate our own laughter? Indeed, if we consider *The Comforters* as an exemplary novel in Spark’s oeuvre, we might ask how seriously the author expects us take such a book when a kindly grandmother in Sussex is found out to be a cunning gangster, and an atrocious villainess disappears—physically *vanishes*, according to the narrator—every time she goes out of the main storyline. The extent of Spark’s tongue-in-cheekness is never easy to measure, but my guess is that it has been grossly underestimated. The purpose of this paper is to reinterpret Spark’s first novel by focusing on the function of mockery, parody and laughter in *The Comforters*. The novel is not, as many critics would have it, merely an allegory about the first creative attempt of a budding novelist. It is, as I have to demonstrate, nothing less than the author’s announcement of her own arrival on the English literary scene, which she is determined to change in a radical and significant way. Furthermore, it is her attempt to provoke the readers of fiction out of their idle, and often complacent, spectatorship, and to force them into a renewed awareness of their relationships to, as well as their responsibilities for, the world they live in.

II

In her well-known interview with Kermode (published in 1963), Spark commented that she had written *The Comforters* “to work out the technique [of novel-writing] first, to sort of make it all right with myself to write a novel at all—a novel about writing a novel, about writing a novel sort of thing”, confirming the general critical view that the book is an allegory about writing fiction (Kermode 29). The novel has also been regarded as metafictional autobiography, as its heroine is undoubtedly Spark’s double in many ways. Caroline Rose, an intelligent and attractive young woman, is a literary critic, and a newly converted Catholic—just as Spark herself was, shortly before she started writing novels. The conver-

sion has made Caroline psychologically unstable (the same happened to Spark). In fact, her mind is so worked up that she starts hearing strange voices, voices that seem to be narrating the story of her own life, followed by the sound of a typewriter—which, apparently, are audible only to herself. Realizing, with more indignation than fear, that she is a character in a novel being written by someone else, Caroline makes up her mind that she will resist the “artificial plot” that is being imposed on herself and those around her by an author who is not only invisible but (Caroline thinks) also irresponsible. At the end of the novel, we learn that Caroline herself has gone off to write a novel, and it is suggested by the narrator that the very book we have been reading—*The Comforters*—has been assimilated into her own fictional work.

But this is only one of the multiple, intermingling plots which constitute the novel, often clashing and vying with one another for prominence and authenticity. All the characters are obsessed with their own stories or living their own versions of reality. To list only some of them: there is Willi Stock, also known as the Baron, who is obsessed with the pursuit of a man he wrongly believes to be a powerful practitioner of black magic; Mrs Hogg, a menacing woman in charge of a Catholic retreat house and a natural-born blackmailer who parasites on anyone else’s guilty conscience; and Louisa Jepp, a homely, good-humored grandmother who leads a band of diamond-smugglers. Even these summary descriptions would suffice to demonstrate that it simply will not do to study these characters as though they were real people, and to examine their problems as though they were real-life issues. This view is actually voiced by the third-person “omniscient” narrator of the novel (in fact, he too should be counted among the single-minded characters) who abruptly announces in the middle of the book: “At this point in the narrative, it might be as well to state that the characters in this novel are all fictitious, and do not refer to any living persons whatsoever” (69).

The novel, then, is an allegory indeed—not only, as has been pointed out so many times already, about writing novels, but also about reading them and, moreover, about critiquing, through parody, the tradition of English realist fiction. To confirm this proposition, it would be profitable to consider a public speech Spark delivered at the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1971,

entitled “The Desegregation of Art” (hereafter referred to as DA). We may well call this speech a literary manifesto, since it expresses, more clearly than any other comment she has ever made on her works, her view on the novels of her time. In the speech, Spark quite bluntly renounces what she calls “the art and literature of sentiment and emotion”. After acknowledging that there are some excellent contemporary works in the tradition of “socially-conscious art”—that is, the kind of fiction characterized by a dramatic depiction and condemnation of social inequities—she coolly suggests: “Good things, when they begin no longer to apply, must go... There is no more beautiful action than the sacrifice of good things at the intelligent season and by intelligent methods” (34).

Spark then goes on to denounce such literature as unduly promotes “the victim-oppressor complex” in the “dramatic portrayals of the gross racial injustices of our world, or in the exposure of the tyrannies of family life on the individual” (34). She insists that any sensationalist representation of brutal actuality of this sort, whether it be a play or a novel, would either cause its audience or readers to feel as though they had fulfilled their moral responsibilities simply by extending their sympathies to the fictional characters, or else to feel like victims themselves. In short, it “cheats us into a sense of involvement with life and society”, whereas such arts are actually “desegregated” from people’s lives. Thus denouncing the escapism inherent in the tradition of modern mimetic arts, Spark proposes to replace the latter with “arts of satire and ridicule”, inasmuch as “[r]idicule is the only honorable weapon we have left”—the weapon with which to fight against the absurdity that surrounds and oppresses us today (35).

We might be able to detect Brecht’s influence here, as Spark expresses an idea fairly similar to his well-known theatrical method, of forcing the audience to distance themselves from the action on the stage. Just as Brecht’s actors were instructed to act in such a way as to prevent the audience from becoming emotionally involved in the play, Spark’s characters are presented so that readers can hardly begin to empathize, nor even to sympathize, with them. The intended effect of this alienating method is to make the audience or the readers more aware of what is wrong or absurd in their own society—to appeal to their reason rather than their sentiment. This means that Spark is more of a social writer than she has

been acknowledged to be, as is further demonstrated by her following assertion :

I would like to see in all forms of art and letters, ranging from the most sophisticated and high achievements to the placards that the students carry about the street, a less impulsive generosity, a less indignant representation of social injustice, and a more deliberate cunning, a more derisive undermining of what is wrong. I would like to see less emotion and more intelligence in these efforts to impress our minds and hearts (36).

Yet, again like Brecht, she ultimately rejects the idea of art as a political instrument, even as she concedes that she partly believes the purpose of art to be propaganda, because “in a sense all art is propaganda since it propagates a point of view and provokes a response” (36). It might be added that the most significant similarity between the two artists is that they both started off as poets. While their art is almost too theoretical, it is often not the theory but their poetic vision that gives their creations the defining touch.⁽¹⁾

According to Peter Kemp, the function of satire and ridicule as expounded by Spark in DA is most prominent in her later novels, such as *The Public Image* (1968), *The Driver's Seat* (1970) and *Not to Disturb* (1971). But, in fact, Spark's idea of the New Novel is most effectively expounded in *The Comforters*.⁽²⁾ The novel is Spark's experimental attempt to demonstrate—or, more precisely, allegorize—her concept of what she would later term “desegregated” art. So when she tells us that it is a novel about novels, she does not merely mean that it is an autobiographical/metaphorical account of a struggling writer. Rather, it is a novel that exposes, by means of pastiche and mockery, the thematic and stylistic limitations of the traditional English novel since the time of Richardson, Defoe and Fielding, and ends with the celebration of the birth of a new fiction—and, more importantly, of a new reader.

III

Despite the seeming haphazardness of her plots, Spark is scrupulous about the chronological structure of her novels (as a close examination of her narrative

time-shifts would reveal), and so it is quite like her to begin her first novel by parodying the rise of the Novel. In the opening of *The Comforters*, Spark attacks the original form of English fiction: the epistolary. Laurence Manders—an important character, who later turns out to be the heroine's fiancé—wakes up in the bedroom of his grandmother Louisa at her cottage, where he is staying during his holiday. A sports commentator (he works for the BBC) and a lapsed Catholic, Laurence is a devout believer in facts, details and “sheer literal truths” (10). The first thing he does after getting up from bed is to snoop around the room, opening chest drawers and fishing out, with delight, “three hairpins, eight mothballs”, “a small piece of black velvet embroidered with jet beads loose on their thread”, and “a comb with some of his grandmother's hair on it”—the last of which, he observes, is “an object [...] none too neat” (9-10).

Spark critics have generally considered Laurence, with his “talent for observation” and “detective's capacity”, as a comparatively minor character whose rigorously realist attitude towards the world highlights, by way of contrast, the creative perspective of Caroline the artist (Richmond 30). Whereas Laurence is a materialist who believes only what he sees, Caroline comes to accept, both as a Catholic and an artist, the existence of a reality other than what is tangible. At the early stage of the story, Caroline is still bound to Laurence (though, because of her new religion, their relationship has ceased to be sexual) and her perspective belongs to his realm, the realm of realism. A literary critic by profession, she is working on a book entitled *Form in the Modern Novel*, but is stuck on “the chapter on realism” (57). But at the end of the novel, Caroline, now endowed with a renewed vision, seems to grow out of her psychological dependence on Laurence. At the same time, she transcends Laurence's kind of reality by usurping the narrative authority from the “typing ghost”, thus becoming the author herself. This ending is interpreted by Richmond as indicating that “[Spark] was concerned with something more than the natural world, that indeed the events of the so-called ‘real’ world are comparatively absurd or at least unpredictable” (37). Little, in her Jungian interpretation of the novel, sees it as a tale of a novelist in search of herself, and argues that the conclusion, where the character-Caroline and the author-Caroline “merge into one”, means “someone named Caroline has ‘found

herself” (108).

These are convincing accounts of the novel, which certainly succeed in illuminating one particular aspect of its metafictionality, namely, the interaction and competition between the author-narrator and the protagonist (Caroline)⁽⁹⁾. Yet it must be noted that they assign too little importance to the roles of other characters in the novel, those whom Little actually considers merely as “parodic spin-offs from Caroline’s process of self-discovery”, “figures who caricature responsible and real creativity” (108). Laurence, however, is not a mere “foil”. Like the rest of the characters, he is at once a character and an allegorical device, through which Spark brings about her elaborate mockery of the “realist” novel.

In the novel’s opening already described, Spark is plainly poking fun at the traditional narrative technique of cataloguing various little items in a woman’s room, which dates back to Richardson—though in this case it is the personal belongings of an old woman that are being described, and not very attractive ones at that. The joke does not end there, however, for another of Laurence’s favorite pastimes turns out to be perusing other people’s letters without their permission. That the epistolary origins of the English novel are parodied in *The Comforters* has already been pointed out by Bold, but this aspect of the novel deserves further exploration (100). Laurence’s peculiar hobby allows him to discover and then disclose such secrets as the pregnancy and the consequent marriage plan of his parents’ housemaid; “I’ve always kept up with Eileen’s correspondence,” he declares (11). His mother Helena, a kind-hearted, anxious woman with unwavering faith both in God and human goodness, finds his prying behavior scandalous, but is never able to dissuade him from it. In response to her feeble protestation that “it’s illegal, I believe, to read letters addressed to others,” Laurence “points out, ‘Well, you’ve got them married, my dear. A good Catholic marriage. That’s the happy result of my shocking perusal of Eileen’s letters’” (*ibid.*). Helena, already feeling “defeated”, can only comment: “The end doesn’t justify the means” (*ibid.*).

This dialogue between Laurence and Helena wittily sums up the essence of epistolary novels. First, the presentation of the male protagonist (Laurence) as a blatant voyeur is in itself a comment on the genre, a comic as well as a shocking

one because, not only does it deride the male omniscient narrators of the novels in the Richardsonian tradition, but it implicates her readers in the voyeurism (after all, we too exalt ourselves by perusing the letters of Pamela the housemaid). And we can take both Laurence's excuse and Helena's innocent remark, which latter plays on the dictum "The end justifies the means", as the author's critique of the expedient ending most typical of 18th- and 19th-century British fiction: the heroine's happy marriage. (Indeed, the conclusion of *Pamela*, which is assumed by its author to "justify" the preposterous behavior of Mr B. in the first half of the novel, can be a perfect, albeit ironic, example of that very dictum.) Furthermore, the novel actually ends, on the surface level, with the marriage between 78-year-old Louisa Jepp, the diamond smuggler and 76-year-old Mr Webster, Louisa's accomplice in her business. (I say the surface level because there is an ending on a higher, metafictional level where Caroline "takes over" the novel itself.)

The epistolary joke is thus carried on throughout the novel, in which many letters are written and sent—to be intercepted, misunderstood, burnt or used as a tool for blackmail. But this particular genre is not Spark's sole target. As already noted, Laurence is not only a surreptitious letter-reader but also a dedicated detective, and it is he who first senses his grandmother's criminal activity and decides to track it down. The temporal and generic leap from the epistolary to detective fiction may seem odd, but it serves to reveal that both kinds of narrative are, in fact, based on the same premise: that disparate elements can always be unified, by the harmonizing power of human perspective, into a coherent whole, and separate events be strung together by the thread of causality. In a word, they can be turned into a plot.

Spark, however, challenges this principle, which underlies all fiction from Daniel Defoe to Agatha Christie. "I always think causality is not chronology", Spark has once remarked, "one thing doesn't necessarily lead to another inevitable thing, although it does lead to something else in actual fact" ("The Same Informed Air", 216). (Spark explores this problem further in her time-conscious novels such as *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973), *Not to Disturb* and *The Driver's Seat*). In order to condemn and caricature this arbitrary imposition of ready-made plots upon a reality that is indeed chaotic and irrational, Spark stuffs her own novels

with obviously over-contrived plots. So, as the heroine Caroline shrewdly observes to the annoyance of the narrator, the plot of *The Comforters* itself depends on a number of absurdly artificial coincidences (resembling, in this respect, narratives in the tradition of Fielding). But Laurence is not bothered by that fact, and, as if to leer at this simple-minded sleuth, the story confirms his farfetched deductions one after another (that Louisa hides her diamonds in the loaves of bread delivered daily to her cottage, for example).

Furthermore, Laurence's pursuit of Louisa and her men is paralleled by the mock-detective activity of the Baron, a friend of Caroline's and a great believer in occultism (for almost everyone is a fanatical believer of something in this novel). Convinced that Mervyn Hogarth, another accomplice of Louisa's, is an occultist, he goes around collecting "evidence" that proves the man's identity as such. It transpires that the Baron is entirely on the wrong track, but he will never realize this, as he happily appropriates every piece of information he finds to accommodate his theory. For instance, the Baron considers the smashed plaster statues of saints in Mervyn's yard as a proof that the man organizes diabolic rituals, whereas the statues are really used by Mervyn to smuggle diamonds from abroad through the British customs.

So both Laurence and the Baron, while being characters, also represent the kind of fictional narrative which Spark tries to subvert by way of mockery. Like any other of her themes, however, Spark's parody is not necessarily clear-cut. It is only by examining her description of the personality and behavior-pattern of each of the characters, as well as their interrelationships, that we can begin to grasp her elaborate means of undermining what she calls desegregated art. How are we to explain, for example, the fact that the gothic tale imagined by the Baron is consigned by the narrator to the category of sheer fantasy, while Laurence's detective story, although no less unlikely than the Baron's, is given the status of truth? Why does the author differentiate like this between two characters who, according to Richmond, are both "mere parodic spin-offs" from Caroline's plot? These questions are not answered within the novel. The very absence of an answer induces us, however, to speculate upon the status of the Baron within the narrative, particularly his ambiguous racial identity. In truth, the full extent of the

Baron's function in this novel may be understood only by asking how he is *not* portrayed—or how he *could have been* portrayed.

According to the narrator, he is a self-declared Baron and a naturalized British subject “originally from Belgian Congo”, and suspected by Caroline to have “native African blood” because, for one thing, of the “expression of pathos which at times appeared on the Baron's face, which she had seen in others of concealed mixed colour” (48). We are also told that, when “Africa's racial problems” were discussed in his presence, the Baron “denounced the blacks with ferocious bitterness, out of all proportion to the occasion” (*ibid.*). If we take this description alone, the Baron might well be some broodingly indignant character out of the novels of Conrad (to whom Spark alludes more extensively in *Robinson*), but, with his curious foreign accent and fanatical interests, he is portrayed overall as one of the novel's most absurd and comic characters. Indeed, apart from another instance when Caroline “unwillingly hurt the Baron by comparing him to an African witch-doctor”, not much is made of the question of his race for the rest of the narrative (163).

But Spark's presentation of this potentially Conradian character is not, it would seem, intended simply for a comic effect. Rather, he can be understood to represent Spark's rejection of the “victim-oppressor complex” and the “dramatic portrayals of the gross racial injustices of our world”. Even though the narrator hints at a dark side of the part-African Baron's personality, he is not overtly depicted as a victim. As a consequence of the author's refusal to expand on the racial issue here, we as readers are more disturbed by the Baron's never-materialized tragic potential than we might be by a more direct, and more indignant, presentation of his situation within English society, particularly among such middle-class white people as Laurence and Caroline. At the end of the novel, we are told off-handedly that he is “having treatment in a mental home” (200). And yet, as Caroline realizes, he is really no more insane than the rest of the characters. It might appear that this is merely one of the instances where Spark pushes a character out of her fictional plot in a glaringly artificial way, so as to remind her readers of her own authorial power. But the novel's marginalization of the Baron, as well as his failure to gain the status of a truth-speaker within its narrative, may be interpret-

ed as an intimation of Spark's view that there are matters that cannot, and must not, be dealt with inside a novel, which is, as she once declared, is nothing but a "pack of lies".

Spark demonstrates another method of comically portraying a potential victim through the character of Ernest Manders, Laurence's homosexual uncle who runs a dancing school. His effeminacy is regarded with silent awe by his sister-in-law Helena, with resignation by his brother Edwin, and with mirth by cruel Laurence. Yet, he is probably the most considerate as well as the most speculative character in the novel, so that, after being induced to laugh at him, we are once again disturbed by our own laughter; to use Spark's own phrase, it can "leave a salutary scar" on our conscience. "Socially-conscious" novels divide individuals into oppressors and victims, and thus allow the readers/audience to subsume their feelings of guilt by identifying with the victims and raging against the oppressors—after which they can put down the book and go out to enjoy a good dinner. Spark's "art of ridicule", on the other hand, purposely presents the victims as comic rather than tragic figures, and thereby subtly induces the readers to interrogate themselves, after the act of reading, on issues they have hitherto chosen to address only vicariously, through fiction (DA 36).

If the Baron and Ernest represent Spark's rejection of the "victim-oppressor complex", the character who personifies it most grotesquely is Mrs Hogg, Caroline's biggest enemy who becomes the bane of her life. Mrs Hogg, whom Caroline once suspects of being "somehow in league with her invisible persecutor", i.e. the omniscient author-narrator, has been mainly discussed either as a "nasty Catholic" figure or a metafictional device. Despite her imposing physicality which Caroline finds frightening (she is particularly revolted by her "colossal bosom"), Mrs Hogg has a habit of disappearing when there is no one in her presence. There are mice running about in the room where she is supposed to live. She has, as the narrator tells us, "no private life whatsoever". In the novel's climax, Mrs Hogg falls into a river and, when Caroline comes to her rescue, she tries to pull her under the water, then drowns and disappears—out of sight and of the story for good.

In his 1963 essay "Time and Description in Today's Fiction", Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose influence on her writing Spark has publicly acknowledged, com-

ments on the characters in *Last Year in Marienbad* (1962), a film by Alain Resnais which Robbe-Grillet scripted: “This man, this woman begin existing only when they appear on the screen the first time; before that they are nothing; and once the projection is over, they are again nothing. Their existence lasts only as long as the film lasts” (152). This remark, which can be applied directly to Mrs Hogg, was made by Robbe-Grillet in response to the film critics who complained of the impossibility of analyzing the psychology of his characters. It is clear that these critics wished art—novels and films alike—to mirror the *real* world, and expected fictional characters to resemble people who inhabit it. For Robbe-Grillet, however, it was precisely this cult of verisimilitude, which latter constitutes the essence of what he describes as the Balzacian novel, that needed to be overcome by the writers of *nouveau romans*. Spark’s presentation of Mrs Hogg, who appears and disappears at a snap of the author’s fingers, is a more comic expression of an idea similar to Robbe-Grillet’s. The difference is that, whereas Robbe-Grillet’s characters simply reject the reader’s attempt to psychologize them, Spark uses Mrs Hogg to deride such an attempt.

Like the rest of the characters in the novel, Mrs Hogg has an allegorical function; but she does not merely represent, as Richmond suggests, “the unappealing individuals who are part of the community of the Church—the reality of the persons as well as the intellectual ideas” (34). Through Mrs Hogg, Spark again caricatures the “victim-oppressor complex” observable in “the exposure of the tyrannies of family life on the individual” characteristic of “socially-conscious art”. For, despite her natural talent for oppressing and frightening others, Mrs Hogg considers herself a victim, for the reason that she has been deserted by her husband Mervyn (because she frightened him, too). Mervyn took her only son Andrew, who is crippled and in need of a wheelchair, and hid himself. He then changed his and Andrew’s surname to Hogarth so that Georgina would not find them, and bigamously married a younger woman. Despite all this potential for family tragedy, Mrs Hogg is denied the status of a tragic heroine by the author. The narrator comments in reference to Mrs Hogg:

...for when misfortune occurs to slightly absurd or mean-minded people it

is indeed tragic for them—it falls with a thud which they don't expect, it does not excite the pity and fear of the onlooker, it excites revulsion more likely ; so that the piece of bad luck which happened to Georgina Hogg was not truly tragic, only pathetic. (139)

Here Spark alludes to Aristotle's definition of tragedy, which she will twist and play with again in her anti-tragic novel, *The Driver's Seat*. But this also preechoes a passage in DA where the distinction between tragedy and pathos, which is clearly central to Spark's theory of fiction, is made : “The cult of the victim is the cult of pathos, not tragedy. The art of pathos is pathetic, simply” (36).

Mrs Hogg's ex-husband Mervyn shares her faith in “the cult of the victim”, and he is even more thoroughly ridiculed in his pathetic self-pity. He is forever grieving over opportunities that have passed him by, and his potentialities that were never allowed to flower. As a young man he had fantasized : “I have it in me to be a sculptor if I find the right medium...the right environment...the right climate...terrific vision of the female form if I could find the right model...the right influences” (142). (It should be noted that the petty-minded artist manqué is a favorite character type for Spark, and she uses it time and again in her fiction.) Now, as a disappointed man of middle-age, he meditates over

his mistakes in life, his lost art and skill, his marriages, the slippery day when he broke the eye-tooth and another occasion not long ago when he had missed his traveller's cheques after spending half an hour in Boulogne with an acquaintance of his youth whom he had happened to meet. Added to this, he had a stomach ulcer...(147)

The novel's title comes from the *Book of Job*, and Georgina and Mervyn are both self-proclaimed Jobs, whose trivial misfortunes parody the vicissitudes undergone by the original martyr. (It is worth noting that their mock-martyrdom is based on their instinct for constructing narratives in which causality *is* chronology, and one thing *does* necessarily lead to another inevitable thing.) At the same time, they also resemble Job's comforters, who misunderstand his suffering (they insist that Job must have done something to offend God and is therefore

being punished, when in reality God is testing Job's loyalty). For they look on each other's suffering as reasonable and acceptable, and their own as cruel and undeserved.

If Mrs Hogg and Mervyn personify the "cult of the victim", then Helena Manders is a vehicle for the author's caricature-criticism of yet another ineffective attitude some people adopt towards reality: denial based on innocence and ignorance. Though a converted Catholic like Caroline, Helena significantly differs from the younger woman in that she refuses to face anything that she is unable, or unwilling, to comprehend, or that does not fit her philanthropic view of the world. (Caroline says to herself at one point: "Poor Helena! Perhaps she would not at all like to know things clearly." (192)) She is depicted as being anxious all the time, for she is in fact surrounded on all sides by what is offensive or irrational. She closes her eyes to such fantastic and disquieting facts as her mother Louisa's crime, the hallucinations of her son's fiancé (who claims that they are all characters in a novel), and the simply abhorrent nature of Mrs Hogg, a former employee in the Manders' household. Because of this willful moral blindness, Helena not only possesses no power of changing the world around her for the better but, despite her goodwill and solicitousness, causes nothing but trouble for others, particularly Caroline (it is Helena who asks her to save Mrs Hogg from drowning). Caroline, for her part, is aware of the invisible third-person narrator's presence, "picks up" bits of his narrative and sometimes even comments on them. After the narrator's long description of Mrs Hogg's bosom, for example, Caroline contemptuously announces that it is in "Bad taste", "Revolting taste" (139). Helena, on the other hand, remains blissfully unaware and therefore is at the mercy of the capricious narrator. This is brought to our attention in at least two instances in the novel where Helena exactly repeats the words of the narrator:

Sir Edwin Manders had been in retreat for two weeks.

"Edwin has been in retreat for two weeks," Helena said. (149)

"I've sent her off for a walk," said Helena, looking round. "I wonder if she's all right." Georgina was nowhere in sight.

"Georgina is nowhere in sight", she said anxiously. (189)

The narrator's control of Helena's thought and action becomes even more conspicuous if we consider that Caroline invariably hears the narrator's voice repeating her thoughts, not dictating them as it does Helena's. It is interesting that the personality of both women is reflected in their relationships to the narrator as such. Caroline is smart, suspicious, and fastidious almost to the point of morbidity; Helena is charitable, gullible and tractable. The author does not present Caroline as a better person; indeed, as a character, Helena is far more likeable. Helena, however, is ineffectual and therefore (in Spark's view) guilty; so Caroline must resist her, just as Spark must resist and replace realism, a good but obsolete form of art, before it "goes bad".

Whereas, despite her horror of the absurd, Helena nevertheless feels compelled to involve herself in the extraordinary affairs of her friends and family, her husband Edwin Manders is happy and composed in what Spark elsewhere calls his "spectacular neglect of material things". He has retired from his business (he is the wealthy owner of Manders' Figs in Syrup, a canning company) in order to live a "contemplative life", and spends his weekends in religious retreat, shut up in a monastery (199). Once inside his "austere cell", which works on him "like a drug", Edwin immerses himself in "that opium daze of devotion", barred from all worldly distractions. As a result, he does not even notice that "there was a big upset going on in the monastic quarters of the buildings due to half the bedrooms being flooded by a burst pipe, that one of the lay-brothers was sick to death of his life, that the Abbot was worried about an overdraft" (199). However, almost at the end of the novel, Edwin abruptly wakes up to reality. For the first time he feels uneasy about leaving home, and about turning his back on his troubled family. He thinks of Louisa and Mrs Hogg, and everyone else; "All these people have suffered while I have fattened on fasting", he thinks, and the narrator assures us that "he meant what he said, and so truly he was not as limited as he seemed" (201).

Edwin's character has received comparatively little critical commentary, but his initial attitude towards life and his later change both gain particular significance when juxtaposed to Spark's ultimate definition of the key concept of art in DA: "And so when I speak of the desegregation of art", she says, "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” (my emphasis, 36). In view of this metaphor, Edwin can be identified with those readers who satisfy their need to feel involved with the problems of their society merely by investing their emotions in fiction that depicts them. Edwin’s final recognition of his own folly and hypocrisy, and his consequent emergence from his “lofty cell”, can be seen to symbolize Spark’s hope for the future of fiction and its readers, which will mark the reuniting of life and art.

I have saved to last the character who is the most complex, and whose very complexity lends both depth and ambivalence to the novel. The story of Louisa Jepp, though no less farfetched than the one the Baron believes in, is portrayed as true, so that Laurence, unlike the Baron, is on the right track when he pursues his grandmother’s secret. However, Louisa herself speaks quite dismissively of Laurence: “Oh, he never misses anything. I’ve never met anyone like him for getting the details. But, you know, the dear boy can’t put two and two together”, as if to justify his being mocked by the very narrative of the novel (22-3). Louisa must be speaking of something other than her criminal deeds here, for Laurence does find out about them in the end. Enigmatic, wise and playful, Louisa is probably the most interesting character in the novel, and we can see that the author feels much affection for her. Louisa is the second character to be introduced by the narrator (after Laurence), and the only person who gets a full-length physical description, or a parody of a traditional character portrait:

She was half gipsy, the dark one and the youngest of a large red-haired family, which at the time of her birth owed its prosperity to the father’s success as a corn dealer. The success was owing to good fortune in the first place, his having broken jail while waiting to come before the Bench, never afterwards returning to his gipsy tribe. It was a hundred and thirty years after this event that Louisa was sitting down to breakfast with Laurence.

This is somewhat reminiscent of the openings of Tobias Smollett’s novels, in the way it dramatically introduces the parentage of the picaresque protagonist. (Another paragraph describing her physical appearance follows, after which the narrator resumes his narrative by saying, “When Laurence had sized her up, as he

always did everyone...”, marking another instance where Spark parodies the third-person “omniscient” narration, by foregrounding our habit of “sizing up” each character in the process of reading a novel (13).)

Louisa can be said to belong to the tradition of the adventure or picaresque novel, just as Laurence belongs to cheap detective fiction, Mervyn and Georgina to cheap family melodrama, and the Baron to cheap occult literature. Her character, however, makes it difficult for us to confine her to such a function in a simple literary allegory. For one thing, Louisa is the only person in the book who does not see herself as a martyr. Also, as we can surmise from her observation on Laurence quoted earlier, she is conscious of the limitations of his perception, that is, the perception of an objective observer. In truth, there are even indications that she is secretly as much aware of everything that goes on inside the novel as the narrator himself. Even in the perspective of Spark’s concept of old and new art forms, it is difficult to determine Louisa’s position and her function, allegorical or otherwise, in this novel. It is significant that, in an often-quoted passage, she is compared by another character (Mervyn) to an artist :

I understand you, Louisa. You can’t bear to participate in separated worlds. You have the instinct for unity, for coordinating the inconsistent elements of experience ; you have the passion for picking up the idle phenomena of life and piecing them together. That is your ideal, it used to be mine. Reality, however, refuses to accommodate the idealist. (22)

Randisi, Kemp and Brian Cheyette all cite this passage as a description of Spark’s own aesthetic perspective. But a careful examination of Spark’s arguments in DA would suggest the very opposite. For the kind of unifying vision described by Mervyn belongs precisely to the kind of fiction which Spark rejects : that in which incongruous details are forced together to form a harmonious whole, and separate events are aligned to give the illusion of causality. As I have already demonstrated, the text of *The Comforters* itself never achieves such a degree of order and concord. The mutual misunderstanding of the characters continues to the end, and their disparate visions of the world never converge into a single, unified one. And Mervyn’s lament here—that reality refuses to accommodate the idealist—rings

quite true if we recall Spark's treatment of Helena, the ineffectual idealist. Yet, Louisa's own response to Mervyn's comment is ambiguous ("I don't know what you mean", she says), making it difficult for us to decide where she stands among the other characters, who demonstrate mutually conflicting attitudes towards life and fiction (22).

What differentiates Louisa from the rest of them most crucially is that she is apparently in control of the plot allotted to her, and ends it at her own will. In the end, she decides to leave off her adventures and, calmly and perhaps even knowingly, allows herself to be incorporated into the novel by Caroline, a novelist of the new generation. For, by getting married to Mr Webster, Louisa lets Caroline keep her promise to Edwin who, when he learns that the girl intends to write a novel, tells her: "Make it a straight old-fashioned story, no modern mystifications. End with the death of the villain and the marriage of the heroine" (202)⁽⁴⁾. Here we see a symbolic depiction of the handover of authority and control from the old artist to the young. Louisa's graceful exit from the main stage, I think, exemplifies what Spark calls "the sacrifice of good things at the intelligent season and by intelligent methods". But Louisa takes her leave with a wink at the reader, who is left bewildered and pondering why she should have to leave, what exactly she had represented and what can possibly replace it—if, indeed, it can be replaced at all. In truth, it is quite probable that Spark herself was still pondering the same question at this point—that is to say, 14 years prior to her speech at the Academy.

On the last page of the novel, Laurence tears up a letter he had meant to send to Caroline, now working on her novel in Worcestershire. It is the last of the series of letters to appear in this mock-epistolary (as well as mock-picaresque, mock-melodramatic and mock-detective) novel. In the letter, Laurence had complained to Caroline about her novel, the story of which he gathered from the notes she left behind (and which, of course, he discovered by snooping around her flat). Apparently Caroline's novel is about the characters in Spark's novel, and is nearing its conclusion. He had accused Caroline of seeing herself as a "martyr-figure" while both misunderstanding and misrepresenting everyone else; he had also told her that he loved her. But he tears it up because he realizes that he, too, had misrepresented Caroline. The pieces of the torn letter are born away by the wind;

and yet, as we are told in the last line of the novel, Laurence “did not then foresee his later wonder, with a curious rejoicing, how the letter had got into the book” (204).

The tearing up of Laurence’s letter symbolizes the death of old literature, whereas the miraculous reemergence of the letter in Caroline’s yet unfinished novel symbolizes its rebirth, its transformation into an art of the future. Caroline’s story survives those of the rest of them—Laurence, Mrs Hogg, Mervyn, Helena, Edwin and Louisa—not because, as Hynes and Richmond have suggested, hers is the most authentic or most true, but most probably because she is the only one who has worked out how to cope with the ridiculous and the absurd in the world we live in. Her method is to counter them with satire and ridicule, these being, for her and for Spark, the only and final weapons left to today’s artists—and, for that matter, for today’s readers as well. At the same time, readers of Spark should take care not to sit back and relax while reading her novels, regardless of how deliciously entertaining they are. For, if they look very closely, they will discover that her weapons, sharp and venomous under the coating of wit and poetry, are more often than not pointed at none but themselves.

Notes

1. As has been often pointed out, Brecht’s method was only partly successful, since it was in fact impossible to prevent the audience entirely from identifying with the actors. But this failure in method was the cause of Brecht’s theatrical success; people were emotionally moved by his plays, despite his intention. In Spark’s case it has actually worked the opposite way, because she is usually so successful in distancing her readers that they become frustrated and even offended. It is ironic that *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* has been Spark’s most “popular” work (being a kind of school drama, it has been most emotionally accessible to readers), because it is her least typical novel. Spark’s use of time-shifts in that novel, as well as in others, may also be intended to bring about a Brechtian effect.
2. Here I use the term New Novel to suggest Spark’s attempt to establish a kind of fiction radically different from the tradition of social realism. It must be noted, however, that Spark has never categorized her novels as *nouveaux romans*, plainly indebted as she is to Robbe-Grillet for her narrative methods.
3. Spark has sometimes been compared to John Fowles, whose *French Lieutenant’s*

Woman (1969) uses a metafictional narrative device similar to Spark's in *The Comforters*. In Fowles's novel, the third-person omniscient narrator appears in the story disguised as an old man and complains about the difficulty of controlling the characters, whose actions occasionally belie his intention. In *The Comforters*, the narrator is irritated by Caroline's critical and defiant attitude towards him. In both cases, the metafictional device has generally been interpreted as a manifestation of the theme of free will versus predestination.

4. The other condition of a "straight old-fashioned story" is, of course, fulfilled by the drowning of Mrs Hogg.

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