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Muriel Spark and the Romantic Ideal

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Abstract

By narrowing the disparate and often contradictory trajectories of Romantic thought into a compressed framework, this thesis seeks to scrutinise the treatment of the Romantic ideal in the fiction of Muriel Spark. A number of recurring themes can be understood to collectively constitute this Romantic ideal. These include Coleridge's theory of the power of the imagination to coalesce disparities into unity and harmony. The relationship between creativity and psychosis in *The Comforters* (1957) is considered within a wider discussion on the nature of creativity and the conception of the visionary Romantic artist. This leads to an investigation of the Romantic Movement's emphasis on interiority and the self, and the influence of John Henry Newman in *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965). The resulting discussion treats the concepts of transfiguration and the sublime as they relate to individual subjectivity in *The Driver's Seat* (1970). The Romantic fascination with the reinvigoration of myth, legend and oral narrative cultures is examined in relation to *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960), and the discussion returns to unity, harmony, vision, and the artist in *The Finishing School* (2004). The investigation of these elements of the Romantic ideal highlights a number of corollary questions. The emphasis on the self prompts the examination of Spark's engagement with the themes of solipsism, ego, and performance, while Keats' 'Negative Capability' is considered in the attempt to comprehend the other. The methodology will be comparative textual analysis with reference to relevant extant criticism, alongside consideration of literature from anthropology and folklore studies. By illuminating previously overlooked connections with Romanticism and Romantic literary methodologies, this interdisciplinary approach will assist in ascertaining whether Spark's sustained engagement with these themes is evidence of a complex, multivalent relationship with the Romantic ideal, or whether recent criticism positing her rejection of Romanticism can be upheld.

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Introduction

In Muriel Spark's debut novel *The Comforters* (1957), the sculptor Mervyn Hogarth says to the diamond-smuggling grandmother Louisa Jepp, "[y]ou 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".¹ In employing vocabulary which defines Louisa's purported unifying tendency as her "ideal" and the consequence of her "instinct" and "passion" (*TC*, p.22), Hogarth articulates concepts indelibly associated with Romanticism. In *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), Barbara Vaughan voices her frustration that Miss Rickward fails to recognise 'the helpless complexity of motives that prompted an action', and that 'there was seldom one motive only in the grown person'.² For Barbara, this is because Miss Rickward 'did not understand harmony as an ideal in this sense' (*MG*, p.161). In both of these instances the concepts of unity and harmony are referred to as an ideal. When discussing the function of the imagination in poetry, Samuel Taylor Coleridge states that it '[d]iffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and [...] reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities'.³ For Coleridge, unity, harmony and reconciliation are achieved through the application of what can be termed as the Romantic imagination. Subsequently, the unification of the creative vision resulting from the deployment of the Romantic imagination can be understood as a central component of the Romantic ideal.

This unifying urge is only one of a number of characteristics which will be considered here as constituting the term the Romantic ideal. A number of the themes which recur throughout Spark's work can be traced back to the Romantic period, whether

¹ Muriel Spark, *The Comforters* (London: Macmillan, 1957), p.22. Subsequent references will be incorporated within the text and abbreviated to 'TC'.

² Muriel Spark, *The Mandelbaum Gate* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1985), p.161. First published by Macmillan in 1965. Subsequent references will be incorporated within the text and abbreviated to 'MG'.

³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: edited with his aesthetical essays by J Shawcross*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), II, pp.12-13. Cited in John Spencer Hill, ed., *The Romantic Imagination: A Casebook* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1983), pp.39-40 (p.39).

originating there, or coming to prominence as a consequence of the writers retrospectively defined as the Romantics. Subsequently, the following concerns will be analysed as further elements of this ideal. These include the centrality and nature of vision as it appears in Spark's fiction, in particular the claim that the "insanity" of visionary perception locates a higher truth than the sanity of rationalism'.⁴ The myth of the isolated artist will be investigated within the wider context of Romantic conceptions of the artist in general, and of the writer more specifically. Spark's treatment of the sublime will be scrutinised, alongside the related themes of transfiguration and performance. The Romantic emphasis on the interiority of the self and the nature of individual subjectivity will be considered, while the reanimation of myth, legend, folklore and oral narratives will also be investigated. Alongside the themes of unity and harmony, these subjects will be considered under the definition of the Romantic ideal. This term should be understood as relating only to these themes, and is not an attempt at a comprehensive definition of the interests of Romanticism or the Romantic Movement.⁵

Chapter 1 investigates a number of the above concerns as they feature in Spark's debut novel, *The Comforters* (1957). The central character, Caroline Rose, appears to be experiencing a period of psychosis, manifested in the sound of a typewriter and voices which lead her to believe that she is a character in a novel being written by a ghostly author. As noted by Brian Cheyette, the result of this apparent fracturing of her psyche is that Caroline must attempt to integrate her 'fragmented self which, if not unified, will lead to insanity'.⁶ Caroline is also undergoing a conversion to Catholicism, and must negotiate the transition into her new faith as she struggles with assuaging her spectral visitations. This 'dichotomy of spirit and matter'⁷ prompts an investigation of what Ruth Whittaker

⁴ Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009), p.446.

⁵ A number of these themes are present in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), however, having considered Spark's most famous work in my Masters thesis, the discussion here will focus on a selection of Spark's other novels.

⁶ Brian Cheyette, *Muriel Spark* (Horndon: Northcote House, 2000), p.21.

⁷ Muriel Spark, *The Golden Fleece: Essays*, ed. by Penelope Jardine (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 2014), p.8. Subsequent references will be dated '(2014)a'.

identifies as Spark's 'religious vision of coherence', and whether Caroline's experiences articulate such a configuration.⁸

The concepts of unity and cohesion are therefore at the core of *The Comforters*, and this chapter will consider the role of the creative imagination as a unifying force in relation to Caroline's mental health, and also to her religious beliefs. Caroline is a writer, and for Martin Stannard, this is central to her striving for unity. He states: '[t]orn between the spiritual and the material worlds, she goes mad – and can only reunite the two halves of her psyche in fiction. This was precisely Muriel's dilemma'.⁹ Stannard identifies Caroline's strategy of moving from writing criticism to writing fiction as integral to her recovery. The result is that '[w]riting and madness are [...] intimately related in the book', a theme which persists throughout Spark's fiction, and which foregrounds Spark's career-long fascination with artists and writers.¹⁰ It will be suggested that Spark's handling of such figures constitutes a satirical depiction of those Romantic conceptions of the artist that are still in evidence; such as the myth of the lonely, isolated, creative genius, or the poet as prophet. Stannard's words also place emphasis on the autobiographical construction of the novel's main character, and the subsequent concerns of reading Caroline as simply a fictionalised version of Spark will also be considered. Central to the theme of unity is Louisa Jepp, grandmother of Laurence and leader of a diamond-smuggling gang. Louisa's ability to organise and plan such an endeavour is considered in contrast to the creative and artistic types who lack such vision, another recurring theme in Spark's oeuvre, and her treatment of artistic vision will also be considered in subsequent chapters.

As with *The Comforters*, *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965) is concerned with unity and the attempt to harmonize disparate elements. However, where Caroline Rose is attempting to unify her disjointed psyche, Barbara Vaughan's efforts are focused on her

⁸ Ruth Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p.17.

⁹ Stannard (2009), p.165.

¹⁰ Cheyette (2000), p.22.

hyphenated identity and her subsequent attempts to achieve religious and cultural coherence, all of which is set against the backdrop of the conflict in the Holy Land.

The criticism of Stephen Prickett will be invoked, with Barbara's experiences considered in relation to what Prickett identifies as Wordsworth's and Coleridge's 'organically unified sensibility'.¹¹ Prickett's work on John Henry Newman will also be utilised in order to better understand the distinction between the possibility of such a unified position, and that which Prickett defines as Newman's 'dialectic of opposites'.¹² These unifying concepts will be analysed with reference to Barbara's understanding of the philosophical writings of Catholicism, and her subsequent belief that 'motives should harmonize' (*MG*, p161).

The extensive use of religious, archaeological and floral symbolism will be considered in terms of its relationship with the wider context of the sacred, cultural, and political terrain of the Holy Land. Barbara's contraction of scarlet fever will be posited as a crucial juncture in the novel. This will lead to an investigation of the symbolic significance of the figure of St Helena, and of the intertextual and biographic commonalities that connect Barbara's experiences with those of Newman. Barbara's pilgrimage and contradictory conception of herself as 'a Gentile Jewess, a private-judging Catholic' (*MG*, p.164), will be analysed in relation to what Geoffrey Faber identifies as Newman's 'self-will'.¹³

By marginalising the common perception of Dougal Douglas as being demonic, Chapter 3 will offer a reading of Spark's 1960 novel *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* in which Dougal is considered solely as a trickster. This strategy is implemented as a deliberate attempt to illuminate the extent to which Spark's novel relies on previously overlooked elements of folklore, mythology, and the various narrative traditions from which a trickster figure such as Dougal emerges. In *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive*

¹¹ Stephen Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p.4.

¹² Prickett (1976), p.183.

¹³ Geoffrey Faber, *Oxford Apostles: A Character Study of the Oxford Movement* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p.324. First published in 1933.

Imagination Creates Culture (2008), Lewis Hyde investigates the origins, narratives, and characteristics of the figure of the trickster, and through an analysis of Spark's novel with reference to Hyde's work, this chapter will offer an alternative critical perspective on one of Spark's most memorable characters. Central to the discussion will be an attempt to untether the figure of the trickster from that of the Devil, and to identify how and why they are regularly confused. In so doing, it will be suggested that Spark's use of the border ballads as a structural and stylistic framework is merely a small part of her engagement with what Ian Duncan terms 'the central metaphor of modern antiquarian romance revival: the recovery of "remains"'.¹⁴ Through close reading and intertextual references to the anthropological literature of Hyde and Paul Radin, Dougal will emerge as a figure who encapsulates the complexity of Spark's debt to Romanticism and its engagement with such oral and folkloric traditions.

In doing so, the discussion will deal with a number of the recurring elements evident in Spark's oeuvre which, as previously noted, originate or came to prominence in the Romantic period. Vision in both the literal and figurative senses again plays an important part in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, with the figure of the artist and the moral nature of the creative act being examined. The influence of T.S. Eliot's poetry is considered with specific attention paid to the use of anthropological myth, and to the parodic use of phonetic sound. Dougal's shape-shifting capability will be analysed in terms of its capacity to transcend the text, and the numerous intertextual commonalities with writers including Robert Burns and James Hogg will be evidenced to further support the reading of Dougal as trickster.

Chapter 4 investigates *The Driver's Seat* (1970) and Spark's treatment of a number of themes which, it will be contended, illustrate her complex attitude towards the legacy of Romantic thought. Focusing on what F.R. Hart identifies as the 'heresy of self-assertion'

¹⁴ Ian Duncan, 'Authenticity Effects: The Work of Fiction in Romantic Scotland', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 102.1 (2003), pp.93-116 (p.110).

and the ‘romantic egoism’ of the character Lise, consideration will be given to how these concepts manifest themselves in Lise’s performative behaviours and her programme to be murdered.¹⁵ Central to the discussion will be the paradox of grotesque self-assertion through self-negation, the difficulty of ‘really getting under the skin’ of the other, and Lise’s attempts to attain the sublime by elevating herself ‘above the height of the vulgar commonplace’.¹⁶

Spark’s contradictory attitude towards the *nouveau roman* will be discussed with reference to Aidan Day’s criticism, with particular attention paid to the resulting structural and stylistic consequences of the influence of the antinovel. The Romantic ideologies of Keats and Shelley will be considered alongside the analysis of themes such as the elusive site of the utopian sublime, and Lise’s status as ‘a doomed romantic’.¹⁷

The last chapter will be an investigation of Spark’s final novel, *The Finishing School* (2004). Beginning with reference to Spark’s critical study of Emily Brontë, the characters of Roland Mahler and Chris Wiley are scrutinised with the intention of better understanding the trajectory of Spark’s satirical treatment of artists and writers throughout her work. Following on from this are the centrality of performance and the self-constructed nature of the artistic persona, and these subjects will be considered within the context of the Romantic myth of the isolated writer, and with reference to Frank Kermode’s *Romantic Image*.

The theme of unity is investigated within the context of the relationship between the characters of Rowland and Chris. As in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, the literal and figurative meanings of vision are crucial to Spark’s rendering of the two writers, while the writing of Flannery O’Connor is utilised in order to illuminate the novel’s fascination with the ocular.

¹⁵ F.R. Hart, *The Scottish Novel: A Critical Survey* (London: John Murray, 1978), p.303.

¹⁶ Muriel Spark, ‘The Same Informed Air’: An Interview with Muriel Spark’, in *Theorizing Muriel Spark*, ed. by Martin McQuillan (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002), pp.210-229 (p.218), Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p.111.

¹⁷ Hart (1978), p.308.

In the attempt to categorise Spark's fiction, F. R. Hart asks:

[s]hall we 'place' Muriel Spark in the 'Gothic' tradition deriving from the late enlightenment, or in its romantic aftergrowth, Natural Supernaturalism? [...] Shall we associate her instead with the mock-Gothic? [...] It may be that – in the puzzling cliché of literary historians – her fiction has grown out of such traditions.¹⁸

The first two categories posited by Hart are both associated with Romanticism (and a case could also be made for the 'mock-Gothic'), but despite Hart's question, scant critical attention has been paid to how Spark's relationship with Romanticism functions in her fiction. The majority of criticism has instead been focused on Spark as a modernist, postmodernist, Catholic, or Scottish writer. There has, however, been one recent exception. In his essay 'Muriel Spark's Break with Romanticism', Paddy Lyons makes a compelling case to support his assertion that Spark's fiction is the work of a writer 'not burdened by the lumber of Romanticism that too often bedevilled other writers of her time'.¹⁹ The intention then is to answer F. R. Hart's question and 'place' Spark's fiction in relation to Romanticism, and to consider Lyons' claim in light of the abundance of material throughout Spark's fiction that suggests a complex and multivalent relationship with Romanticism, a burden to which she repeatedly returns.

¹⁸ Francis Russell Hart, 'Ridiculous Demons', in *Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision*, ed. by Alan Bold (London: Vision Press Limited, 1984), pp.23-43 (pp. 23-24).

¹⁹ Paddy Lyons, 'Muriel Spark's Break with Romanticism', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, ed. by Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp.85-97 (p.97).

Chapter 1: The Matter of Spirit and the Spirit of Matter: The Problem of Romantic Unity in *The Comforters* (1957)

Whilst broadly categorising Spark's fiction, Ruth Whittaker offers a description which appears remarkably specific to *The Comforters* (1957). Whittaker states that

[r]ealism is inadequate, since her concept of reality includes the divine and the supernatural. She uses experimental techniques, but negates their original functions by subordinating them to her own, religious vision of coherence. Her Catholicism, as expressed in her novels, is uncomfortable and idiosyncratic, and is far from a call to conversion.¹

All of the above facets are in evidence in Spark's debut novel. The reality of the novel includes a character – Mrs Hogg – who literally vanishes, and is later alleged to be a witch. Baron Willi Stock is a diabolist who runs an esoteric bookstore and who performs black masses. The central character, Caroline Rose, suffers from what appears to be a mental breakdown, manifested in the sound of voices and a typewriter which appear to be writing her into a novel. Meanwhile Caroline is undergoing conversion to Catholicism, and on entering a retreat she encounters a number of fellow worshippers, including the aforementioned Mrs Hogg, who illustrate Whittaker's final point that Spark's version of Catholicism is indeed 'uncomfortable and idiosyncratic'.²

Whittaker's comments draw our attention to the theme of unity in Spark's fiction. A 'concept of reality' which 'includes [...] the supernatural', and the use of 'experimental techniques' are all clearly present, but the question remains as to whether *The Comforters* depicts a 'religious vision of coherence', or indeed, any kind of coherence or unity.³ Nonetheless, any such attempt to include the supernatural alongside the real or the everyday, or a scathing portrayal of believers within such a 'religious vision of coherence' raises the question of unity, and when the central character spends much of the novel on a

¹ Whittaker (1982), p.17.

² Whittaker (1982), p.17.

³ Whittaker (1982), p.17.

quest to (re)unify the seemingly disparate elements of her fractured psyche, coherence and unity become central concerns.⁴

For Brian Cheyette, Caroline's mental health issues are a way for Spark to deal with the disparate nature of reality and existence. Cheyette states that '*The Comforters* is especially concerned with her sense of having a fragmented self which, if not unified, will lead to insanity'.⁵ Referring back to Whittaker's statement, it is possible therefore to consider the novel as dealing with unity through a number of themes. These are: the 'religious vision of coherence' which, according to Whittaker, Spark is allegedly seeking through fiction; Caroline's unification of her fragmented self – the failure of which will be a permanent loss of her sanity – and the unity of artistic vision which is a problem for both Spark, and subsequently, Caroline.

Nevertheless, the first reference to the concept of unity or harmony is made not to Caroline, but to Louisa Jepp:

Mervyn spoke. '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. It is difficult at your age to grasp a fact which you have never had occasion to recognise, but –'

'I don't know what you mean,' Louisa said, 'not at any age I wouldn't know'. (*TC*, p.22)

Here the character Mervyn Hogarth accuses Louisa Jepp of what can be best summarised as a Romantic conception of the world. Indeed, a comparison of Louisa's supposed tendency to unify, as alleged by Mervyn, with a definition of the poetic methodology of Romanticism is telling. Samuel Taylor Coleridge emphasises the importance of the unifying power of the imagination to the Romantic poet. According to Coleridge, the poet

[d]iffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively

⁴ Whittaker (1982), p.17.

⁵ Cheyette (2000), p.21.

appropriated the name of the imagination. This power [...] reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities.⁶

Mervyn's view, that Louisa has "the instinct for unity, for coordinating the inconsistent elements of experience" (*TC*, p.22), accords almost perfectly with the final sentence of Coleridge's statement. Louisa's response to Mervyn's accusations is unequivocal, but he has drawn attention to the theme of unity within a framework which corresponds with that of the Romantic artist and the harmonising qualities of the Romantic imagination.

There is a strong element of irony in having Mervyn raise the issue of unity and Romantic harmony. As Coleridge has noted, part of the Romantic artist's construction is the concept of vision, of the ability to see beyond matter and – with the assistance of the imagination – create something new from the coalescence of experience and imagination. However, it transpires that Mervyn is a failed sculptor, with a large number of excuses as to why he has never found success as an artist:

'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', and by the time he was forty it became, 'I had it in me ... if only I had found the right teachers'. (*TC*, p.142)

Mervyn's grasping clearly reveals an artist deprived of vision, unable to identify his own artistic shortcomings, and it is this inability to perceive his own failings that alert us to his absence of vision. He lacks the very coherence and "instinct for unity" (*TC*, p.22) that he accuses Louisa of having. He even articulates the reason behind his own inability, stating that he has "terrific vision of the female form if I could find the right model" (*TC*, p.142). In doing so he admits to having no ability to transfigure or transform, "for coordinating the inconsistent elements of experience" (*TC*, p.22) or to see beyond his immediate subject. His "terrific vision of the female form" (*TC*, p.142) is in fact the opposite of this. Rather, it is an inability to see the artistic potentialities in any model. In blaming his

⁶ Coleridge in Hill (1983), p.39.

inability to “find the right model” (*TC*, p.142), he is inadvertently and unwittingly admitting that he has no vision; rather he has only an eye for the ladies, a tendency which reduces creative vision to the unthinking gaze of the voyeur. This inability to transfigure what he sees in front of him into art – via imagination and vision – places Mervyn at the beginning of an extensive cadre of literalists, unable to transform the materials and experiences they encounter into the ‘paradoxical truth of imaginative fiction’.⁷

Despite all of this, Mervyn is not entirely useless. The very “passion for picking up the idle phenomena of life and piecing them together” (*TC*, p.22) that Louisa – despite her refutation – does indeed display, leads to Mervyn’s pedestrian sculpting abilities being utilised. Louisa admits to the incredulous Georgina Hogg that she is “in smuggling [...] I have a gang of my own [...] A gang. We are four. I am the leader. The other three are gentlemen. They smuggle diamonds from abroad” (*TC*, p.111). Mervyn Hogarth and his son Andrew are two of the three gentlemen, and his artistic (in)ability is central to the concern. Louisa is the mastermind of the gang, and she has Mervyn create statues of holy figures and rosary beads in order to conceal the diamonds within their hollow structures. Laurence, while snooping on Mervyn notes “broken plaster statuettes. St Anthony. S Francis. Immac. Concept. – others unrecognizable” (*TC*, p.120). Mrs Hogg also notes ‘some broken plaster statuettes lying on a table’ (*TC*, p.146), and most comic of all, the Baron mistakenly identifies Mervyn as “a *raging* diabolist” (*TC*, p.158) on account of the shattered statues and a dog. Finding “a large number of broken plaster statuettes – religious objects [...] hacked about in a curious way” (*TC*, p.164), the Baron concludes that “there had been a wholesale orgy of deliberate iconoclasm” (*TC*, p.164). Encountering a black dog, the Baron claims that “[i]t encircled me three times”, and determines that “the black dog was Mervyn Hogarth [...] Magically transformed” (*TC*, p.165). The narrative is clear that Mervyn was ‘innocent of prolonged interest in, let alone

⁷ Muriel Spark, *The Essence of the Brontës* (London: Peter Owen, 1993), p.319. As will be discussed in chapter 5, Rowland Mahler, twenty-one novels and forty-seven years later, suffers from exactly this inability.

any practice of, diabolism, witchcraft, demonism, or such cult' (*TC*, p.157). It falls to Louisa to explain the apparently ““deliberate iconoclasm”” (*TC*, p.164) to Caroline, telling her that

‘I desired to have my merchandise quickly [...] For the sake of the London end [...] So we arranged that Mervyn should break up his saints and rosaries and extract the stones as soon as he returned from the trips’. (*TC*, p.177)

Mervyn has been reduced to creating mere vessels, instantly disposable and worthless, within which the items of real value are transported. Unable to attain the status of artist through sculpture, Mervyn has failed to emulate his vision of Louisa and her ability ““for picking up the idle phenomena of life and piecing them together””, and this ““idle phenomena”” we now understand to be Mervyn unwittingly defining himself (*TC*, p.22). A number of issues are inferred here. On the one hand it appears that Mervyn’s artistic career stalled because of a lack of vision, imagination, and due to his inability to become ‘[t]he artist [...] the creator of new wholes, reconciling opposite or discordant qualities’.⁸

Meanwhile, Louisa’s retirement has blossomed because of her ability to do so, but less in an artistic context, and more-so in a real-world one. Louisa is practical and she does indeed resolve disparities; she skilfully juggles various dubious characters throughout – such as Mrs Hogg, Baron Stock, and Mervyn and his son Andrew – she coordinates the entire smuggling operation, and she keeps herself above the suspicion of the authorities (although not above the suspicions of her grandson Laurence), marrying her fellow smuggler Mr Webster at the novel’s end.

Brian Cheyette cites Spark’s critical work on Proust as a possible source for this capacity for unification in the character of Louisa. He notes that in her 1953 essay ‘The Religion of an Agnostic: A Sacramental View of the World of Marcel Proust’, Spark identifies unity as being enabled by hyphenated identity.⁹ Cheyette says

⁸ Prickett (1976), p.23.

⁹ Muriel Spark, ‘The Religion of an Agnostic: A Sacramental View of the World in the Writings of Proust’, in *The Golden Fleece: Essays*, ed. by Penelope Jardine (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 2014),

[i]n this essay [...] Spark sets up the redemption of Proust's pagan half-Jewishness as a momentous counter to the prevailing 'dualistic attitude to matter and spirit' [...] Louisa's 'half-gipsy' racial identity enables her, like Proust, to similarly harmonize 'inconsistent elements of experience' into a unified whole.¹⁰

It is the practical nature of her unifying that most stands out; she is a seventy-eight year old grandmother but also a diamond smuggler; she is artistic in spirit, but she deals with matter, and is adept at reconciling the two.

The Romantic imagination as outlined by Mervyn appears thus far to have a more practical than poetic application in *The Comforters*. The implication is therefore that these unifying skills are much too important to be left to poets; diamonds are objects of real, quantitative value, regarded as the height of aesthetic beauty, raising the question of the value of art in a world with diamonds.

However, before we dismiss the Romantic inclination, where '[t]he imagination synthesises disparate elements in order to generate a new reality', it worth considering Spark's own words with regard to another, rather more successful artist than Mervyn Hogarth.¹¹ Spark says of the Italian artist 'Pierro della Francesca, [that] like all great artists, [he] did not accept any dichotomy between spirit and matter'.¹² Della Francesca seems to enact this unification in his own life and those of his subjects, as Spark notes, stating that 'della Francesca was a humanist with a deep sense of the sublime. His Madonna (Our Lady of Childbirth) is a substantial country woman and at the same time a majestic, archetypal figure'.¹³ In Spark's view, della Francesca is an artist able to resolve – or allow to coexist – the disparate elements in both his work and his life, and the central question of *The Comforters* is whether Caroline can do the same.

pp.186-190. First published in *The Church of England Newspaper* on Friday 27th November 1953.

Subsequent references will be dated '(2014)b'.

¹⁰ Cheyette (2000), pp.25-6. Cheyette quotes from Spark (2014)b, p.188, and from *TC*, p.12, p.22.

¹¹ John Spencer Hill, ed., *The Romantic Imagination: A Casebook* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1983), p.13.

¹² Spark (2014)a, p.8.

¹³ Spark (2014)a, p.7.

Echoing the words of Coleridge on the methodology of the Romantic poet, John Spencer Hill states that '[t]he imagination synthesises disparate elements in order to generate a new reality'.¹⁴ However, shortly into the narrative of *The Comforters*, it seems Caroline's imagination may be working the opposite way by fracturing cohesive reality into disparate elements, and creating a new, ruptured, (un)reality where her sanity is called into question. On returning home from retreat, Caroline begins to experience some unusual occurrences:

[j]ust then she heard the sound of a typewriter. It seemed to come through the wall on her left. 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.* (TC, p.42) (Author's italics)

The italicised words are those that the narrative has ascribed to Caroline as interior thought in the immediately preceding paragraph. This is repeated as Caroline attempts to understand what is happening:

[a] typewriter and a chorus of voices: What on earth are they up to at his time of night? Caroline wondered. But what worried her were the words they had used, coinciding so exactly with her own thoughts.

Then it began again. Tap-tappity-tap; the typewriter. And again, the voices [...] The chanting reached her as she returned to her room, with these words exactly:

What on earth are they up to at this time of the night? Caroline wondered. But what worried her were the words they had used, coinciding so exactly with her own thoughts. (TC, pp.43-4)

This seemingly sets the pattern for the voices and the typewriter; the narrative renders Caroline's thoughts, then the sound of the typewriter begins, followed by the voices repeating Caroline's thoughts as the tapping continues. Not surprisingly, Caroline wonders "[a]m I going mad?" (TC, p.44). As the episodes continue, it becomes apparent that the voices are repeating not only Caroline's thoughts, but the narrative within which she is contained:

¹⁴ Hill (1983), p.13.

[m]eantime, she was trembling, frightened out of her wits, although her fear was not altogether blind.

Tap-click-tap. The voices again: Meantime, she was trembling, frightened out of her wits, although her fear was not altogether blind. (TC, p.44-5)

As this passage illustrates, the typewriter and the voices have access not only to Caroline's interiority, but they are able to access the narrative that the reader is reading and Caroline is experiencing. This leads to the question of the nature of these hallucinations or visions; are they signs of Caroline's insanity, are they evidence of the supernatural, is there a rational explanation, or, indeed a reason which defies rationality and the supernatural? Caroline has already arrived at an account she regards as the truth. Talking to Father Jerome about her experiences, Caroline says,

‘[b]ut the typewriter and the voices – it is as if a writer on another plane of existence was writing a story about us.’ As soon as she had said these words, Caroline knew that she had hit on the truth. (TC, p.63)

Believing herself to be a character in a novel, Caroline now questions the nature of her own existence. Is she only a character in another writer's narrative, or does she exist in two separate states; as this character, but also as a separate self?

Immediately following this revelation, Laurence suggests that they attempt to “record your spook-voices” (TC, p.64), and while this proves futile – Caroline's suggestion that “[m]aybe those voices won't record” omits what the reader already knows about her theory of being a character (TC, p.64) – Caroline resolves to “assemble the evidence” (TC, p.65) to prove her theory to the doubters (of whom Laurence is one). Laurence's suggestion to record the voices highlights a number of relevant issues. He represents the rational, materialist approach, stating that “[i]f the sound has objective existence it will be recorded” (TC, p.64). Caroline's awareness that her explanation will require some element of objectivity appears to be hinted at in her desire to “assemble the evidence” (TC, p.65), but given that she says “[t]his sound might have another sort of

existence and still be real” (TC, p.64), it is unclear whether any evidence will, in fact, satisfy the rationally minded Laurence. This is encapsulated in the following exchange: Laurence advocates that they ““first exhaust the possibilities of the natural order””, to which Caroline replies, “[b]ut we don’t know all the possibilities of the natural order”” (TC, p.64). Caroline’s position is that she is aware that what she is experiencing may be madness, but that there are numerous other possibilities, and these may fall within the natural order given that she believes it is impossible to know ““all the possibilities”” (TC, p.64). For Judy Sproxton, this is evidence that ‘[r]eality means to Caroline inclusion of the spiritual dimension’, and this is apparently borne out later in the novel when Mrs Hogg vanishes before Caroline and a number of other witnesses.¹⁵

Whatever the explanation for the voices, Caroline has a number of disparate elements that require resolution or unification. If she is a character within another narrative, and simultaneously the ‘real’ Caroline, she has to find a way to silence the voices before her real self succumbs to the madness brought on by the voices she hears. She realises how this appears, telling Laurence ““I know that I am slightly insane [...] From your point of view,” she insisted, “I am out of my senses. It would be a human indignity to deny it”” (TC, p.96). Caroline, therefore, is fully aware of what appears to be her own fractured psyche, and the need to resolve these disparate elements into some form of coherence. This has led some observers to the question of Caroline’s position with regards to the narrative, and because of this ambiguity, Bryan Cheyette states that

[w]riting and madness are [...] intimately related in the book [...] For this reason, we are never quite sure in *The Comforters* of the status of Caroline’s story within a story. Is she suffering from paranoid delusions (the victim of a diabolical ‘plot’) or groping towards a divine mystery? This sense of being on the cusp of both madness and prophecy positions her, like so many of Spark’s heroines, both inside and outside her own story.¹⁶

¹⁵ Judy Sproxton, *The Women of Muriel Spark* (London: Constable, 1992), p.24.

¹⁶ Cheyette (2000), p.22.

Cheyette identifies the questions that Caroline's madness presents. The proximity of 'madness and prophecy' and the supernatural possibilities encapsulated in the phrase 'a divine mystery' motion towards a Romantic conception of Caroline and her metafictional dilemmas.¹⁷ Is she the mad artistic visionary on the verge of revealing the truth, or is she in need of rest and recuperation? As Cheyette notes, at this point in the novel these questions remain unanswered, and with the ambiguity surrounding Caroline's mental state and her status as a character within a novel – itself within a novel – the mysteries are deepened, not resolved.

For Caroline, however, the investigation into her theory continues, and given that she is currently writing a book called '*Form in the Modern Novel*' (TC, p.57), she would appear to be the ideal – perhaps too ideal – candidate to analyse her predicament from a literary perspective.¹⁸ However, in a comic admission she reveals – perhaps more than she realises – “‘I’m having difficulty with the chapter on realism’” (TC, p.57). Caroline resolves to tell Laurence of her theory, but only after ‘she was well again and committed to health’ (TC, p.69), and this is the first implication that her condition is not psychological or physical. Believing that she is now capable of dealing with the voices with a stronger constitution and with the self-belief that she is not suffering a breakdown, Caroline becomes more open. She tells Laurence ‘as if it were an undeniable fact, of her theory about the author making a book out of their lives’ (TC, p.94). It is at this point that Caroline realises that she may be able to assert a level of control upon the voices if she asserts her free-will and subverts the narrative that the mysterious author is constructing. When Laurence, ever the rationalist, says “‘I’ve never heard of a Catholic being allowed to traffic with the unknown like this’”, Caroline replies that “[t]he author is doing all the trafficking [...] But I’m going to make it difficult for him, you’ll see” (TC, p.96). She continues to try and assert her agency, telling Laurence that “[t]he narrative says we went

¹⁷ Cheyette (2000), p.22.

¹⁸ Laurence hints at this being partly responsible for the form of her hallucinations: ‘[h]e went so far to suggest, “[y]our work on the novel form – isn’t it possible that your mind –”’ (TC, p.95).

by car; all right, we must go by train. You do see that, don't you, Laurence? It's a matter of asserting free will" (TC, p.97). However, circumstances dictate that they do travel by car, and the crash that follows splits in the novel into two.

It is while she is recovering in hospital that Caroline resolves to think of herself as existing outwith the narrative of the voices. Her realisation comes about as a result of physical pain and as such represents a symbolic reunification of matter and spirit, where her physicality – matter – gradually begins to resolve to unity with her emotionally fragile condition – her spirit. Caroline tells Baron Stock that “this physical pain convinces me that I'm not wholly a fictional character. I have independent life” (TC, p.160). Caroline is now intent now on asserting her free will, and when the Baron quizzes her regarding her “speculations about the source of the noises” (TC, p.160), she declares that “[t]he evidence will be in the book itself” (TC, p.160). This introduces a brief element of confusion as to the nature of this book, and the role of writing in Caroline's recovery, as the following passage illustrates:

‘How is your book going?’ meaning her work on the structure of the modern novel. ‘I think it is nearing the end,’ she answered. He was surprised, for only a few days since she had announced that the work was slow in progress. (TC, p.167)

The initial confusion is between Caroline's study on *Form in the Modern Novel* (TC, p.57) and the narrative of the mystery typist, as Caroline now comes to understand that the voices are less frequent and, whatever the nature of the mystery narrative, it is coming to an end. Caroline's explanation for her conviction that the mysterious voices and typewriter narrative is coming to an end is vague and unsatisfactory, and contributes to why the second half of the novel is somewhat of a let-down. Her reasons are: “[b]ecause of incidents which have been happening within our orbit of consciousness, and their sequence. Especially this news about your grandmother's friend” (TC, p.171). The news she is referring to is the possible miracle of Andrew Hogarth regaining movement in his

legs after years of being crippled. It is never convincingly explained as to why this would signal an end to the voices, and perhaps we are meant to infer that Caroline herself does not know, but rather feels a sense of impending closure.

Laurence repeats the textual confusion shortly after, when he asks “[h]ow is your book going? [...] the book you are writing, not the “book” in which you think you are participating” (*TC*, p.170). The book he is referring to is her critical study of the modern novel, ‘*Form in the Modern Novel*’ (*TC*, p.57).¹⁹ However, by this point there is a brief period where there are three books in circulation. Caroline’s reply to the Baron, that “[t]he evidence will be in the book itself” (*TC*, p.160), refers not to her study, but to the work of fiction she has resolved to write once her critical book is complete. This signals the presence of the mystery typing narrative, the critical study, and now Caroline’s projected first work of fiction. By the end of the novel the typing ‘ghost’ appears – or perhaps not – to have vanished, as Caroline announces her immediate plans:

Caroline had finished her book about novels. Now she announced she was going away on a long holiday. She was going to write a novel.
[...]
‘What is the novel to be about?’
Caroline answered, ‘Characters in a novel’. (*TC*, p.202)

The element of mystery is combined with mischief here, as a number of eventualities are inferred, namely that Caroline’s novel will turn out to be this novel (the novel that we are reading; *The Comforters*), but also conceivably the novel of the mysterious typist, or perhaps an altogether different one.

For some it is this transition from criticism to fiction that signals Caroline’s final move towards full recovery. Judy Sproxton notes that the typewriter ‘at first torments her. Then she finds out that she can assuage and temper this experience, ultimately pacifying it by completing a novel’.²⁰ Martin Stannard sees Caroline’s dilemma in Romantic terms, and

¹⁹ Spark’s italics.

²⁰ Sproxton (1992), p.20.

he reads Spark's presence in the character of Caroline, stating; '[t]orn between the spiritual and the material worlds, she goes mad – and can only reunite the two halves of her psyche in fiction. This was precisely Muriel's dilemma'.²¹ Stannard's use of 'reunite' also alerts us to a Romantic conception of Caroline's dilemma, where the process of turning her experiences into fiction, or art, unifies the disparate elements of experience. Coleridge claims that

[a]rt [...] is the mediatrix between, and reconciler of, nature and man. It is, therefore, the power of [...] infusing the thoughts and passions of man into every thing which is the subject of his contemplation; colour, form, motion, and sound, are the elements which it combines, and it stamps them into unity.²²

While the terminology of Coleridge's 'nature and man', and Stannard's 'spiritual and material worlds' may differ, the unifying processes they outline do not. What Stannard highlights, however, is the autobiographic nature of *The Comforters*, and there are indeed a number of similarities between Spark and Caroline Rose. Caroline also comes from a family where one half is Jewish (*TC*, p.38), and like Spark, she undergoes a conversion to Catholicism. The years preceding *The Comforters* are similar for both, 'mostly times of poverty', coming 'before Caroline had got her literary reputation' (*TC*, p.67). And finally, both undergo what in Spark's case seems certain to have been a nervous breakdown, brought on in part by an addiction to Dexedrine slimming tablets and subsequent sleep deprivation; as Caroline says, "I could sleep for a fortnight" (*TC*, p.69).²³ The result for Spark was that she also began to hear voices, and suffered hallucinations where she believed T.S. Eliot was communicating directly with her via embedded messages in his drama. In *Curriculum Vitae* (1992) she states, 'I thought at first that there was a code built

²¹ Stannard (2009), p.165.

²² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'On Poesy or Art', excerpted in *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature*, ed. by Richard Ellman and Charles Feidelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp.43-46 (p.43).

²³ See Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.204: 'foolishly, I had been taking dexedrine as an appetite suppressant, so that I would feel less hungry. It was a mad idea'. Subsequent references will be dated '(1992)a'.

into Eliot's work and tried to decipher it'.²⁴ The conclusion is not that *The Comforters* is simply a fictionalised account of Spark's own experiences – although some, such as Stannard, overemphasise this element – rather that Spark chooses to utilise her breakdown via the madness that Caroline experiences. In doing so she ignites a debate centred upon a pervasive Romantic theme; the relationship between writing – and by extension creativity in general – with madness, insanity, altered mental states, or states of emotional disturbance.

This draws a number of critics to comment on the nature of this proximity of writing and madness. As mentioned above, Bryan Cheyette notes that '[w]riting and madness are [...] intimately related in the book',²⁵ whilst Martin Stannard goes further, and again invokes Romanticism when he states that '[t]he ultimate paradox, and one to which Muriel's work always returns, is the Romantic one: that the 'insanity' of visionary perception locates a higher truth than the sanity of rationalism'.²⁶ Stannard's comments highlight the conundrum which has been evident in the study of Spark's fiction since she first came to notice in 1951 with 'The Seraph and the Zambezi'.²⁷ In order to ascertain whether Spark's novel substantiates Stannard's claim regarding 'the 'insanity' of visionary perception', we must first consider the treatment of vision and perception, before then considering unity in a wider context.²⁸

Vision – whether the by-product of insanity or not – is a recurring motif throughout Spark's oeuvre, and while Caroline's 'Typing Ghost' (*TC*, p.161) manifests itself aurally, *The Comforters* interrogates the concepts of sensory, artistic, and visionary modes of perception. The problem with Stannard's assertion is that the paradoxical nature of both Romanticism and Spark's fiction complicates any such absolutism. As noted above, Caroline's breakdown – if it is such – resembles that which Spark endured. However, the

²⁴ Spark (1992)a, p.204.

²⁵ Cheyette, (2000), p.22.

²⁶ Stannard (2009), p.446.

²⁷ This came about as a result of her victory in *The Observer* short story competition.

²⁸ Stannard (2009), p.446.

narrative does not support a reading that Caroline attains any ‘higher truth’ due to any ‘insanity’ of visionary perception’ that she experiences while hearing the voices.²⁹ Rather, the novel’s trajectory is more of a rejection of the Romantic sensibility as manifested in Caroline’s ‘Typing Ghost’ (*TC*, p.161) episodes. And as previously noted, Caroline’s striving for a reunification of her fractured consciousness and her desire to unify these elements has its roots in Romanticism and is contrary to remaining in a state of madness or of claiming to be visionary. The implication is that Spark is unsure of how to treat the Romantic idea of vision as outlined by Stannard, and instead resolves the disparate elements of the novel through the application of experimental fictional methods. Indeed, one could question whether resolution is perhaps too neat a term for the rather forced conclusion to the narrative. Spark appears to be aware of this, and employs humour as a way of both acknowledging the difficulty of resolving the conundrum she has set herself in the first half of the novel, whilst ironically undermining it too. Having stated that she is to undertake writing a novel, Edwin suggests to Caroline that she

‘[m]ake it a straight old-fashioned story, no modern mystifications. End with the death of the villain and the marriage of the heroine.’
Caroline laughed and said, ‘Yes, it would end that way.’ (*TC*, p.202)

This is both in keeping with the metafictional nature of the novel, but also an allusion to Shakespearean drama. The death of Mrs Hogg and the marriage of Louisa to Mr Webster realise Edwin’s advice, while Caroline’s comment is loaded with metafictional implications, further emphasised by the ending, where Laurence wonders ‘with a curious rejoicing, how the letter’ he has written – of which Caroline can have no possible knowledge – ‘had got into the book’ (*TC*, p.204).

It is worth remembering the method by which Caroline regains her unified – or sane – self; through the act of writing fiction. Taken alone, this is evidence of the role of fiction in reasserting her integrated character, and while Cheyette notes that ‘writing and

²⁹ Stannard (2009), p.446.

madness' are in close proximity, it is when Caroline resolves to write fiction as opposed to criticism, that she fully regains her sanity and in doing so distances herself from her apparent psychosis.³⁰

Spark is fully aware of the Romantic origins of Stannard's assertion whereby 'the "insanity" of visionary perception locates a higher truth', and her critical work gives no indication that she believes it to be anything but true.³¹ Her work on Emily Brontë in particular displays a deep understanding of the relationship between an artist's vision and their proximity to what may be insanity. The final few years of Brontë's life are a case in point, where her self-imposed isolation and her awareness of her role as a novelist and poet embody the exemplar of the isolated, visionary artist. Spark recognises that Brontë's romantic conception of her own role and function as a writer and artistic persona has enabled her to achieve something akin to Stannard's 'higher truth'.³² Spark notes this and a similar paradox when writing about her favourite villain Heathcliff from Emily's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), saying '[i]t is not the plain truth of realism, but the paradoxical truth of imaginative fiction which draws us to the immortal *Wuthering Heights* and its nightmare hero'.³³ Yet while she recognises the paradoxical value of creating a hero – or villain – who is verging on the visionary insanity that Stannard implies, Spark also notes the absurdity of such a character:

son of a special race; a being who recognised no law but that of Nature; one powerfully raised above the common destiny of man; in the world, a courageous stoic; in essence mystically united with Nature; amoral, ruthless. Such a being would partake of the extremes of passion, primitive in action, mystically remote in contemplation. In other words, he would be absurd.³⁴

³⁰ Cheyette (2000), p.22.

³¹ Stannard (2009), p.446.

³² Stannard (2009), p.446.

³³ Spark (1993), p.319.

³⁴ Muriel Spark, 'Biographical', in Muriel Spark and Derek Stanford, *Emily Brontë: Her Life and Work* (London: Arena, 1985), pp.9-99 (p.81). First published in 1960 by Peter Owen Ltd.

Spark sees the absurdity in a character like Heathcliff (although he is her favourite villain), as she does in the idea of the artist as having access to ‘higher truths’.³⁵ The notion articulated by Wordsworth in the ‘Preface to Lyrical Ballads’, that ‘the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society’,³⁶ is likewise rejected. As Judy Sproxton states: ‘Spark makes it clear that she has no romantic illusions about the intrinsic superiority of the artist’, and the evidence in *The Comforters* supports this assertion.³⁷

All of this suggests that Spark’s understanding of the artist was radically transformed somewhere during – or by – the process of her transition from writing criticism to writing fiction. This, however, relates to Spark’s own experience; what is intriguing is the portrayal of writers in the novel. Other than Caroline, other possible candidates in the quest to locate ‘a higher truth’ through the ‘“insanity’ of visionary perception’ include the literary types and poets she and Laurence encounter while visiting a number of pubs on a night out.³⁸ At the second pub, they learn that ‘the Baron had spread the story of Caroline and her hysterical night at his flat’ (*TC*, p.78). It is apparent that although the Baron has been less than scrupulous, the literary types who repeat the Baron’s gossip are not to be trusted either. It would seem that the literary scene is not inhabited by honourable characters and their description as ‘the ageless boys and girls who dropped in on [the Baron’s] bookshop in Charing Cross Road’ (*TC*, p.79) signals their emotional immaturity. They encounter three poets, who range from the neurotic to the psychotic to the publicity-obsessed. The first, ‘a fat fair poet’, says to Caroline, “[t]ell me *all* about your visions, my dear”, but rather than listening, ‘[t]he fat poet went steadily on about Caroline’s “visions”; he said they would be good for her publicity’ (*TC*, p.79). His concern for Caroline’s literary profile rather than her wellbeing signals his emphasis on image over

³⁵ Stannard (2009), p.446.

³⁶ William Wordsworth, ‘Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems (1802)’, in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.595-615 (p.606).

³⁷ Sproxton (1992), p.20.

³⁸ Stannard (2009), p.446.

substance. The next, a caricature of the wolf from ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ with ‘a cape and a huge mouth’ enquires “[i]s there much Satanism going on within the Catholic Church these days?” (TC, p.78), before stating that “R.C.s usually try to convert everyone, however hopeless. I thought it was a sort of obligation” (TC, p.79). Caroline is patient with the wolf-lady’s misinformed notions about the Church, and recognising her hunger for idle gossip, tells her ‘that Eleanor Hogarth had deserted the Baron’, and in doing so is ‘satisfied that the story would now spread’ (TC, p.79). The third poet’s obsession with psychiatry is ridiculed by Laurence, who states “[w]e know one [...] who analyses crazy pavements” (TC, p.79).

However it is an off-the-cuff remark that most upsets Caroline, and which illustrates the paucity of vision the poets possess. The lady poet observes that the Baron “[g]oes in for the Black Mass. He’s a Satanist. Probably that’s why Eleanor left him. She’s so awfully bourgeois” (TC, p.80). For Caroline, ‘[t]hat word ‘bourgeois’ had a dispiriting effect on her evening – it was part of the dreary imprecise language of this half-world she had left behind her more than two years since’ (TC, p.80). Worse than the self-obsession, the emphasis on image over content, the misinformation, or the reliance on psychiatry, is the careless use of language – perhaps not surprising amongst a cadre of gossip-mongers – the very thing a poet should not be found guilty of. This is Spark’s first display of piercing antipathy towards artistic types, an attitude that will repeatedly resurface throughout her fiction in characters such as these pub poets, Hector Bartlett, the ‘*pisseur de copie*’³⁹ in *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988), and continuing until her final novel *The Finishing School* (2004).⁴⁰

Spark seems to emphasise here that the Romantic conception of the poet either no longer applies, it never did, or it has long since vanished. These poets are the antithesis of the blueprint outlined by Wordsworth in the ‘Preface to the Lyrical Ballads’ (1802), where

³⁹ Muriel Spark, *A Far Cry from Kensington* (London: Penguin, 1989), p.45. First published by Constable and Company in 1988.

⁴⁰ Rowland Mahler and Chris Wiley are both reminiscent of the poets in this episode.

‘[p]oems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply’.⁴¹ Long and deep thought are not the preserve of the poets in *The Comforters*, and Baron Stock puts paid to any notion that the poet is striving for any ‘higher truth’ when he says that ““my informants always exaggerate. They are poets on the whole or professional liars of some sort, and so one has to make allowances”” (*TC*, p.126).⁴² The Baron is, of course, a gossip and a fraud. For all of his claims to knowledge as a result of his fascination with ““inter-esting black arts”” (*TC*, p.156) and esoteric reading, the Baron’s visionary perception leads him to the higher truth that Mervyn Hogarth is a dog because ““[i]t encircled me three times, Caroline”” (*TC*, p.165). Mervyn as we have seen, has no vision (for art), and this is comically and eerily combined with Mrs Hogg’s lack of substance in the scene where he struggles to see her: ‘Mervyn, though he looked straight at her, could not see her accurately’ (*TC*, p.141). This is a literal rendering of his lack of vision, and a foreshadowing of her full disappearing act later, itself a premonition of her death where ‘her body was never recovered’ (*TC*, p.200). The conclusion to be drawn from *The Comforters* is that the artist exists in a petty, duplicitous, craven present, with art often providing the materials for blackmail and other such evils. There is none of Stannard’s ‘visionary perception’ here, only numerous traces of the ‘insanity’ that allegedly precipitates it.⁴³

For Peter Kemp, Spark’s writing is concerned with unity. This is not, however, unity in the strictly Romantic sense as has been discussed – although there is a strong connection here to be investigated – but the unifying possibilities found in her religious beliefs. Kemp states that Spark’s fiction exhibits the following: ‘[a]n artistic dislike of waste, the redundant, the inaccurate, a religious striving after harmony and integration:

⁴¹ Wordsworth (2000), p.598.

⁴² Stannard (2009), p.446.

⁴³ Stannard (2009), p.446.

these dictate both what is in the fiction and the shape it takes'.⁴⁴ Spark has also talked about the direct effect her conversion to Catholicism had on her career as a writer. She states that she 'had entered the Roman Catholic Church – an important step for me, because from that time I began to see life as a whole rather than as a series of disconnected happenings'.⁴⁵ As well as enabling her to conceive of the unity of experience – the 'harmony and integration'⁴⁶ that Kemp mentions – it also had what seems to be a contradictory effect:

I take this attitude to Catholicism because it's really a Christian thing to me conducive to individuality, to finding one's own individual personal point of view. I find I speak far more with my own voice as a Catholic and I think I could prove it with my stuff. Nobody can deny I speak with my own voice as a writer now, whereas before my conversion I couldn't do it because I was never sure what I was, the ideas teemed but I couldn't sort them out, I was talking and writing with other people's voices all the time. But not any longer. This is the effect of becoming a Christian [...] the Catholic Faith really has enormous scope.⁴⁷

What Spark outlines here is the way in which her belief enabled her to find a coherent artistic vision by locating her 'individual personal point of view'.⁴⁸ To be able to speak with a recognisable 'voice as a writer' requires that voice to be identifiable, coherent, and unified.⁴⁹ What is notable is that before her conversion, Spark says that 'the ideas teemed but I couldn't sort them out, I was talking and writing with other people's voices all the time'.⁵⁰ There are obvious parallels here between Spark and Caroline, given the latter's experiences in *The Comforters* with strange disembodied voices that require being brought under control.⁵¹ However, the danger here is making a direct correlation between author and character, and misreading the religious possibilities of the narrative in much the same way that Caroline's madness – also with its autobiographic source in Spark's experience – permits. This would be a mistake. Nevertheless, Spark may have taken her own notion of

⁴⁴ Peter Kemp, *Muriel Spark* (London: Elek Books Limited, 1974), p.158.

⁴⁵ Spark (2014)a, p.75.

⁴⁶ Kemp (1974), p.158.

⁴⁷ Muriel Spark, 'My Conversion', in Joseph Hynes ed., *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (Oxford: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992), pp.24-8 (pp.26-7). Subsequent references will be dated '(1992)b'.

⁴⁸ Spark (1992)b, p.26.

⁴⁹ Spark (1992)b, p.26.

⁵⁰ Spark (1992)b, p.26.

⁵¹ As there are with Barbara Vaughan in *The Mandelbaum Gate*, Fleur Talbot in *Loitering with Intent*, Nancy Hawkins in *A Far Cry from Kensington*, and, to a lesser extent, January Marlow in *Robinson*.

‘writing with other people’s voices’ as a way to investigate the novel form, and experiment with finding her own fictional voice.⁵² As with Caroline Rose, Spark appears to be striving for a way to combine the seemingly disparate notions of individuality and a unified conception of ‘life as a whole’, and for her, Catholicism allows her to coalesce individuality and belief into a unified entity.⁵³

Ironically it is the subject of individuality within the Catholic context which alerts Caroline to the difficulty of unifying matter and spirit. A recent convert to Catholicism, Caroline has taken a short break to The Pilgrim Centre of St Philumena in Liverpool. There she encounters Mrs Hogg, who, according to Laurence, ‘suffers from chronic righteousness, exerts a sort of moral blackmail’ (*TC*, p.26). This is fully in evidence when she has the following encounter with Caroline:

‘I know your type,’ Mrs Hogg said, ‘I got your type the first evening you came. There’s a lot of the Protestant about you still. You’ll have to get rid of it. You’re the sort that doesn’t mix. Catholics are very good mixers. Why won’t you talk about your conversion? Conversion’s a wonderful thing. It’s not *Catholic* not to talk about it’. (*TC*, p.32)

Ironically Mrs Hogg is partially correct; Caroline retains a strong sense of individuality, although whether this is Protestant in origin is not clear.⁵⁴ This is evidence of what Chikako Sawada identifies, whereby ‘in her fiction, Spark sometimes lets pseudo-artists or even con-men appropriate her words and ideas’.⁵⁵ For Caroline, conversion is an individual, personal process, and her ‘retreat’ is not an occasion for group therapy or the Catholic equivalent of a visit to the psychiatrist. For Mrs Hogg, Catholicism is enmeshed in her

⁵² Spark (1992)b, p.26.

⁵³ Spark (2014)a, p.75.

⁵⁴ Willy Maley says of Spark that ‘at times to hear her talk is to detect an underlying Protestant individualism’ (Willy Maley, *Muriel Spark for Starters* (Edinburgh: Capercaillie Books Limited, 2008), p.27). Spark discusses this in an interview with Robert E. Hosmer Jr.: ‘I see that the Church, of course, has changed, the Catholic Church, and I think for the better. I think it’s better that more freedom should be given to the individual conscience’. (Spark in Robert E. Hosmer Jr, “‘Fascinated by Suspense’: An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark, in *Hidden Possibilities: Essays in Honor of Muriel Spark*, ed. by Robert E. Hosmer Jr. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), pp. 227-255, (p.230)). It should be re-emphasised that these comments relate to Spark’s beliefs, not those of Caroline.

⁵⁵ Chikako Sawada, ‘Review of *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, by Martin Stannard’, in *Studies in English Literature*, No. 52 (Tokyo: The English Literary Society of Japan, 2011), pp.142-149 (p.146).

public persona, and she performs adherence to her faith as though on stage, in stark contrast to Caroline's private and introverted approach. Indeed, this exchange anticipates Mrs Hogg's vanishing later in the novel, where her performative traits indicate a lack of interiority, to the extent that she vanishes on account of having "no private life whatsoever" (*TC*, p.186).

Caroline recognises that part of the problem is semantic, that 'the popular meaning of "retreat" in religious circles was an organized affair, not a private retiring from customary activities, so as to possess one's soul in peace' (*TC*, p.32). Caroline attempts to make clear her reasons for visiting St Philumena's, saying "I've retreated from London, and now I'm here for rest and quiet" (*TC*, p.32), but Mrs Hogg remains unsatisfied, condescendingly telling Caroline "[y]ou haven't really got the hang of the Catholic Faith" (*TC*, p.35). Rather than taking this as the insult it is intended to be, one suspects that Caroline would prefer to remain in an awkward relationship with Catholics, if not Catholicism. Such an affiliation would entail that she retains a sense of individuality within the body of the Church, and on the evidence the novel provides, allow her to unify her fractured psyche by paradoxically rejecting any unification with the brand of Catholicism as embodied by Mrs Hogg.

By the close of the novel Caroline has ostensibly appeased the 'Typing Ghost' (*TC*, p.161) through the tactic of imposing her self-will against that of the spectral author. Her transition from writer of criticism to creator of fiction appears to have played an important part in facilitating the reunification of her fractured psyche. In doing so, she problematizes Martin Stannard's position that 'the 'insanity' of visionary perception locates a higher truth than the sanity of rationalism'.⁵⁶ Indeed, it is only when Caroline's sanity is restored that she feels able to fully engage her creative bent. Brian Cheyette's remark that '[w]riting and madness are [...] intimately related in the book', is true in the literal sense, with Caroline writing her study of modern fiction whilst admitting to Laurence that "[f]rom your point

⁵⁶ Stannard (2009), p.446.

of view [...] I am out of my senses. It would be a human indignity to deny it” (*TC*, p.96). Cheyette’s remark is also pertinent to the egotistical posturing of the pub poets, a collection of charlatans who display an abundance of madness but no perceptible writing abilities.⁵⁷ Such ostentatiously self-aware ‘pseudo-artists [and] con-men’, such as Mervyn Hogarth, Baron Stock, and these bar-room bards, are manifestations of fraudulent impostors deprived of vision.⁵⁸ Rather it is Louisa Jepp, the diamond-smuggling grandmother, who displays the Romantic imagination in action through her ability to envisage and implement the totality of her criminal vision. While she may resent Mervyn Hogarth for being correct, Louisa does indeed exhibit “the instinct for unity, for coordinating the inconsistent elements of experience” (*TC*, p.22) that are the hallmarks of Coleridge’s Romantic imagination in practice. Yet Louisa deals with matter, not artistic vision or spirit, and she has the vision to comprehend the expediency of Hogarth’s lack of talent, and to utilise it to maximum effect by employing the material solution his sculptures provide.

Caroline regains her mental health contemporaneously with her conversion to Catholicism, so in this respect she appears to illustrate Spark’s ‘religious vision of coherence’.⁵⁹ However, we should be wary of oversimplifying this configuration, as her religious views encompass a number of contradictory elements. She notes that “we don’t know all the possibilities of the natural order” (*TC*, p.64), and in so saying, enables her religious vision to encompass both spirit and matter, where ‘reality includes the divine and the supernatural’.⁶⁰ This is less a position of unity than an acceptance of what Helen Cixous identifies in Spark’s fiction as ‘the irreparable duplicity of the universe, where ordinary things coexist with supernatural ones in hideous harmony’.⁶¹ In this respect Caroline’s

⁵⁷ Cheyette (2000), p.22.

⁵⁸ Sawada (2011), p.146.

⁵⁹ Whittaker (1982), p.17.

⁶⁰ Whittaker (1982), p.17.

⁶¹ Hélèn Cixous, ‘Grimacing Catholicism: Muriel Spark’s Macabre Farce and Muriel Spark’s Latest Novel: *The Public Image*’, in *Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction*, ed. by Martin McQuillan (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2002), pp.204-209 (p.205).

new-found faith and sanity resemble the ‘balance [...] of opposite or discordant qualities’ as identified by Coleridge, albeit not ‘the reconciliation’.⁶² There is no doubt that Caroline’s recovery is also enabled by her move towards fictionalising her experiences, a move which corresponds with Coleridge’s position whereby art takes the disparate elements of experience, and ‘stamps them into unity’, albeit a unity of the fictional, creative kind.⁶³

It is therefore possible to posit that the results are equivocal with relation to Spark’s use of the materials and strategies of Romanticism. The ‘‘insanity’ of visionary perception’ closely associated with Romanticism is rejected outright,⁶⁴ and in correspondence with Cixous’ comments above, what Caroline achieves is not unity but an acceptance of the coexistence of disparities.⁶⁵ Barbara Vaughan faces a similar dilemma in *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965); the struggle to find coherence or unity where none seems possible. Like Caroline Rose, Barbara will endeavour to find a way to assuage the disparate elements of her life into something resembling coherence, and the next chapter will examine whether or not this is achieved.

⁶² Coleridge in Hill (1983), p.39.

⁶³ Coleridge in Ellman and Feidelson (1965), p.43.

⁶⁴ Stannard (2009), p.446.

⁶⁵ Whittaker (1982), p.17.

Chapter 2: Unified under God: Misadventure in *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965)

As Spark's most extensive foray into the realm of realist narrative and characterisation, with the combination of pilgrimage narrative and thriller, *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965) is often regarded as something of an oddity; paradoxically a stylistically experimental retreat from surrealist brevity to realist expanse. Yet a brief taxonomy of the novel's themes and techniques reveal a broad correspondence with her other works. These include a heroine moulded from the autobiographical, espionage, spying, attempted blackmail, deceit, hyphenated identity, the use of prolepsis, and the questioning of faith, all set against a backdrop of political, cultural and religious conflict, alongside questions of textual and spiritual authority. These are all concerns articulated in a number of Spark's other novels and short stories. Why, then, is *The Mandelbaum Gate* often regarded as an aberration in Spark's oeuvre? It will be my contention in this chapter that the novel is in fact central to an understanding of the on-going concerns voiced throughout her work, and while it departs from many of her stylistic and structural tendencies in terms of narrative tone, voice and scope, the material negotiated is of the same substance as that found in much of her work, and crucial to an understanding of it.

Subsequently, the objectives of this chapter are to illuminate the ways in which specific aspects of the teachings of John Henry Newman coalesce with areas of Romantic thought, as evident in both the formal and philosophical elements of the novel. This will be achieved with reference to the purported unifying capacity of the Romantic imagination – what might be termed the Coleridgean model, as identified in the previous chapter – alongside Newman's belief in the unifying capacity of the Catholic faith. In particular, Newman's theology allows for the 'Private Judgement' of the individual conscience; he sees the 'Catholic Christendom [as] no simple exhibition of religious absolutism, but [...] a continuous picture of Authority and Private Judgement alternatively advancing and

retreating as the ebb and flow of the tide'.¹ It is Newman's insistence on the role of the individual within the broader structure of the Church, that corresponds with Barbara Vaughan in *The Mandelbaum Gate*, and which has much in common with Romanticism's emphasis on the individual and on the inner experience of the self. The unification or coherence of such opposing positions is discussed with reference to Newman's oppositional theology, and in relation to Coleridge's assertion that 'Unity is manifested by Opposites. But it is equally true, that all true Opposites tend to Unity'.²

Spark's formal debt to Newman will be considered through analysis of the scarlet fever plot line, with Barbara's contraction of the illness indicative of intertextual borrowing from Newman throughout the novel. I will suggest that Spark draws directly upon incidents from Newman's life, and that these can be considered within the trajectories of Romantic travel writing, and specifically in relation to what Carl Thompson identifies as the providential narratives and '*misadventures*' of the '*suffering traveller*' genre.³ The events of Barbara's pilgrimage will be considered alongside Newman's experiences in order to illuminate the importance of 'self-will' in relation to the novel's wider theme of unity. This will enable a consideration of the way in which Spark's treatment of unity is both Romantic – or specifically Coleridgean – and at the same time religious – specifically Newmanesque – and that the proximity of Romanticism and religion can be understood as poetic in nature. In addition to these concerns, this chapter will consider the extensive use of symbolism in the novel, and suggest that the excess of allusive possibility acts metaphorically for the difficulty of finding unity within such a contested territory as the Holy Land.

¹ John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd, 1977), p.286. First published in 1864.

² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, quoted by Jeffrey Hipolito, 'Coleridge's Lectures 1818 – 1819: On the History of Philosophy', in Frederick Burwick, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 254-270 (p.265).

³ Carl Thompson, *The Suffering Traveller and the Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.2, p.4. Author's italics.

In one of the central passages of *The Mandelbaum Gate*, the narrator informs us that ‘[f]or the first time since her arrival in the Middle East she felt all of a piece; Gentile and Jewess, Vaughan and Aaronson [...] a private-judging Catholic, a shy adventuress’ (*MG*, p.164). This cataloguing of Barbara Vaughan’s new-found harmonious identity maps the territory of a number of the novel’s concerns, respectively; her hyphenated cultural and religious background, both strands of her family history, her desire to feel, think – and most importantly, act – as an individual within the authoritative structure and teaching of the Church, and her ability to resolve or unify seemingly disparate character traits.

In considering *The Mandelbaum Gate*, Ruth Whittaker outlines what she sees as Spark’s central concerns in the novel:

[t]he theme of *The Mandelbaum Gate*, as personified in Barbara and epitomised by the city of Jerusalem is division and the means of unity. Unlike the earlier novels, this one does not offer the Catholic faith as a painful but unqualified solution. Other factors force themselves into consideration, such as a Jewish heredity and culture, the demands of sexual love and marriage, and the vital need to become a wholly integrated person at ease with both inherited and adopted faiths.⁴

With this in mind, if we return to reconsider Barbara’s feeling ‘all of a piece’ (*MG*, p.164), it is notable that she articulates this through a number of paradoxes or dialectics: ‘Gentile and Jewess, Vaughan and Aaronson [...] a private-judging Catholic, a shy adventuress’ (*MG*, p.164). Rather than unifying these disparate elements by cancelling each component and replacing them with a single alternative, Barbara has reached a point where she has resolved to allow these disparities to coexist; they cohere in harmony or counterpoint, but they still exist as separate entities. No new Barbara is created; rather, she has come to terms with the existence in her character of opposing elements, and accepted that the balancing of such a ‘dialectic of opposites’ will suffice.⁵

We are reminded here of Coleridge’s configuration from chapter 1, whereby ‘the imagination [...] reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant

⁴ Whittaker (1982), p.70.

⁵ Prickett (1976), p.183. Prickett makes this point with regard to Newman, but it is applicable to Barbara.

qualities'.⁶ While Coleridge is discussing the role of the imagination within the specific context of poetry, elsewhere he articulates a similar impulse for unification on a much broader scale, similar to the way in which Barbara's 'reconciliation [of] discordant qualities' relates to the entirety of her life.⁷ Writing to his friend John Thelwall in 1797, Coleridge says that his mind 'feels as if it ached to behold & know something *great* – something *one & indivisible*'.⁸ In his *Biographia Literaria*, written from 1815 to 1817, he specifies how such a panoramic, unifying vision should be applied to the discipline of philosophy. He states:

[i]n order to obtain adequate notions of any truth, we must intellectually separate its distinguishable parts; and this is the technical process of philosophy. But, having so done, we must then restore them in our conceptions to the unity, in which they actually coexist; and this is the result of philosophy.⁹

This process of division, contemplation, and re-unification is consistent across Coleridge's interests, whether they are philosophy, poetry or religious belief. This impulse towards unity or wholeness through all of these disciplines is identified by Stephen Prickett as Coleridge's 'organically unified sensibility'.¹⁰ As posited in the introduction, the unification that Barbara experiences, and which resembles Coleridge's desire to know 'something *one & indivisible*', is shared by John Henry Newman.¹¹ Newman writes, 'I had a great impatience, whatever was the subject, of not bringing out the whole of it, as clearly as I could'.¹² Newman reiterates this belief in *The Idea of a University*, stating that

⁶ Coleridge in Hill (1983), p.39.

⁷ Coleridge in Hill (1983), p.39.

⁸ Coleridge, letter 'To John Thelwall, 14 Oct. 1797', quoted in M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971), p.267.

⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Biographia Literaria', in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works*, ed., H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.316. Coleridge's vision is reminiscent here of Kant, who states that 'without knowledge one never becomes a philosopher, but knowledge alone will never make the philosopher, unless there is added a purposeful joining of all cognitions and skills into unity, and an insight into their agreement with the highest ends of human reason' (Immanuel Kant, quoted in Douglas Burnham, *An Introduction to Kant's Critique of Judgement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p.1.

¹⁰ Prickett (1976), p.4.

¹¹ Coleridge in Abrams (1971), p.267.

¹² Newman (1977), p.178.

all knowledge is a whole and the separate sciences part of one..... all branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being the great Creator and His work. Hence it is that all sciences complete, correct and balance each other.¹³

It is noticeable how similar Newman's vision is to that of Coleridge. He states that within the wider whole of knowledge there exists 'separate sciences', which must be integrated through a process of corrections and balances.¹⁴ Likewise, Coleridge talks of the 'technical process of philosophy' whereby we 'must intellectually separate its distinguishable parts' before restoring them 'to the unity, in which they actually coexist'.¹⁵ While Newman is ultimately talking about learning within the context of faith, and Coleridge about philosophical truth, Coleridge's take on faith again shows a tendency to unification which in return resembles that of Newman. Coleridge states that faith is 'an energy, and, inasmuch as it relates to the whole of man, it must be exerted in each and all of his constituents, or incidents and tendencies; – it must be total, not a partial.....energy'.¹⁶ With this in mind, Barbara's dialectic understanding of her disparate identities and concerns, and her capacity to accept and assuage these can be seen within the shared unifying urges of both the Romantic imagination as outlined by Coleridge, and in Newman's assertion that 'all knowledge is a whole', given that the subject of all knowledge is 'the great Creator and His work'.¹⁷ Put another way, Spark's unification of Barbara's disparities can be termed as both Coleridgean and Newmanesque in its method; it is a confluence of Coleridge's unifying Romantic imagination and Newman's all-encompassing Catholic faith. Indeed, the influence of both of these urges can be seen in a number of other ways throughout the novel, as will be seen.

Early in the novel, the narrator outlines elements of Barbara Vaughan's character that define her religious beliefs, her method of thinking, and the resulting effects:

¹³ Newman quoted in Tim Quinlan, 'Coleridge and Newman: A Shared Vision', in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 85, No. 339 (Autumn, 1996), pp.222-230, (p.225).

¹⁴ Newman in Quinlan (1996), p.225.

¹⁵ Coleridge (2000), p.316.

¹⁶ Coleridge in Quinlan (1996), p.227.

¹⁷ Newman in Quinlan (1996), p.225.

[b]y constitution of mind she was inclined to think of ‘a Catholic point of view’ to which not all facts were relevant [...] This did not mean that she had failed to grasp the Christian religion with a total sense of its universal application [...] All it meant was that her habits of mind were inadequate to cope with the whole of her experience, and thus Barbara Vaughan was in a state of conflict, like practically everyone else, in some mode or another. (*MG*, p.23)

This passage shows the theme of ‘division and the means of unity’ in the context of Barbara’s ‘habits of mind’ (*MG*, p.23), in contrast to the background of the on-going conflict being played out in the wider region.¹⁸ What is most notable here is the way in which Barbara applies ‘a Catholic point of view’ (*MG*, p.23) in order to avoid those elements of her experience which differentiate from, or lie outwith, her purview. This is evident when Saul Ephraim attempts to convince her come to the Eichmann trial, which will alter Barbara’s pilgrimage plans. She rejects Saul’s request saying, “‘I’ve got a tidy mind [...] I only want to cover a specific ground without unnecessary diversions’” (*MG*, p.175). For Barbara then, her state of mind may be ‘inadequate to cope with the whole of her experience’ (*MG*, p.23), but it allows her to retain an element of focus and control in an environment where she is constantly being advised on what, and what *not* to do.

This ‘tidy mind’ is also evident in Barbara’s belief in the harmony of motives. This becomes evident as Barbara considers the disapproving attitudes of her friend and former colleague Ricky towards her pilgrimage, her plans to marry Harry Clegg, and her religious beliefs: ‘Ricky was all for doing the right thing for the right reason; she was fierce-principled about motives’ (*MG*, p.161). For Barbara, this position is naively simplistic; it refuses to acknowledge the chaotic nature of existence, a chaos that is, however, acknowledged in Catholicism’s philosophical writings:

[t]o Barbara, one of the first attractions of her religion’s moral philosophy had been its recognition of the helpless complexity of motives that prompted an action, and its consequent emphasis on actual words, thoughts and deeds; there was seldom one motive only in the grown person; the main thing was that motives should harmonize. (*MG*, p161)

¹⁸ Whittaker (1982), p.70.

This is the crucial difference between Barbara and Ricky; ‘Ricky did not understand harmony as an ideal in this sense’ (*MG*, p.161). Subsequently, motive and action become dissociated, and this in turn means that Ricky assumes that ‘it was both right that people should tear themselves to bits about their motives and possible for them to make up their minds what their motives were’ (*MG*, p.161). Barbara’s belief is based upon and supported by an understanding of the moral complexities and multifarious ethical considerations required in decision making, compounded by a need for these multiple motivations to be in harmony.

Barbara’s attitude is again closely reminiscent of Newman’s. When talking about the believer’s attempt to arrive at a position of belief or assent, Newman states that such assent can be reached as ‘the result of converging probabilities’, leading in turn to ‘a cumulative proof’.¹⁹ While this assertion is stated with regard to the broader nature of an assertion of faith, Barbara’s harmonizing motives are the result of the same process applied to the specific problem, but within the wider context of the faith she shares with Newman. For Tim Quinlan, Newman’s notion of assent is encapsulated in the concept of the

‘illative sense’. Newman coined this expression to describe the act of assent in the mind which comes about from a diverse body of grounds acting as a whole, even though the mind may not be aware of all the grounds treated as separate arguments.²⁰

Here again we see the similarity between Newman’s approach to assent, and Barbara’s understanding of the need for motives to harmonize. Indeed, Quinlan’s comment that ‘the mind may not be aware of all the grounds treated’ is consistent with Barbara’s statement, whereby “‘I’ve got a tidy mind [...] I only want to cover a specific ground without unnecessary diversions’” (*MG*, p.175).²¹

¹⁹ John Henry Newman, quoted in Ian Ker, *Healing the Wound of Humanity: The Spirituality of John Henry Newman* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1993), p.5.

²⁰ Quinlan (1996), p.228.

²¹ Quinlan (1996), p.228.

Spark has made no secret of the influence of Newman on her life and subsequently her writing, and this was clearly evident to those close to her. Here, her former partner (and co-author of some of her criticism) Derek Stanford states that

Cardinal Newman once remarked that a Christian picture of the universe is almost necessarily a poetic one, and this notion so took Miss Spark's fancy that she once copied out his words in a book of essays on him which she presented to me.²²

This poetic conception of the universe, while Christian in Stanford's formulation, shares a number of features with the Coleridgean, Romantic, unifying urge. As noted above, both Coleridge and Newman share a unifying vision; indeed Stanford's view highlights the proximity of the Romantic and the Catholic as expressed by Newman. This is emphasised by Stephen Prickett, who notes that '[t]he influence of Wordsworth and Coleridge on their successors is neither simply theological, nor simply aesthetic, but in their sense of the word, 'poetic' – in other words, an indivisible union of the two'.²³ So Newman's 'Christian picture of the universe is almost necessarily a poetic one' because it refuses to comprehend religious belief as anything other than unified.²⁴ As Prickett states:

[t]he essence of the Wordsworth / Coleridge position (which Newman was to develop so brilliantly in the *Grammar of Assent*) was that religious experience, like sense experience, was neither 'internal' (subjective) nor 'external' (objective) but a balance or dialectic between the two. For them, poetry brought together the 'two worlds' in a bond that, like sense perception, was indivisible.²⁵

Unity therefore becomes an aesthetic (or poetic) and religious matter; just as religion becomes a poetic and unifying matter. As with Wordsworth and Coleridge, the idea of dividing religion from the poetic – or the aesthetic – or the internal from the external, seems just as absurd in relation to Newman as it is to Coleridge or Wordsworth. This is a correlation that Prickett has commented on, noting that '[a]nyone who has read both literary criticism and theology in the Victorian period soon comes to realise how deeply the

²² Stanford, quoted in Whittaker (1982), p.44.

²³ Prickett (1976), p.6.

²⁴ Stanford in Whittaker (1982), p.44.

²⁵ Prickett (1976), p.5.

two are intertwined'.²⁶ Indeed Stanford's observation on Newman correlates with that of Prickett, who states that '[t]he influence of Wordsworth and Coleridge on their successors is neither simply theological, nor simply aesthetic, but in their sense of the word, 'poetic' – in other words, an indivisible union of the two'.²⁷ It is the nature of this indivisibility which accords with Newman's spiritual vision, expressed by Spark through Barbara's observation that '[e]ither the whole of life is unified under God or everything falls apart' (*MG*, p.283). Barbara's unification can therefore be understood as a coalescing of the Romantic and the Catholic; the Coleridgean and the Newmanesque.

So if such a Romantic, poetic unity exists as the unification of disparities such as the theological and the aesthetic, then it is possible to read Barbara Vaughan's feeling 'all of a piece; Gentile and Jewess, Vaughan and Aaronson [...] a private-judging Catholic, a shy adventuress' as poetic in just this way (*MG*, p.164). In this respect Barbara resembles a number of other Romantic figures that Spark considers in *Child of Light*, her study of Mary Shelley. The first is Percy Shelley, who, writing to his friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg, says 'I never before felt the integrity of my nature [...] and learned to consider myself as an whole accurately united – rather than as an assemblage of inconsistent and discordant positions'.²⁸ The unification of Shelley's nature in this instance is not brought about through the creative act of writing, but as a result of his increasing affection for Mary Godwin, soon to become his second wife. Martin Stannard, commenting on the above letter, also notes that '[i]n describing the Godwin / Shelley entourage [...] Muriel offers an oblique reflection of the landscape of her own mind. Shelley writes to Mary much as Muriel had to Stanford'.²⁹ Stannard here compares Mary Shelley to Spark, but the resemblance also holds true for Barbara Vaughan, which is unsurprising given the autobiographic material from which Spark moulds her. Stannard, quoting Spark, notes that

²⁶ Prickett (1976), p.7.

²⁷ Prickett (1976), p.6.

²⁸ Shelley is quoted in Muriel Spark, *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (Hadleigh: Tower Bridge, 1951), p.32.

²⁹ Stannard (2009), p.117.

‘[i]n Mary, “Shelley found for the first time combined erotic and intellectual elements”, just as Stanford had discovered this in Muriel.³⁰ Mary, she insists, “was a woman with a mind”’.³¹ Again we see the autobiographical elements of Spark that have gone into the construction of Barbara. One of her central dilemmas in the novel is to resolve her disparate erotic and religious concerns, just as Stannard notes a similar coexistence in Mary Shelley and Spark herself.

For Barbara, this sense of unity, of feeling ‘all of a piece’ (*MG*, p.164), has its analogue in her developing understanding of the world beyond her own immediate experience. Suzi Ramdez quizzes Barbara on how she can unify her religious beliefs with her attitude towards her relationship with Harry Clegg. She asks Barbara, “[a]re you sincere in these devotions, when you go to them talking and laughing with me so much about love–affairs and men and sex?” (*MG*, p.283). Barbara’s reply deals with the personal issue, but has its roots in her wider and unifying world–view. She says:

either religious faith penetrates everything in life or it doesn’t. There are some experiences that seem to make nonsense of all separations of sacred from profane – they seem childish. Either the whole of life is unified under God or everything falls apart. (*MG*, p.283)

This attempt to unify all experience – and not just her own subjective experience – has the echo of the Romantic unifying vision as rendered by Newman and Coleridge, and it is evidence of Barbara’s new understanding as it develops through the novel. Alan Bold summarises this development, noting that ‘Barbara’s pilgrimage has given her an insight into herself as a woman with both physical needs and metaphysical longings. She is, finally, able to face facts as well as to acknowledge that the ideals of her faith are flexible’.³² Barbara is able to achieve this as a result of balancing her faith with reason, of understanding that “the whole of life is unified under God” (*MG*, p.283).

³⁰ Stannard (2009), p.117.

³¹ Stannard (2009), p.117.

³² Alan Bold, *Muriel Spark* (London: Methuen, 1986), p.85.

As well as the influence of Newman on her outlook, it is also brought about in part from her experiences while in the Holy Land. Following her statement to Suzi that “‘life is unified under God or everything falls apart’” (*MG*, p.283), the narrator reveals that Barbara ‘was thinking of the Eichmann trial, and was aware that there were other events too, which had rolled away the stone that revealed an empty hole in the earth, that led to a bottomless pit’ (*MG*, p.283). Witnessing the Eichmann trial and hearing the catalogue of horrors has a direct effect on Barbara’s own life. Throughout the novel Barbara wavers over her desire to be married to her boyfriend Harry Clegg, who, having been married previously, cannot be married within the Church. For Barbara, “[t]he only point at issue is whether we can get married by the Church or not, that’s to say, whether I’m going to have peace of mind for the rest of my life or not” (*MG*, p.181). Previously she has been recalcitrant on the subject, and her cousin says:

‘You really must stop messing the poor fellow about, you know, Barbara. If you want to marry him, marry him. He’s free and you’re free to be married according to the laws of the land.’

‘You know that to me marriage is a sacrament. If I marry outside the Church I’ll have to remain outside the Church. That’s going to be difficult for me. Year after year – it will be difficult’. (*MG*, pp.172-3)

However, following the Eichmann trial and the revealing of the ‘bottomless pit’ of humanity, the effect is such that ‘people drew back quickly and looked elsewhere for reality, and found it, and made decisions, in the way that she had decided to get married anyway’ (*MG*, p.283). The sheer horror of the trial seems to provoke the response in Barbara that she *can* live outwith the Church; that being with Harry – whatever the ruling of the Church’s Ecclesiastic Court – is preferable to the alternative. It proves to be a moot point however, as Ricky intervenes and in attempting to put a stop to the marriage actually makes it possible within the Church. Whether this is poetic justice or divine providence is left unsaid.

During her pilgrimage, Suzi Ramdez asks Barbara

‘Did you convert to be a Catholic on account of a feeling?’ Suzi said.
 ‘No, I took a long time to make up my mind’. (*MG*, p.213)

Throughout the novel emphasis is placed on Barbara’s conversion to Catholicism being the result of a rational, intellectual process, and not – as Suzi’s question implies – an emotional or faith alone based decision. Again we are faced with the drive towards religious unity or coherence. The balancing of the intellect with faith is the desired state of co-existence which Barbara eventually arrives at, and again this contains echoes of Newman. He states: ‘I do not want to be converted by a smart syllogism; if I am asked to convert others by it, I say plainly I do not care to overcome their reason without touching their hearts’.³³ Newman also states this configuration in reverse, balancing reason and faith in so doing: ‘I wish the intellect to range with the utmost freedom, and religion to enjoy an equal freedom’.³⁴ For Newman then, the coexistence of faith alongside reason is a requirement of the true believer, of the unified, Romantic sensibility of existing as Barbara comes to do so; ‘all of a piece [...] a private-judging Catholic’ (*MG*, p.164), living life ‘unified under God’ (*MG*, p.283).

In the search for this unity, or this spiritual truth, the figure of St Helena plays a central role. In his 1986 monograph *Muriel Spark*, Alan Bold says of Barbara’s affliction with scarlet fever that the ‘disease has been traced to St Helena’s Convent, where Barbara stayed, but the symbolic tone of the narrative suggests that her illness is psychosomatic’.³⁵ There is plenty of scope to read Barbara’s illness as such, given that she is half-Jewish and is entering Jordanian territory. Her fever could be a symbolic physical manifestation of the danger and subsequent psychological stresses brought on by her pilgrimage, however, the narrative refutes this. We are told that ‘[s]he was sure there was a certain amount of physical risk in her venture into Jordan. But try as she might, she did not care’ (*MG*,

³³ Newman quoted in Prickett (1976), p.184.

³⁴ Newman in Roderick Strange, *John Henry Newman: A Mind Alive* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2009), p.86.

³⁵ Bold (1986), p.84.

p.163). She is entirely unfazed by the danger she has been in, indeed '[s]he thought, it was really very funny, that escape from the convent' (*MG*, p.164). This is despite her being warned at numerous points about such an undertaking, to the extent that even her pragmatic boyfriend, the archaeologist Harry Clegg 'considered it risky for her to travel into Jordan on account of her Jewish blood' (*MG*, p.169).

Bold uses other examples of Sparkian symbolism to justify his argument; however, he overlooks the significance of Barbara contracting the illness at the convent of St Helena. On Barbara's subsequent visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, we are told that 'this was St Helena's Chapel, where the true Cross had been found in the fourth century' (*MG*, p.202). As the finder of the real Cross of the Crucifixion, St Helena symbolises truth – and the discovery of it – and the site of Barbara contracting the illness indicates the novel's turn towards truth and resolution. However, while this is the case on a narrative level, the symbolism invoked by the figure of Helena and the use of symbolic metaphor throughout the novel is unexpected and idiosyncratic. The figure of St Helena is introduced early in the novel:

'Where are you staying?' Joanna said.
 [...]
 'The guest-house at St Helena's Convent. It's quite comfortable.'
 'You'll be safe there,' Joanna said.
 'Oh goodness, yes. I'm the safe type'. (*MG*, p.75)

As the plot proceeds, the reader will become aware of the inaccuracy of this conversation. Barbara will prove herself to be far from "the safe type" (*MG*, p.75); indeed she seems intent on placing herself and others in danger at numerous points. Joanna's comment on the safety of St Helena's Convent also proves inaccurate given that it will require a swift night-time escape orchestrated by Freddy to extricate Barbara from the immediate danger of being captured there. It will also prove to be the site where Barbara contracts her scarlet fever, providing further evidence for the symbol of St Helena as a mystifying, contrary

figure; far from being associated with truth, she seems closer to a symbol for danger and disease.³⁶

As she continues on her pilgrimage, Barbara arrives at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with Freddy and Suzi. There an English priest gives a sermon which is central to novel, in which he extols a number of points which help explain Spark's idiosyncratic use of the figure of St Helena. Unfortunately for Barbara, the scarlet fever she contracts at St Helena's Convent prevents her from hearing the very truth that Helena supposedly stands for. The priest, a Fr. Ballantyne, states that

‘most of the experts believe that this is the site of Calvary [...] Whether true or not, our religion does not depend on it [...] If you are looking for physical exactitude in Jerusalem it is a good quest, but it belongs to archaeology, not faith’. (*MG*, p.198)

Our knowledge that Harry Clegg is an archaeologist and St Helena is the archaeological discoverer of the true cross illuminates the irony in the priest's words, an irony which is intensified given that they are spoken at the possible site of Calvary. The implication is that the veneration of St Helena is inconsequential to Spark; whether the cross she discovered was the true cross or not is irrelevant. As the priest says: “our religion does not depend on it” (*MG*, p.198); all that matters is that Christ was crucified and rose again. That this is explored in a pilgrimage narrative is Sparkian irony at its keenest, summed up by Fr. Ballantyne who says

‘[t]he historical evidence of our faith is scattered about under the ground; nothing is neat. And what would be the point of our professing faith if it were? There's no need for faith if everything is plain to the eye’. (*MG*, p.199)

In an interview with Martin McQuillan in 2002, Spark outlines a similar position to that of Fr. Ballantyne, stating ‘I am a Catholic and I'm a believing Catholic. I do adhere to the

³⁶ There are a number of references to St Helena throughout Spark's fiction; Sandy Stranger takes on the title of Sister Helena following her conversion in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and there is also the character Helena Manders in *The Comforters*.

Catholic doctrines although not all the practices, the trimmings and all that'.³⁷ It may be considered irreverent, but Spark's words suggest that to credit St Helena with the discovery of the true cross is to place too great an emphasis on 'the trimmings' of Catholicism, and not the substance.³⁸ As Fr. Ballantyne says, "[d]oubt is the prerogative of the believer; the unbeliever cannot know doubt" (MG, p.199), and any subsequent doubt about St Helena's symbolic role is dispelled when the pilgrims move on to 'St Helena's chapel, where the true Cross had been found in the fourth century' (MG, p.202). It is here that Barbara feels physically at her worst. She is disguised as Suzi's mute Arab servant in order to escape the immediate danger, and to compound matters this is where she encounters Ricky, recently arrived from England on a personal crusade to prevent Barbara's marriage to Harry Clegg. The wearing of this disguise gives Barbara the distinction of having acted out participation in all three of the region's monotheistic traditions; she comes from Jewish blood, has converted to Christianity, and is now disguised as a Muslim.

Given that *The Mandelbaum Gate* is set in the Holy Land it comes as no surprise that it is laden with such symbolic and religious allusions. However, the novel is so saturated with symbols that either the inferred allusion contradicts what might be expected – as is the case with St Helena – or the allusions are so densely layered and convoluted that it is often difficult to infer any specific, coherent, or unified allegorical meaning within an abundance of possibilities.

For example, the house where Barbara recuperates following her contraction of scarlet fever; here the original symbolism is – literally – solid; made of stone and embedded into the design and structure of the building:

[t]he old foundations had probably been laid in the form of a cross by some Crusader mission or a later Christian community, and the house was no doubt built on the site of a church or a chapel within a larger place of worship. (MG, p.215)

³⁷ Spark in McQuillan (2002), p.217.

³⁸ Spark in McQuillan (2002), p.217.

So while the building itself is symbolic in its layout, it is the current ownership and use of the structure which builds upon the symbolic cross-shaped foundation of the house in a manner one might expect from the presence of the archaeology motif that runs through the novel.³⁹ Indeed, these meanings appear to be layered upon one another, just as many of the buildings in the Holy Land are built upon the foundations of previous structures.

The first possibility implied is that the Muslim faith has symbolically conquered the Christian faith within the boundaries of the former church. This conquest of Christianity by Islam is played out on the metaphoric level in both the relationship between Joe and Ricky, and in the building's aforementioned layered structure, and as such, it functions metonymically for the state of flux in the Holy Land, symbolising the territorial disputes and the ebb and flow of the region's disparate faiths.

The specific mention of the crusades also has a number of potential implied allusions. We are told that '[o]ne way and another the spirit of the Crusaders in their everyday aspect brooded over the house that night' (*MG*, p.246), and the subtle inference of 'one way and another' is reflected 'one way' in Ricky's crusade – in the contemporary meaning of a personal, passionate campaign of objection – to stop Barbara's marriage, 'and another' in the affair between Joe and Ricky. The affair (which begins on this night) and subsequent marriage symbolise a reversal of the original Crusaders' intentions to expel Islam from the Holy Land.⁴⁰ This conquest is also encapsulated in Joe's ownership of the former church, and in his use of the house as a brothel.⁴¹

It is important to note that these symbolic possibilities are not indicative of a wider attitude or position throughout the novel regarding the dominance or supremacy of one group – whether religious, gender-based, ethnic, social or political – over any other. They

³⁹ Archaeology as embodied in the investigation, uncovering and possible revealing of mysteries that connects the various plot strands. These include: the search for Nasser's Post Office, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Barbara's desire to be married within the Church, the subsequent digging into Harry's past, Barbara's own attempts to remain 'underground' when in danger, and Barbara's pilgrimage itself.

⁴⁰ In case the inference is not clear, Ricky approaches Suzi to ask for directions to 'The Crusaders' Inn' (*MG*, p.203). It is worth noting that Joe does not expel the Crusader, but rather he convinces her to convert to Islam. Subsequently the marriage of Ricky and Joe can be read less as a benign conquering or reversal of the Crusaders' imperative, and more as an act of unification.

⁴¹ The house is also Nasser's Post Office, the location of a number of leaks against the British.

relate only to the numerous potential allusions embodied within Joe Ramdez's house and the goings-on which occur there.

This metaphoric conquering of Christianity by Islam is treated by Spark with a comic touch. As Joe Ramdez seduces Miss Rickward, his language is entertainingly baroque, calling her “my fruitful vine, my pillar of cedar, golden minaret [...] My rose of Islam [...] Well of sweet waters!” (*MG*, pp.246-7). However, it is through the language of his daughter Suzi that Joe's seduction of Ricky is articulated as a conquest, albeit with comic undertones. Suzi states to Freddy the following morning ‘that her father had “unflowered and nearly killed” poor Miss Rickward [...] “I thought it was cats”’ (*MG*, p.260).⁴² It is worth noting that Joe's linguistic extravagance and Suzi's overstated claim that her father nearly killed Ricky, can be understood within the context of what Freddy notes as ‘the tendency to exaggerate [which] ran in the family’ (*MG*, p.65). He comes to this conclusion following a conversation with Abdul (Suzi's brother and Joe's son) who, while attempting to sell Freddy one of his father's insurance policies, ‘each time exaggerated the mild interest Freddy had expressed on the previous occasion’ (*MG*, p.65).⁴³ This tendency is also apparent when Abdul ‘depict[s] himself and his early life in romantically exaggerated scenes’ (*MG*, p.64), such as his affair at a young age with “a beautiful English schoolmistress” (*MG*, p.85), a claim which foreshadows his father's later affair and marriage to Miss Rickward.

As with Suzi's use of the euphemism ‘deflowered’, Abdul also employs imagery connecting flowers with sex, stating that “I planted Arab wild-flower seeds in her. She was my first woman” (*MG*, p.85). All of this presents the Ramdez family as having an awareness of the erotic; however, it is Barbara who attempts to resolve the apparent disparities of the erotic and the spiritual when she notes that “Jesus Christ was very sophisticated on the subject of sex. And didn't harp on it [...] There are more serious

⁴² This juxtaposition of comedy and violence is perhaps also a reflection of the realities of day-to-day life in the region.

⁴³ Joe Ramdez's life insurance scheme is a barely disguised front for blackmailing politicians and bureaucrats.

things in the world”” (*MG*, pp.262-3). Given the violent nature of the on-going conflict in the Holy Land, and the revisiting of the Holocaust through the Eichmann trial, this suggests that Spark’s use of floral imagery within a sexual context alludes not only towards conquest, but also to notions of rebirth, renewal, fertility, and growth, again illustrating the surfeit of symbolic possibilities. However, it is testament to Spark’s ability to deftly handle such topics that Joe’s brothel being situated in an old church seems less a cause for indignation than it is a depiction of the absurd reality of life in the region, and an illustration of the coexistence and proximity of the erotic and the spiritual.

As previously noted, Ruth Whittaker identifies the main theme of the novel as ‘division and the means of unity’, and these concerns are ‘personified in Barbara and epitomised by the city of Jerusalem’.⁴⁴ Barbara’s efforts to unify the erotic and the spiritual elements of her personality are understood by Whittaker as the attempt to balance ‘the demands of sexual love and marriage, and the vital need to become a wholly integrated person at ease with both inherited and adopted faiths’.⁴⁵ Indeed, an over-abundance of symbolic meaning suggests that resolution into a singularity is not possible, but rather an acceptance of the duality or multifaceted nature of life is more realistically attained. Whittaker’s position allows for the acceptance of coexistent disparate elements within ‘a wholly integrated person’, and this is illustrated in Barbara’s evolving understanding and acceptance of the dual nature of the erotic and the spiritual.⁴⁶ Indeed, she makes a direct connection between the erotic and her Jewish heritage, when the narrative reveals that in comparison to her cousin on her Anglican side,

[s]he had felt then, how much more of a sexual person she was than he. She could not remember when first she had associated her Jewishness with her sexual instincts and distinguished herself from her Gentile relatives by a half-guilty feeling that she was more afflicted by sex than they were [...] she felt more blessed by sex than they were, by virtue of her Jewish blood. (*MG*, p.43)

⁴⁴ Whittaker, (1982), p.70.

⁴⁵ Whittaker, (1982), p.70.

⁴⁶ Whittaker, (1982), p.70.

Here the contrary motion of many of the novel's themes is evident in the juxtaposition of 'afflicted' and 'blessed' (*MG*, p.43), identifying her erotic nature in dialectic terms; as both an ailment to be endured and a benefit to be celebrated. Nonetheless, her awareness of her erotic nature is understood as being connected with her spiritual side, or rather, elements of her ethno-religious side; the only problem is that having converted to Catholicism, the confluence of the sensual and spiritual must be reconsidered within the context of her new-found faith. She considers this while on Mount Tabor, but by the time she has suffered and begun to recover from her bout of scarlet fever, she recognises that 'her own recent experiences of sex [were] unselfconscious and so full of fun and therefore of peace' (*MG*, p.262). This attitude towards the erotic corresponds with the use of floral imagery as symbolic of growth, fertility, and beauty, and the new-found harmony she feels allows her to continue in her new faith without rejecting the sensual aspect of her nature.

This acceptance is perhaps due to what is identified as her late development. Just as Ricky is referred to in floral terms, evolving from an archetypal English schoolmistress and spinster to become Joe Ramdez's "rose of Islam" (*MG*, p.247), Barbara, we are told, is 'a pleasant English spinster' (*MG*, p.16) and '[a] trite late-flowering' (*MG*, p.43). Here we are returned again to floral imagery to illustrate aspects of the characters' personalities, however, throughout the novel references are made to actual flowers and particularly the process of transplanting seeds and flowers to a non-native environment. At the beginning of the novel Freddy notes the similarities of the flower types in Joanna Cartwright's garden in Jordan to those that grow at home, noting that they belonged 'to the same botanical tribes as the wild flowers of the English fields' (*MG*, p.51). The word 'tribes' personifies the flowers, and also alludes to the Biblical story of the twelve tribes of Israel. The similarity of the flowers in Joanna's garden to those found in England also functions as a metaphor for the centrality of the Holy Land to the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian faiths. Additionally, the concept of 'the same botanical tribes' (*MG*, p.51) also represents the phenomena of the Jewish diaspora, with Barbara embodying both the outward

dissemination of Judaism from the Holy Land, and the return of many Jews either as pilgrims or settlers following World War II and the Holocaust, ‘the war of 1948’ (*MG*, p.13), and the subsequent formation of the State of Israel. Through her Jewish lineage, Barbara represents this two-way movement of many of the Jewish ethno-religious group, with her hyphenated identity of ‘the Golders Green Jewishness of her mother’s relations and the rural Anglicanism of her father’s’ (*MG*, p.28), also embodying the metaphoric cross-pollination theme that recurs throughout.

This cross-pollination encapsulates the contrary motion seen in much of the novel’s symbolic imagery; in this case, Barbara is representative of the wild English flowers which can be traced back to the Holy Land, and her pilgrimage is therefore a homecoming of sorts, an idea emphasised by her symbolic planting of English seeds on Mount Carmel:

‘[t]o tell the truth, I smuggled a few *Anthyllis* seeds – that’s Lady’s Fingers – into Israel and scattered them on Mount Carmel on the sea verge [...] It was wildly against regulations, but I couldn’t resist it. I never can. It’s a habit’. (*MG*, p.77)

Here we see Barbara undertaking an act of self-will, defying authority in order to enact her sometime holiday tradition of transplanting seeds. The knowledge of her Jewish heritage, the role of the British government in the political process, and her attempts to unite the disparate elements of her life, give this particular act considerable symbolic weight. The notion of transplanting as symbolic of the attempt to unify is spelled out explicitly in a similar situation regarding Freddy’s second cousin who – like Barbara – transplants flowers from one territory to another: ‘[t]his virgin cousin had expressed the sentiment that when she scattered those flowers abroad in the fields and sidewalks of India, that she was doing something to unite East and West’ (*MG*, pp.54-5). Here again we see Spark using the same symbolic association – between the sexual and the floral – as that used by Suzi when speaking of her father and Miss Rickward, but the use of the term ‘virgin’ also has obvious religious connotations, as well as inferring innocence and purity. The desire for unification that Freddy notes in his cousin is similar to that motivating Barbara. However, Barbara’s

act of floral colonisation embodies acts of Empire-building and Crusader-like behaviour, and as such has symbolic implications not only of the wider context of political, religious and territorial conflict in the Holy Land, but for her own personal disparate elements. Her transplanting on Mount Carmel can therefore be understood as symbolising a return to her Jewish roots as enacted in the placing of English seeds into the soil of the newly formed State of Israel, which metaphorically symbolises a merging of her English and Jewish ancestry, and is an attempt to unify her Jewish religious heritage with her new-found Catholicism.

Barbara and Freddy's cousin are not the only characters who transplant flowers; Joanna Cartwright has sourced 'numerous wild flowers and herbs of the Holy Land that she picked up on her rambles', and transplanted them into her garden in Jordan (*MG*, p.51). Joanna's garden is well tended, illustrated by the young Arab who waters the plants with 'an air of special concentration, plainly having been instructed in the seriousness of the job' (*MG*, p.51). This is reiterated later in the novel by Barbara, who notes the same 'clump of wild flowers, carefully tended wild flowers, frequently watered wild flowers' (*MG*, p.184). The repetitive phrasing emphasises both the care taken in attending to the flowers, but also that they are wild and therefore not grown from the seeds, but rather uprooted from the soil from which they originated. Here again it is possible to read references to the Jewish diaspora and to the enforced resettlement of many Palestinian and Jordanian Arabs following the formation of the State of Israel. So Joanna creates a miniature floral version of the Holy Land in her garden, prudently attending to the plants which she 'had categorised [...] by their place of origin [...] Gethsemane, Mount of Olives, Valley of Jehosophat, Siloam, Jericho, Bethlehem' (*MG*, p.52).

It would be an almost insurmountable task to trace all of the Biblical allusions throughout the novel, but the correspondence between the use of 'origin' with regard to the plants, and the mention of Bethlehem suggest that Joanna's garden is an attempt to plot specific Biblical locations. This sense is further enhanced when a discussion regarding the

origin of the plant *Cotyledon* takes place.⁴⁷ While Barbara believes it to be pennywort, and English in origin, Joanna suggests that it is in fact indigenous to the Holy Land, and adds the comment that “I daresay the same plant has been growing there since the time of Christ” (*MG*, p.77). The plant therefore becomes a direct living link to the past, a symbol of the common geographic roots and historic lineage of the people of the Holy Land throughout history, and a symbol of the birth of Christ and the roots of Christianity given its place ‘in the clump marked Bethlehem’ (*MG*, p.77).⁴⁸ It becomes possible therefore to read a number of symbolic readings into Joanna’s garden; it could be a reflection of her own religious beliefs, or it could be a political metaphor for her attempt to reintegrate the fractured tribes and territories of the Holy Land back into unity by collecting plants from the contested regions and planting them side-by-side. Alternatively, Joanna could simply enjoy gardening. The saturation of symbolism in the novel is such that it renders almost all of the imagery in the narrative open to multiple metaphoric interpretations. However, the garden does appear to be important to Joanna, and the care given the flowers is not surprising given the danger in which Joanna places herself in order to acquire them. Joanna tells Freddy “I’m going out on one of my flower-hunts” (*MG*, p.291), and despite his plea to be careful, finds herself being shot at.

For Freddy, Joanna’s garden initially symbolises a connection back to England. As noted above, he focuses on the tribal similarity between the flowers in Joanna’s garden and those he remembers from home, and this triggers fond memories of his childhood. He says “I always feel this garden has such a delightful English atmosphere” (*MG*, p.66), however, realising he is offending Joe Ramdez with the colonial implications of his statement, he attempts to clarify his point, stating “I only mean, of course, that these wild

⁴⁷ The plant’s full Latin name is ‘*Cotyledon umbilicus*’ (*MG*, p.77). The choice of a plant with the categorisation *umbilicus* suggests a symbol of motherhood, connection, and birth, although it remains unclear whether the mother in question is the Church (as represented by the Holy Land), or England. In keeping with the Romantic impulse towards wholeness, the flower can also be considered symbolic of the attempt – undertaken by Freddy’s second cousin – to unify East and West.

⁴⁸ The question of the plant’s region of origin – England or the Holy Land – remains unsolved, but this particular specimen was uprooted from the Bethlehem area.

flowers of Joanna's are nothing more or less than English wild flowers, planted in the countryside by silly women during the Mandate" (MG, p.66). It is difficult to see how this statement would be any less offensive to Ramdez, given that it infers that some of the region's flora originated in England. Perhaps Freddy is attempting to imply that Joanna's garden simply is her attempt to feel at home in a foreign territory, but it does reveal that he agrees with Barbara when she says "I wonder how it got to this country" (MG, p.77). Freddy's colonialist attitude at this point is indicative of his position within the British Government intelligence and diplomatic community, and this is further illustrated when the narrative reveals that "[h]e felt it proper that [Barbara] should have scattered Lady's Fingers in some corner of a foreign field" (MG, p.77). The phrase 'some corner of a foreign field' imbues Barbara's seed-scattering with a sense of memorialising fallen soldiers, and adds to the perception of Freddy as very much the entrenched British diplomat.

This perception is, however, about to change. Matt Cartwright warns Barbara gently at first, noting that her seed-sowing was somewhat irresponsible. He tells her "[y]ou could have been arrested by the Israelis [...] They're extremely strict about what goes into their soil" (MG, p.77). When the discussion moves to the dangers of Barbara's pilgrimage – because "[i]t's a question of your Jewish blood" (MG, p.78) – he also objects on the basis of the risk posed to Abdul, Joe Ramdez's son, saying "it seems a bit unfair of Barbara to tempt the law and risk involving a young Arab in Israel" (MG, p.79).⁴⁹ Freddy, who observes that "[a]nyone with Jewish blood is automatically arrested as an Israeli spy" (MG, p.78), surprises Barbara by siding with her against the Cartwrights: "[t]he trouble with you," Freddy said, fully conscious and rather astonished that he was wrecking the delightful atmosphere, "is that you blow neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm" (MG, p.78). Freddy is drawing on the passage from the Book of the

⁴⁹ The mention of blood unsettles Freddy, who admits to "a premonition of bloodshed" (MG, p.129). He fears for his friends, and in the incident mentioned above – where Joanna is shot at while collecting wild flowers – he mistakes her red dress for blood, when she has only suffered a bloody knee. His premonition of bloodshed will, however, come true in the murder of his Mother at the hands of her maid Benny. This is another example of the contrary motion of the novel, as the expectation is that any bloodshed will occur in the already violent region of the Holy Land, and not in Harrogate, Yorkshire.

Apocalypse which Barbara had previously used against him, and which he now utilises whilst turning against the Cartwrights. What the discussion also reveals is a connection running through the use of flower symbolism – they are sitting in Joanna’s miniature Holy Land garden – into Matt’s use of ‘soil’ for territory, and into the idea of ‘blood’ as a metonym for Barbara’s ancestry. As previously noted, the flower symbolism has numerous connotations, and the use of ‘soil’ evokes notions of roots and origins, while the mention of ‘blood’ intensifies the concept of heritage and lineage by its implications of the danger Barbara will place herself – and others – in, by undertaking her pilgrimage.

Later, Barbara realises that this moment reveals an unexpected change in Freddy, and it signifies a foreshadowing of the bigger changes to come. She has underestimated Freddy, but the manner in which she internally processes Freddy’s surprising behaviour is telling:

[t]he change in Freddy, she thought, occurred there in the garden, where that clump of wild flowers, carefully tended wild flowers, frequently watered wild flowers [...] Freddy said, ‘Jewish blood or Gentile blood, the point is it’s hers.’ That was unexpected. Barbara had thought she had recognised his type, and knew him through and through; but no. And the Cartwrights, who had known him far longer, were decidedly taken aback. (*MG*, pp.184-5)

Here the repeated referencing of wild flowers implies a connection with Freddy himself, that he shares aspects of the characteristics of the flowers; namely that he is wilder than previously thought, that in this moment – ‘there in the garden’ (*MG*, p.184) – he is growing, flowering, blossoming into someone new and different. Like the transplanted flora, he is adapting to a new environment, and like the flowers he has required care and watchful attending from colleagues and friends such as the Cartwrights. His new position signals his growth from being an uptight, stilted diplomat, and it indicates a transition from anxiety to bravery and a determination on his part that Barbara should be protected by her government whatever her ethno-religious origin, and wherever she desires to go. It is a change which will reach its zenith in his affair with Suzi and through his bravery during

Barbara's pilgrimage, although the memory loss he suffers implies that it is, perhaps, too great a change.⁵⁰ The garden therefore becomes a possible site of symbolic transition; encapsulated in both the transplanted wild flowers, but also in Freddy's flourishing bravery and new-found sense of adventure. The language and imagery of seeds, soil and flowers, of tribes, origins and blood, makes explicit the symbolism of religious and cultural roots, of concepts of nationhood and state, and of the Holy Land as both the source and destination of these various forms of lineage. But while the associations between Freddy and the garden within which he sits illustrate these varying symbolic interpretations, it is unclear as to the wider meaning such symbolism implies. As with the symbolism invoked in the archaeological layering of structures, the use of flower imagery infers so much as to render it almost indeterminate. Flowers become signifiers for notions of the erotic and fertility, for concepts of religious, cultural and ethnic cross-pollination, of origins, of personal growth and transition, of territorial re-unification, and of memory, to name only some of the possibilities, to the extent that flowers become unworkable as symbols, unable to ultimately signify anything specific.

The indeterminate nature of Spark's use of symbolism with regard to flora and the figure of St. Helena, is also germane to the way in which illness is treated in the novel.

Barbara's scarlet fever gives Spark licence to pun, as Alan Bold notes:

[I]ying in bed, discussing sexual allure in a house also inhabited by Joe Ramdez's 'pretty prostitutes' [...], Barbara tells Suzi Ramdez, 'I'm the scarlet woman' [...]. The pun points up the distance between appearance and actuality. Barbara is neither a nun nor a scarlet woman.⁵¹

Bold is correct that Barbara is neither, further evidence that even Barbara's own punning symbolism is inaccurate, but there is another connection to be made here.

Barbara's escape from St Helena's and her subsequent scarlet fever have biographic antecedents in the life story of Newman. In a letter to F. Rogers, dated 5th June,

⁵⁰ The possible implication being that he blossoms, only to wither again. The flower symbolism becomes endless in its possibilities.

⁵¹ Bold (1986), p.84.

1833, and written in Palermo, Newman says, ‘a bad fever, of the nature of the scarlet, was epidemic; which I did not know, nor should have thought of perhaps, if I had’.⁵² It is worth briefly reiterating the importance of Newman to Spark. She says:

I began reading Newman – he was a tremendous influence [...] Newman, I feel, was outstanding because he was a great man and would have been a great man, if he had not been a Catholic. He was also a great writer, a persuasive stylist, which appealed to me greatly [...] Newman helped me to find a definite location.⁵³

It is especially noteworthy that Spark reiterates Newman’s influence as a writer and stylist, and not simply because he was a Catholic thinker, or that she likewise converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism. As noted at the outset of this chapter, the influence of Newman is not only theological, but comes to bear on the plot of the novel also. What is specifically relevant to *The Mandelbaum Gate* is the episode of Newman’s illness in Sicily, where he too succumbs to suspected scarlet fever.⁵⁴ In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864), Newman says:

I struck into the middle of the island, and fell ill of a fever at Leonforte. My servant thought that I was dying, and begged for my last directions. I gave them, as he wished; but I said, “I shall not die.” I repeated, “I shall not die, for I have not sinned against the light, I have not sinned against the light.” I never have been able to make out at all what I meant.⁵⁵

Whether or not Newman’s life was in danger, it is clear that he was in a poor physical and mental state, indeed the incidence of the illness itself is of less significance than its long-term psychological, emotional and theological after-effects. What is also significant is the way in which Newman’s experiences resemble the sub-genre of travel writing classified as

⁵² John Henry Newman, *Letters of John Henry Newman: A Selection edited and introduced by Derek Stanford and Muriel Spark* (London: Peter Owen Limited, 1957), p.64.

⁵³ Spark (1992)b, pp.24-25.

⁵⁴ Faber notes that Newman ‘had been attacked by a virulent form of fever—according to one account a ‘gastric’ fever, according to another a variety of scarlet fever—which was raging in Sicily at the time’, (Faber (1974), p.327).

⁵⁵ Newman (1977), p.121. Newman’s sentiments here are echoed by Spark in her Foreword to *All The Poems* (2004). She says ‘I have no idea what I meant by the words in the poem “never mine”, and yet I meant them at the time. And I have let them rest as they are, along with other unfathomable lines’ (Muriel Spark, *All the Poems*, (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 2004), p.xi-xii). This illustrates the overall point, that Spark presents disparate elements, and rather than unify them, she leaves them to coexist. The meaning is left, just as opposites and disparities coexist, non-unified.

‘Voyages and Travels’.⁵⁶ As Carl Thompson states, ‘Voyages and Travels was not just a genre that one went to for facts about foreign regions, or for exciting tales of adventure or misadventure: it also had a strongly religious dimension’.⁵⁷ In the case of Newman, all of his experiences have a strongly religious dimension because he himself was so inclined; however, such a dimension was to be found throughout the Romantic travel narratives that Thompson identifies. He states:

we often find the theme of travel invested with what we might think of as a characteristically Romantic sensibility. Here we can find travel construed as heroic quest, as a process of simultaneous inner and outer discovery that leads perhaps to a moment of transcendence or a sense of the self’s sublimity. Rendered thus, as an act of enormous existential significance and a crucial route to wisdom, self-knowledge, and authenticity, travel not surprisingly becomes one of the master-tropes of Romantic writing.⁵⁸

Again the connections between Romanticism, Newman, and Barbara’s experiences in *The Mandelbaum Gate* become apparent. Barbara’s quest is arguably more heroic, as while Newman would have been aware that anywhere south of Naples was regarded as dangerous, Barbara is fully aware of the numerous dangers into which she is entering.⁵⁹ She initially considers her journey to have ‘a strongly religious dimension’, although as will be seen, she somewhat modifies this opinion later.⁶⁰ What is clear is that it will be ‘an act of enormous existential significance and a crucial route to wisdom, self-knowledge, and authenticity’; a quest of ‘Romantic sensibility’, culminating in her resolving her dialectic oppositions.⁶¹ Thompson classifies this hazardous alternative to the cultured Grand Tour of the Romantic era as ‘misadventure’, and Barbara’s pilgrimage certainly qualifies as such.⁶² Much of her time is spent in danger, in disguise, or in hiding, while ‘[a]ll the nights of the pilgrimage were spent under strange roofs, off the main tracks’ (*MG*, p.279). Newman’s

⁵⁶ Thompson (2007), p.71.

⁵⁷ Thompson (2007), p.71.

⁵⁸ Carl Thompson, ‘Travel writing’, in Nicholas Roe, ed., *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.555-573, (p.563).

⁵⁹ Thompson (2007), p.2.

⁶⁰ Thompson (2007), p.71.

⁶¹ Thompson in Roe (2005), p.563.

⁶² Thompson (2007), p.71.

journey is also a risky and rarely-travelled route, and like Barbara, he undertakes this despite the apprehension of his friends.

So Barbara, like Newman, undertakes a misadventure, and – like Newman – she succumbs to scarlet fever. According to Geoffrey Faber, Newman subsequently attached great significance to his contracting suspected scarlet fever in Sicily. Faber states that

[h]is Sicilian fever was, for many years afterwards, the most important episode in his experience [...] in the last years of his Anglican career his mind was constantly preoccupied with the detailed recollection of his illness [...] And at intervals between 1834 and 1840 he wrote the remarkable memorandum, called *My Illness in Sicily*.⁶³

For the characters of *The Mandelbaum Gate*, the period of Barbara's illness corresponds with that of Newman in its significance and place in their memories. We are told that 'Freddy Hamilton, Barbara Vaughan, Suzi Ramdez – each, in later years, when they had looked back on that time, remembered one particular event before all others' (*MG*, p.191). These memories are all from the time period when Barbara is contracting or suffering from scarlet fever, and for all of the characters this episode involves a pivotal point or significant episode on their lives.

For Newman, the Sicilian episode 'marked a division in his life' and the corresponding episode in Spark's novel marks a pivotal point between the construction of the novel's plot-lines and a move towards their resolution.⁶⁴ Two further themes from the episode of Newman's illness find their way into Spark's novel; providence and self-will. Indeed, Stephen Prickett notes Newman's 'belief in a special providence that struck him down with fever in Sicily in 1833, and then preserved him by a hair's breadth from death'.⁶⁵ As Carl Thompson reveals, such providential narratives are a convention of the 'suffering traveller' idiom.⁶⁶ He states that

⁶³ Faber (1974), p.320.

⁶⁴ Faber (1974), p.321.

⁶⁵ Prickett (1976), p.176.

⁶⁶ Thompson (2007), p.4. Author's italics.

[i]t was customary in all such misadventurous narratives to invoke Providence at some point, and to thank God for one's 'remarkable deliverance' or 'Providential escape' from some greater or lesser degree of disaster. In a great many narratives of this sort, moreover, it is clear that the account is produced expressly so that the writer can demonstrate the complex workings of Providence, as revealed in the events of his or her own life.⁶⁷

Newman's narrative of his illness in Sicily is a supposedly factual account of events; therefore, while his writing corresponds to the convention of invoking providence, it would be unfair to suggest that it is related expressly for the effects it renders.⁶⁸ However, in Spark's novel, the providential illness narrative is an intertextual debt to Newman which functions as both a plot device by merging various plot strands, but also in philosophical terms, as it allows Barbara to stop and consider her life. It is during this respite that she begins to understand how she can unify the competing aspects of her life, and it is the point where her act of self-will in undertaking the pilgrimage becomes the realisation that she can exert her 'private judgement', that she assuage her contradictions.⁶⁹ Consequently, Barbara's 'misadventure' can be read as the archetypal, Romantic, 'suffering traveller' narrative.⁷⁰

Throughout Barbara's illness, Suzi's refrain of "'it's God's blame'" (*MG*, p.232) takes on a double meaning. Rather than make the connection explicit by having Barbara recognise providence herself, Spark makes Suzi the unknowing identifier of providence, and as Warner Berthoff notes, 'ignorance of what one is doing [...] is a regular concomitant of virtuous action'.⁷¹ It is worth considering Spark's views on the subject. She states:

⁶⁷ Thompson (2007), p.72.

⁶⁸ There is a caveat to this. While Newman wrote at length about his scarlet fever incident in *My Illness in Sicily*, he also discusses his Sicilian travels in the *Apologia*. T. R. Wright suggests that '[t]he *Apologia*, like all the autobiographies I have considered, is very much a fiction, a literary construct, a product of intertextuality, though like a true Romantic, Newman quotes mainly from his own work, citing numerous excerpts from his earlier letters and articles' (T. R. Wright, *Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p.109).

⁶⁹ Newman (1977), p.286.

⁷⁰ Thompson (2007), p.2.

⁷¹ Warner Berthoff, 'Fortunes of the Novel: Muriel Spark and Iris Murdoch', in *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*, ed. by Joseph Hynes (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992), pp.55-64, (p.60). Originally published in the *Massachusetts Review* 8 (1967), pp.301-332.

I'm a great believer in providence. I believe that things work out providentially in a way. If something happened to seriously suppress my work so that it was not able to reach the public I want to reach I feel it would be providential in a sense. I might not realise at the time, but there would be some later development which would compensate. It's not quite fatalism, but watching until you see the whole picture emerge. I do go by providence a lot. I have had to.⁷²

This raises the possibility that Spark has utilised the misadventure narrative of Newman's experience as a way through which to introduce a providential element into Barbara's own misadventure narrative, with the suggestion that divine providence is the source of Barbara's scarlet fever, although whether she realises this is another question. The results spread beyond Barbara to all the strands of the narrative, as seen in the following passage, where Freddy stops to think at Joe Ramdez's house:

[i]n Suzi's sitting-room he had faith in his plans, he was beyond questioning the success of Barbara's pilgrimage. One who can move mountains does not stop to doubt the success of Barbara's pilgrimage, and the scarlet fever was to him only a slight set back which, by happy chance, had led him to Nasser's Post Office here.
(*MG*, p.220)

Here we see that 'the complex workings of Providence' have disseminated from Barbara to the espionage plot, where 'by happy chance' (*MG*, p.220), or rather providence, Freddy has identified the location of the leaked information.⁷³ While the presence of divine providence brings about the resolution of many of the novel's plot strands, Barbara's scarlet fever can also be traced back to the life of Newman, and just as Newman influenced Spark as a writer and a theologian, Barbara's illness can be understood in terms of intertextuality as well as theology.

This intertextuality is also evident in the self-willed aspect of Newman's character during his episode in Sicily, and the way in which this is mirrored by Barbara in *The Mandelbaum Gate*. Here Faber talks of Newman's trip to Sicily:

⁷² Spark (1992)b, pp.27-8.

⁷³ Thompson (2007), p.72.

[l]ying, then, in bed at Leonforte too ill to move, all that Friday, the third of May, he was tormented by the idea that he was being punished by God for his self-will. The Froudes and all his other friends had been against his going to Sicily. Why had nobody pointed out that he was being self-willed?⁷⁴

Barbara displays a similar attitude to the dangers she will put herself and others in by entering Jordan. Her cousin, a lawyer from London visiting the Holy Land for the Eichmann trial says “take my advice about not going into Jordan. You might cause us a lot of worry” (*MG*, p.176). Despite this, Barbara also acts on her self-will and continues into Jordan, subsequently placing herself, Freddy, Suzi and Abdul Ramdez in direct danger.

For both Newman and Barbara, these episodes of self-will are indicative of a wider and beneficial reliance on what Newman terms the ‘Private Judgement’ of the individual conscience.⁷⁵ As noted in the introduction to this chapter, he sees the ‘Catholic Christendom [as] no simple exhibition of religious absolutism, but [...] a continuous picture of Authority and Private Judgement alternatively advancing and retreating as the ebb and flow of the tide’.⁷⁶ Here again we see a dialectic approach in Newman’s thinking, and one which again corresponds with the Romantic, poetic unifying urge. Newman takes this stance in objection to accusations that Catholicism exhibits ‘the full inheritance and super-incumbent oppression of Authority’, while in contrast, Protestant believers have ‘all the Private Judgement to themselves’.⁷⁷ Newman states that

it is the vast Catholic body itself, and it only, which affords an arena for both combatants in that awful, never-dying duel. It is necessary for the very life of religion [...] that the warfare should be incessantly carried on. Every exercise [...] is brought out into act by an intense and varied operation of the Reason, from within and without, and provokes again a re-action of Reason against it.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Faber (1974), p.324.

⁷⁵ Newman (1977), p.286.

⁷⁶ Newman (1977), p.286, p.286.

⁷⁷ Newman (1977), p.286.

⁷⁸ Newman (1977), p.286.

Here Newman extols the beneficial necessity of such a tension of opposites, whereby the individual conscience of ‘Private Judgement’ – the more considered, reasoned variant of self-will – must battle with the ‘Authority’ of the Church in an ‘awful, never-dying duel’.⁷⁹ The individual is therefore granted a crucial role in the on-going development of religious experience, one where reason and private judgement co-exist with, and modify, existing theology and dogma.

Newman’s identification that such tensions arise ‘from within and without’ is echoed by Stephen Prickett who identifies the close proximity of Newman’s position on belief with that of the Romantics’ on unity.⁸⁰ Prickett states that

the essence of the Wordsworth / Coleridge position (which Newman was to develop so brilliantly in the *Grammar of Assent*) was that religious experience, like sense experience, was *neither* ‘internal’ (subjective) *nor* ‘external’ (objective) but balance or dialectic between the two. For them, poetry brought together the ‘two worlds’ in a bond that, like sense perception, was indivisible.⁸¹

Newman’s dialectic position on religious experience can therefore be understood as neither subjective nor objective, but both ‘within and without’, or, to return to Joseph Hynes’ assessment of Spark, “‘both/and’”.⁸² Subsequently, Prickett goes on to state that ‘the idea of the Church as ‘poetic’ is far stronger than an analogy to Newman. It often seems, indeed, that for him the aesthetic unity of poetry is analogous to the divine unity of the Church’.⁸³ This divine unity therefore allows for a prominent role for the individual, and for the recognition of the self, within the structure of the Church. Here again we see the unification of disparities; the singular individual comes to be valued within the wider collective body of Church.

All of which is reflected in Barbara’s experiences in the novel. If there is still any doubt as to the way in which Newman’s influence is evident in *The Mandelbaum Gate*, it

⁷⁹ Newman (1977), p.286.

⁸⁰ Newman (1977), p.286.

⁸¹ Prickett (1976), p.5.

⁸² Newman (1977), p.286. Joseph Hynes, ed., *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1992), p.2.

⁸³ Prickett (1976), p.201.

is surely laid to rest on returning to the passage cited at the opening of the chapter. The narrator says of Barbara that '[f]or the first time since her arrival in the Middle East she felt all of a piece [...] a Gentile Jewess, a private-judging Catholic, a shy adventuress' (*MG*, p.164). In the *Apologia*, Newman states that 'Private Judgement' is not the preserve of Protestantism, but of 'the vast Catholic body, and it only'.⁸⁴ The similarity is overwhelmingly clear; Spark defining Barbara as 'a private-judging Catholic' (*MG*, p.164), is a direct reference to – and an almost verbatim lift from – Newman's dialectic vision of 'Private Judgement' within the authority of the unifying Church.⁸⁵

There is, however, one important distinction between Newman and the character of Barbara Vaughan. Whereas Newman views his self-willed episode retrospectively as providential and part of God's plan for him, Barbara does no such thing. Rather she seems to view her decision to take on the dangers of the pilgrimage as inspired at least partly by Freddy Hamilton's sense of adventure. In her discussion of the novel, Ruth Whittaker says of Barbara that her 'Jewish blood prevents her from legitimately making a pilgrimage to the shrines in Jordan. For Barbara, an avid pilgrim, this is a genuine deprivation, just as the celibacy imposed by her religion is a deprivation of a different kind'.⁸⁶ But as the following passage shows, Barbara retrospectively denies this avidity, recalling that she went through it all so as not to disappoint Freddy. Indeed, Barbara appears almost whimsical in her decision making:

I honestly couldn't swear that I went through all that from a determination to pray at Christian shrines. It's true I'd set my heart on the pilgrimage. But, to be perfectly honest, I might have taken refuge at the Embassy – Freddy did suggest it – only in fact, I could see he really wanted me to be a *good sport*. And Freddy was so very nice, I sort of couldn't let him down. (*MG*, pp.254-5)

So Barbara is swayed by a sense of duty towards Freddy and to her intuitive sense of what he is feeling. It is an unexpected explanation in a novel full of unexpected characters and

⁸⁴ Newman (1977), p.286.

⁸⁵ Newman (1977), p.286.

⁸⁶ Whittaker (1982), p.70.

unusual uses of symbolism. This does, however, seem typical of Spark; just as the narrative approaches something conclusive, she avoids pinning herself – or her characters – down to any absolute position. It is as though she cannot abide the thought of the reader reaching a comfortable conclusion about Barbara, or even Freddy, who acts in a manner counter to his character traits as displayed in the first half of the novel.

Throughout *The Mandelbaum Gate*, Spark's use of floral, religious, and biblical symbolism functions in a curious manner. Indeed, the over-abundance of possible allusions is itself symbolic of the profusion of theological and spiritual interpretation in a territory crucial to three monotheistic traditions. This initially infers that the poetic unification of the Romantics, and the religious wholeness of Newman's vision, may lie beyond the grasp of Barbara. However, she finds a way to assert that her 'religious experience, like sense experience, was neither 'internal' (subjective) nor 'external' (objective) but a balance or dialectic between the two'.⁸⁷ This poetic conception of the Romantic tendency to assimilate is found for Barbara through her contention that "either religious faith penetrates everything in life or it doesn't [...] Either the whole of life is unified under God or everything falls apart", and in her subsequent belief that the former is true in both cases (*MG*, p.283). By finding a balance between her individual sense of 'private judgement', and her place within the new faith to which she now adheres, Barbara comes to unify her various incongruences in a way reminiscent of the unifying poetic vision of the Romantics, and of Newman's balancing of the disparate positions of the individual and the Church.

Yet there remains a sense of the contradictory in finding unity in the balance of discordant positions. Newman himself articulates a sense of this paradox when he asks, '[h]ow could men act together, whatever was their zeal, unless they were united in a sort of individuality'?⁸⁸ For Coleridge, it is the paradox itself which enables unity, as he states that 'Unity is manifested by Opposites. But it is equally true, that all true Opposites tend to

⁸⁷ Prickett (1976), p.5.

⁸⁸ Newman (1977), p.125.

Unity'.⁸⁹ Perhaps the most apposite way to define the Coleridgean, Romantic, poetic, Newmanesque 'dialectic of opposites'⁹⁰ version of unity that Barbara reaches, is found in John Glavin's essay '*The Mandelbaum Gate: Muriel Spark's Apocalyptic Gag*'. Commenting on the central passage where she feels 'all of a piece' (*MG*, p.164), Glavin references 'Rowan Williams's paraphrase of Hegel, "a structured wholeness nuanced enough to contain what appeared to be contradictories"', and in so doing, perfectly captures Barbara's position as 'a Gentile Jewess, a private-judging Catholic, [and] a shy adventuress' (*MG*, p.164).⁹¹

⁸⁹ Coleridge in Hipolito (2009), p.265.

⁹⁰ Prickett (1976), p.183.

⁹¹ Rowan Williams quoted in John Glavin, '*The Mandelbaum Gate: Muriel Spark's Apocalyptic Gag*', in *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives*, ed. by David Herman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp.153-172, (p.168).

Chapter 3: ‘Revivification through Dirt’: The Figure of the Trickster in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960)¹

In this chapter I will attempt to read against both the text of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and the prevailing critical norms by marginalising the reception of Dougal Douglas as a diabolic figure. Instead I will suggest that reading Dougal as a wholly folkloric, trickster figure, stripped of his religious and supernatural elements will better reveal Spark’s engagement with oral cultures and mythological narratives. I will argue that Dougal can be understood as part of a wider narrative tradition with which Spark engages, one which suggests that her engagement with Romanticism can be understood with reference to what Ian Duncan defines as ‘the central metaphor of modern antiquarian romance revival: the recovery of “remains”’.² Spark digs into the past to revive elements of the border ballads, while drawing heavily on intertextual correspondences with Scottish Romantic literary figures such as James Hogg and Robert Burns. I will also suggest that by referring to the much wider context of trickster narratives, important aspects of Dougal’s character which lie beyond the religious or the diabolic can be revealed. By relying on Lewis Hyde’s *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture* (2008), and with reference to the writing of T. S. Eliot, John Masefield, Robert Henryson, and the French *Roman de Renart*, I hope to posit a reading of Dougal as existing and functioning within a tradition which belies Spark’s supposed rejection of Romanticism and its ideologies.

Despite the prevailing critical reception of Dougal as diabolic, some commentators have acknowledged the trickster element in Dougal’s construction. F. R. Hart defines Dougal as ‘[t]he trickster-diabolist of Peckham Rye’,³ while Richard C. Kane notes that

¹ Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd., 2008), p.177. First published in 1998, by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York.

² Duncan (2003), p.110.

³ Francis Russell Hart, ‘Ridiculous Demons’, in *Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision*, ed. by Alan Bold (London: Vision Press Limited, 1984), pp.23-43 (p.31).

‘moral instruction is offered by a trickster who may be the Devil himself’.⁴ Brian Cheyette offers an explanation as to why Dougal is predominantly investigated within religious and supernatural contexts. He notes that ‘[t]he reason why Douglas is so often misread as utterly devilish is that he playfully represents himself in these terms [...] Douglas is commenting with subtlety on what he is ‘supposed to be’ or how others perceive him’.⁵ If we therefore accept Cheyette’s premise that Dougal is in fact only performing a diabolic dance in order to trick the inhabitants of Peckham, it introduces the possibility of a reading which isolates the trickster elements of Dougal’s character from the demonic.

However, untangling Dougal the trickster from Dougal the “wicked spirit” proves to be problematic.⁶ This is in part because the diabolic conception of Dougal owes as much to folklore, mythology, art, oral narrative culture, and primitive legend as it does to any Biblical or theological orthodoxy. While this process of separating the trickster from the demon is fraught, it is, I will contend, worthwhile. My methodology is to follow Lewis Hyde, who states that he works by:

holding the trickster stories up against specific cases of the imagination in action, hoping that each might illuminate the other. If the method works, it is not because I have uncovered the true story behind a particular work of art but more simply that the coincidences are fruitful, making us think and see again. Such goals are in keeping with the trickster’s spirit, for he is the archetype who attacks all archetypes. He is the character in myth who threatens to take the myth apart.⁷

My goal therefore, is not to suggest that Dougal is not partly demonic, or that he is entirely trickster and ‘I have uncovered the true story behind’ Spark’s *Ballad*, but as Hyde suggests, to illustrate just how fruitful the coincidences are, and that they may offer some fresh perspectives on Spark’s novel.⁸ It is my hope that in highlighting some of the folkloric, anthropological, and mythological aspects of Dougal’s origins and character, that

⁴ Richard C. Kane, *Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark and John Fowles: Didactic Demons in Modern Fiction* (Cranbury NJ: Associated University Presses, 1988), p.65.

⁵ Cheyette (2000), p.45.

⁶ Muriel Spark, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p.77. First published in 1960, by Macmillan. Subsequent references will be incorporated within the text, and abbreviated to *BPR*.

⁷ Hyde (2008), p.14.

⁸ Hyde (2008), p.14.

we can consider Spark's relationship with aspects of Romanticism in a new light, 'making us think and see again'.⁹

Dougal Douglas enters the community of Peckham as an outsider, literally bent on causing chaos and stirring up the emotions of the jaded inhabitants. He is a divisive figure, liked and loathed in equal measures, even before he appears in person in the narrative. The novel opens in a flash-forward to the aftermath of Humphrey Place walking out of his wedding to Dixie Morse. One character remarks that "[i]t wouldn't have happened if Dougal Douglas hadn't come here" (*BPR*, p.7). Dixie's mother Mavis says "I liked Dougal" (*BPR*, p.10), while Dixie notes that the best man Trevor Lomas "didn't like him" (*BPR*, p.10). When Dougal does appear, it is immediately apparent that he is in appearance a devilish, deformed, shape-shifting and persuasive character. During his interview with Mr Druce, managing director of Meadows, Meade and Grindley, Dougal

leaned forward and put all his energy into his own appearance; he dwelt with a dark glow on Mr Druce, he raised his right shoulder, which was already highly crooked by nature, and leaned on his elbow with a becoming twist of the body [...] he made movements with the alarming bones of his hands (*BPR*, p.15).

The demonic aspect Dougal casts is further exacerbated by "the lumps on his head" (*BPR*, p.8), which he claims to be the remnants of horns. Dougal instructs Humphrey to "[f]eel my head [...] I had it done by a plastic surgeon [...] He did an operation and took away the two horns" (*BPR*, p.77). Later his story has changed, as he tells Nelly Mahone, "I had a pair of horns like a goat when I was born. I lost them in a fight at a later date" (*BPR*, p.114).

Dougal gently torments the nervous Mr Weedon, head of personnel at Meadows Meade, who eventually has a breakdown and states to Merle Coverdale that "it's my belief that Dougal Douglas is a diabolical agent, if not in fact the Devil" (*BPR*, p.81). Dougal, however, makes no claim to be the Devil, although he does state "I have a dream

⁹ Hyde (2008), p.14.

at nights [...] in the dream I'm the Devil'" (*BPR*, p.50). He does, however, openly admit to being a 'wicked spirit'. When quizzed by Humphrey "'[y]ou supposed to be the Devil then?'" , Dougal replies, "'[n]o, oh, no, I'm only supposed to be one of the wicked spirits that wander through the world for the ruin of souls'" (*BPR*, p.77). As his evolving explanation regarding the loss of his horns shows, Dougal has uttered so many lies and deployed so many disguises that it is difficult to accept anything he says as fact.

So Dougal appears to have the capacity to alter his appearance depending on the persona he wishes to adopt. This, combined with his use of a number of pseudonyms, allows him to gain employment simultaneously at the two rival firms of 'Meadows, Mead & Grindley, manufacturers of nylon textiles' (*BPR*, p.15), and 'Drover Willis's, textile manufacturers of Peckham' (*BPR*, p.68). Dougal's ability to mutate from one physical form to another has deceived some readers – and in this case even experienced, attentive readers – into assigning him with physical characteristics for which there is no textual evidence. It is as though Dougal's capacity to convince the onlooker to see him as they imagine him to be, or as he wishes to be perceived, has transcended the limits of the text itself. Whilst discussing the nature of Dougal's character, Brian Cheyette – as previously noted – argues that Dougal is commonly misread as existing solely within a religious or supernatural context. Cheyette reads Dougal as being located within a broader literary, historical, and cultural context, and states that

[m]ost critics have mistakenly regarded Dougal Douglas, the mischievous trickster at the heart of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, as a wholly diabolical figure. While the red-haired Dougal is obviously a figure out of Scottish mythology, especially the border ballad tradition, he is also a notably appealing character. The redness of his hair has often been said to indicate Dougal's diabolical nature but it can also be related to the 'reddish hair' (*CV* 107) of Spark herself.¹⁰

While he is correct to widen the scope of Dougal's character to include folklore and the oral and song traditions of the border ballads, Cheyette cites Spark's own appearance as

¹⁰ Cheyette (2000), p.44. Cheyette quotes from Spark's *Curriculum Vitae*, (London: Penguin, 1992), p107.

evidence to oppose the argument that Dougal's hair colour is simply a physical signifier of his devilish character. This is understandable given the strongly inferred metaphoric relationship between Dougal's roguish behaviour and his aforementioned crooked frame and (purportedly) blunted horns. As Jeffrey Burton Russell states, '[o]ften the Devil appears monstrous and deformed, his outward shape betraying his inner defect'.¹¹ Meanwhile, for Katarzyna Nowak, this association can be extended to non-demonic and literary characters on the basis of the 'Augustinian theory of distorted body reflecting distorted soul, developed in his first Christian work, entitled "De quantitate animae"'.¹²

So whether Dougal is demonic or not, both the mythological and religious literary traditions, as outlined by Burton and Nowak respectively, strongly infer that Dougal's physical appearance is in some way a manifestation of his interior character, also deformed in some way. Meanwhile, Norman Page, while speaking of the character Hector Bartlett, the '*pisseur de copie*'¹³ of Spark's novel *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988), says that '[l]ike other devil-figures from Dickens's Fagin to Muriel Spark's own Dougal Douglas, he has red hair'.¹⁴ Page, however, also notes that Dougal 'is also an author, and even a kind of novelist [...] ambiguous and chameleon-like', whilst also noting the folkloric ballad tradition 'such as 'Sir Patrick Spens' or 'The Demon Lover'' as progenitors to which the character of Dougal owes some form of debt.¹⁵

The problem with the assertions of both Cheyette and Page is that at no point in the novel is Dougal described as having red hair. The first mention of Dougal's hair comes when he breaks into tears in the canteen after Jinny finishes with him. In the scene, Elaine Kent 'combed Dougal's hair as it moved with his head slowly from side to side [...] It was

¹¹ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p.68. First published in 1984.

¹² Katarzyna Nowak, 'The Distorted Body', *The Flannery O'Connor Repository*, <<http://mediaspecialist.org/kndistorted.html>> [accessed 10th September 2014].

¹³ Muriel Spark, *A Far Cry from Kensington* (London: Penguin, 1989), p.45. First published by Constable and Company in 1988.

¹⁴ Norman Page, *Muriel Spark* (Houndmills: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1990), p.114. Bartlett is described as having '[r]ed hair *en brosse*' (Spark (1989), p.47), which translated means that his hair sticks up like the bristles of a brush.

¹⁵ Page (1990), p.29, p.28.

curly hair but cut quite short. Nevertheless she combed it as if it had been as long as the Laughing Cavalier's' (*BPR*, p.42, p.43).¹⁶ Later, 'Dougal guided Humphrey's hand among his curls [...] "They had to shave my head in the nursing home before the operation. It took a long time for my hair to grow again"' (*BPR*, p.77). There is no mention of hair colour here. Later he repeats the action with Nelly Mahone, guiding 'her hand to the two small bumps among his curls' (*BPR*, p.114), all of which informs the reader that Dougal has short, curly hair, within which are two bumps on his head. There is, however, no mention of the colour of his hair anywhere in the novel. There are, however, references to Nelly Mahone's 'wet grey hair' (*BPR*, p.114), Elaine Kent – "'fair-haired"' (*BPR*, p.97), and "'a scraggy little blonde"' (*BPR*, p.116) – and Beauty, who 'combed her long copper-coloured hair' (*BPR*, p.106), the latter of which may partly explain Dougal's phantom red locks.

In addition to these hair-related passages, we also learn that 'Mr Druce had formerly been blond' (*BPR*, p.15), but in a curious omission no mention is made of his current hair colour. In a similar but contrasting and puzzling inclusion, Dougal is compelled to explain his ownership of long tweezers, telling Humphrey that he uses them "'to pluck out the hairs which grow inside my nostrils, and which are unsightly"' (*BPR*, pp.28-9). Quite what the reader is supposed to make of this information remains a mystery.

When Dougal tries to convince Humphrey that he has had two horns surgically removed, his mentioning that "'[i]t took a long time for my hair to grow again"' (*BPR*, p.77) is an unusual detail. In *The Golden Bough*, J. G. Frazer offers a possible explanation as to why Dougal would feel the need to comment on this. Frazer states that 'in folk-tales a man's soul or strength is sometimes represented as bound up with his hair, and that when his hair is cut off he dies or grows weak'.¹⁷ This is a familiar narrative given its

¹⁶ This is perhaps an oblique reference to McEwan's beer, brewed in Fountainbridge in Edinburgh, within walking distance of Spark's childhood home on Bruntsfield Place. McEwan's have used the image of the laughing cavalier to advertise their beer since the 1930s. See picture number 6, 'In Pictures: Scottish Brewing Archive', *BBC News*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_pictures/7410351.stm> [accessed 10th December 2014].

¹⁷ J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1993), p.680. First published in 1922.

resemblance to the story of Samson in the Old Testament, however, Frazer also notes that ‘in Europe it used to be thought that the maleficent powers of witches and wizards resided in their hair, and that nothing could make any impression on these miscreants so long as they kept their hair on’.¹⁸ This suggests that Dougal is attempting to strengthen his demonic persona with subtle references to supernatural folklore as well as implied Biblical narratives. In so doing, the possibilities offered by considering Dougal within a folkloric context become apparent.

However, it also reveals Dougal’s duplicity, given that Humphrey recognises a myth when he hears one, and he identifies Dougal’s horns as nothing more than cysts. Yet Dougal still perseveres, and despite climbing down from the implication that he may be the Devil – see his previously noted denial to Humphrey, and explanation that he’s ““only [...] one of the wicked spirits”” (*BPR*, p.77) – his determination to self-mythologize and ability to rapidly adapt are testament to trickster’s capacity for self-preservation and disguise. Indeed, this is one of trickster’s most valuable traits, his ability to combine disguise and deceit in order to carry out his work. As Lewis Hyde notes, it is at such times when trickster is faced with such ‘well-guarded barriers’ – signified here by Humphrey’s identification of Dougal’s self-mythologizing – ‘that these figures are especially *tricksters*, for here they must be masters of deceit if they are to proceed’.¹⁹

Given their relative unfamiliarity at this point, the combing of Dougal’s hair by Elaine Kent is a slightly unusual and intimate act, yet the onlookers are unperturbed, with one remarking ““[i]t calms you down, a good comb”” (*BPR*, p.42). When Dougal suggests the same thing to Mr Weedin, the reaction is in stark contrast: ““I’ve brought a comb with me. Would you like me to comb your hair?”” asks Dougal, to which Weedin replies

¹⁸ Frazer (1993), p.680. Frazer also quotes a story whereby ‘Satan himself, in a sermon preached from the pulpit of North Berwick church, comforted his many servants by assuring them that no harm could befall them “sa lang as their hair wes on, and sould never latt ane teir fall fra their ene”’ (Frazer (1993), p.681). This suggests that Dougal’s distress at his hair taking a long time to grow back strengthens his demonic credentials, but both his comment that it ““[d]oes you good [...] a wee greet”” (*BPR*, p.67) and his weeping in the canteen (*BPR*, p.41) are in direct opposition to Satan’s dictate to his servants that they should never let one tear fall from their eye.

¹⁹ Hyde (2008), p.7.

“‘[y]ou’re unnatural’” (*BPR*, p.74). Mr Weedin is closer to the truth at this point than he realises; whether demon or trickster, Dougal’s shape-shifting abilities define him as something out of the ordinary. It is a mythical creature other than Dougal which alerts the reader to the ritualistic associations of hair combing. Dougal reads aloud from his copy of “‘Colborn’s *Calendar of Amusements 1840*’”, regaling Humphrey with the tale of “‘the lately caught and highly accomplished young mermaid [who] combs her hair in the manner practiced in China’” (*BPR*, p.27). The practice referred to is most likely the Chinese ritual of hair-combing carried out on the eve of a wedding, when the bride, and sometimes the groom, have their hair combed up to four times to invoke good luck, fertility, and health in their married life.²⁰ The mention of the mermaid alongside the ceremonial hair-combing of an eastern culture are intertextual gestures towards T.S. Eliot, whose ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ features the following lines:

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back.²¹

Here the mermaid’s swimming is transformed into a triple metaphor; their slicing through the water is likened to ‘riding’ and ‘combing’, while the breaking surf becomes ‘white hair’. By combining the Chinese ritual of hair combing with the intertextual reference to ‘Prufrock’, Spark is playfully appropriating Eliot’s use of the mermaid myth, while subtly gesturing towards the eastern rituals and mythology he employs in ‘The Waste Land’.

²⁰ Mery Taicher and Tracey Lees, ‘Weddings: Feng Shui to Frocks’, *Friends of the Museums Singapore: Field Studies Singapore Tours*, (September to November 2012) <http://www.fom.sg/FSS_2012_fall.pdf> [accessed 18th December 2014], pp.3-11. Based on a lecture by David Tong, titled ‘Traditional Chinese Wedding Customs’, Taicher and Lees note that the hair-combing ceremony ‘symbolizes the coming-of-age of the bride and the groom [and] is believed to bring long and lasting marriage’ (p.9). An alternative or variation of the ceremony of combing the hair four times is described by Maurice Freedman, who notes, ‘[e]ach in his own house (usually the night before the day the bride is to be conveyed), the girl has her hair ritually put up, the boy is “capped” or given a courtesy name. By that solemn act the married pair are rendered fit to enter into the conjugal tie of marriage’, (Maurice Freedman, *The Study of Chinese Society: Essays by Maurice Freedman*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979), p.290).

²¹ T. S. Eliot, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, in *T. S. Eliot: Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2002), pp.3-7, (ll.124-127). First published in 1974.

Spark's amalgamation of mythology and ritual is part of a wider patterning which owes a debt to Eliot, and his influence upon Spark's novel will be discussed further in due course.

Returning to Cheyette's assignation of red hair to Dougal on account of his 'diabolical nature', it is worth considering how such an association came to be codified across many cultures, especially as it illustrates the difficulty in separating the folkloric and the religious.²² The misreading by Page and Cheyette is understandable given this association between the colour red and conceptions of the physical appearance of the Devil.²³ However, this association arguably owes more to folklore and mythology than to any religious or theological depictions of Satan, with little mention in the Bible of Satan's physical appearance. The passages that do refer to the appearance of the Devil include verses from Ezekiel, which state that Satan was God's 'anointed cherub' (Ezekiel 28. 14). A cherub is described as having 'four faces: the first face *was* the face of a cherub, and the second face *was* the face of a man, and the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle' (Ezekiel 10. 14). In addition to four faces, they also have 'four wings; and the likeness of the hands of a man *was* under their wings' (Ezekiel 10. 21). By the New Testament and the Book of Revelation, the Devil has taken on another form: 'and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his head' (Revelation 12. 2), '[a]nd the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world' (Revelation 12. 9). These verses appear to have been instrumental in the creation of perhaps the most influential depiction of the Devil in medieval culture; Dante's *Divine Comedy*. As Jeffrey Burton Russell notes, Dante 'gives Satan's three faces three different colours: yellowish white, red, and black'.²⁴ These three options suggest that it remains unlikely that Dante's version is solely instrumental in

²² Cheyette (2000), p.44.

²³ I use the terms 'Satan' and 'the Devil' synonymously.

²⁴ Russell (1986), p.232.

solidifying the visualisation of a red Satan, and Burton notes also that ‘[e]fforts to trace the development of artistic representations of the Devil yield no clear results’.²⁵

Rather, it is when he turns his view to folklore and mythology that Russell reveals the numerous origins of the Devil’s physical appearance as it is now broadly understood.

He states that:

[t]he Christian concept of the Devil was influenced by folkloric elements, some from the older, Mediterranean cultures and others from the Celtic, Teutonic, and Slavic regions of the north [...] From Celtic religion, for example, came the “horned god of the west,” Cernunnos, lord of fertility, and hunt, and the underworld. Cernunnos, somewhat similar in traits and appearance to the Greco-Roman Pan, was assimilated to the Devil in much the same way as Pan.²⁶

Burton notes that the predominant colour associated with the devil in the Middle Ages was black; red gradually surpassed this to become prevalent in intervening times. He states that

[t]he Devil’s second most common hue is red, the colour of blood and fire; the Devil dresses in red or has a red or flaming beard [...] Red was associated with evil in ancient Egypt as the colour of the sterile desert and of blood. Red-haired people were commonly supposed to be evil in the Middle Ages.²⁷

So a modern conception of the devil as being red may have some Biblical foundation in the red dragon of the Book of Revelation, and it is perhaps then understandable that Dougal is misread as having red hair because of the perceived demonic elements of his character and appearance. However, what seems apparent is that the components of the common perception of Satan – as being red in colour, with horns, wings, a trident, and cloven-hoofed, or some combination thereof – owe more to depictions of Pan, satyrs, and figures from the mythologies of various folkloric cultures than to the Bible. For Allan Massie, Dougal can be traced back to the classical tradition, as he ‘is the Saturnalia made flesh’, a

²⁵ Russell (1986), p.209.

²⁶ Russell (1986), pp.62-63.

²⁷ Russell (1986), p.69. See also Frazer (1993), p.378: ‘[w]ith regard to the ancient Egyptians [...] they used to burn red-haired men and scatter their ashes’ as an offering to the god Osiris.

living embodiment of the Roman festival to honour Saturn; a singing, dancing and performing encapsulation of his origins in an older mythological culture.²⁸

Cheyette, however, claims that there is a biographic precedent, with Spark describing herself as looking ‘rather Scottish with reddish hair, blue eyes and a round face’.²⁹ However, there are numerous problems with attempting to locate the origin of Dougal’s physical appearance in Spark, even allowing for the fact that his hair colour is never identified. If Spark were to have given Dougal her own hair colour, it raises the question of how we are then to consider his other physical attributes, such as his deformed shoulder, his blunted horns, or ‘the alarming bones of his hands’ (*BPR*, p.15). Additionally, there are a number of other characters in Spark’s oeuvre with red hair. If Dougal’s hair ‘can also be related to the ‘reddish hair’ [...] of Spark herself’, does it follow that these others are also related in some way to Spark?³⁰ In addition to Hector Bartlett from *A Far Cry From Kensington* (as noted above), Chris Wiley from *The Finishing School* (2004) is ‘red-haired’,³¹ and Margaret Damien (nee Murchie) from *Symposium* (1990) ‘is a romantic-looking girl with long dark-red hair, a striking colour, probably natural’.³² It seems beyond the capacity of the critic to state such an assertion with any justifiable conviction, especially when considering those characters that most resemble Spark – Barbara Vaughan, Caroline Rose, and Fleur Talbot – are not given red hair.

One reference which better illuminates Dougal’s circumstances in the novel is not his hair colour, but his name. In *A Dictionary of First Names* (1990), by Patricia Hanks and Flavia Hodges, the entry on Dougal reads: ‘Dougal (*m.*) Scottish : Anglicized form of the Gaelic name Dubhghall or Dũghall, composed of the elements *dubh* black, dark + *gall* stranger’.³³ John Abernethy in *Collins Scottish Names* cites the same etymology, but adds

²⁸ Allan Massie, *Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: The Ramsay Head Press, 1979), p.30.

²⁹ Spark (1992), p.107.

³⁰ Cheyette (2000), p.44.

³¹ Muriel Spark, *The Finishing School* (London: Penguin, 2005), p.3. First published by Viking in 2004.

³² Muriel Spark, *Symposium* (London: Virago Press, 2006), p.5. First published by Constable in 1990.

³³ Patricia Hanks and Flavia Hodges, *A Dictionary of First Names* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.90.

another aspect to the application of the name Dougal: '[m]ale first name that is an anglicised form of the Gaelic name *Dubhghall* meaning 'dark stranger' and thought to be given to individuals of foreign origin'.³⁴ There is no proof that Spark named Dougal as a consequence of any knowledge of the etymology of the name, but the conception of Dougal as foreign is fully borne out, whether in relation to his being Scottish (in the context of London), or metaphorically in the sense that he is unusual and out-of-place. Given that there is no mention of his hair colour or skin tone, the possibility remains that he is dark in appearance, which given the historical reception of the Devil as dark (see above) is as plausible as the theory mistakenly posited by Cheyette and Page. Indeed his surname Douglas, the origins of which will be discussed below, strongly suggests that Spark was fully aware of the allusive possibilities of the name Dougal Douglas. What is beyond doubt is that Dougal is strange, unusual, mysterious, and from beyond the boundaries of Peckham.

His hair colour, however, remains unidentified. What does become apparent is that any reading of Dougal as devilish must concede that any such elements in his construction owe as much, if not more, to folklore and mythology as they do to the Bible or Christian theology. If Dougal is a devil of sorts, he is constructed largely out of the myths of oral culture and the songs of the novel's title; the ballads. It is subsequently of little surprise that some, such as Valerie Shaw, conclude that 'the reader of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* may hope for some indication that a spiritual world with genuine power and meaning exists beyond what is depicted, but this never comes'.³⁵ It appears that once Dougal's attempt to awaken Peckham from its complacent cultural slumber is achieved, or 'if the danger gets too high', that true to his trickster nature he is on the road again, crossing the boundary of Peckham for a last time as he escapes to create mischief elsewhere.³⁶

³⁴ John Abernethy, *Collins Scottish Names*, (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), p.16.

³⁵ Valerie Shaw, 'Muriel Spark', in *The History of Scottish Literature, Volume 4: Twentieth Century*, ed. by Cairns Craig (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987), pp.277-290 (p.282)

³⁶ Hyde (2008), p.357.

The most notable aspect illustrated by the misreading of both Cheyette and Page is that Spark seems to have imbued Dougal with the capacity to convince or trick attentive readers into seeing or imagining something for which there is no evidence. By altering Dougal's appearance beyond the limits of the text, these critics pay inadvertent homage to the powers of both Spark and Dougal to inhabit the reader to such an extent that his shape-shifting continues in the imagination long after the novel's end. Such a misreading therefore becomes appropriately metaphoric, encapsulating Dougal's capacity for mystification and trickery. Through this ability to deceive experienced readers, Dougal proves himself to be the ultimate trickster, transcending his physical limitations and enhancing his own myth beyond the boundary of Peckham, indeed, beyond even the limits of the text which contains him.

While Cheyette notes that 'Dougal is obviously a figure out of Scottish mythology, especially the border ballad tradition', he is also a character who emerges from the Scottish literary tradition.³⁷ Dougal's chameleon-like ability to alter his physical appearance and his use of pseudonyms lead Gerard Carruthers to note that 'Dougal pays homage to Hogg's Wringhim / Gil-Martin in featuring a duplicitous identity'.³⁸ The question of Gil-Martin's identity in Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) is fundamentally two-fold. Firstly there is the matter of whether Gil-Martin is simply a fiction conjured up in the mind of Robert Wringhim to justify his murderous actions; a spectral manifestation resulting from either his religious fanaticism, some form of psychosis (such as schizophrenia), or both. Secondly; if this Gil-Martin does exist, is he the Devil? Like Dougal, Gil-Martin appears able to change his appearance at will. When Robert encounters the mysterious stranger for the second time, he does not recognise him: "[i]f you are the

³⁷ Cheyette (2000), p.44.

³⁸ Gerard Carruthers, *Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p.127. Dougal's pseudonym is constructed by reversing his name: 'my Christian name is Douglas on this side of the Rye, mind that. Dougal Douglas at Meadows Meade and Douglas Dougal at Willis's, mind. Only a formality for the insurance cards and such' (*BPR*, p.70). Nelly Mahone calls Dougal "'Mr Doubtless'" (*BPR*, p.80), and he uses his own name to create a pseudonym for Humphrey, calling him 'Mr. Dougal-Douglas' (*BPR*, p.111) at the hospital.

young gentleman with whom I spent hours yesterday, you have the cameleon [*sic*] art of changing your appearance; I never could have recognised you”’, to which Wringhim replies, ““[i]f I contemplate a man’s features seriously, mine own gradually assume the very same appearance and character”’.³⁹

Hogg’s Gil-Martin character draws upon the associations between the Devil and the colour red in a way which accounts for the understandable misreading by Page and Cheyette. When Robert encounters him for the second time, Gil-Martin appears to be reading a Bible:

I looked on the book also, and still it seemed a Bible, having columns, chapters, and verses; but it was in a language of which I was wholly ignorant, and all intersected with red lines, and verses. A sensation resembling a stroke of electricity came over me, on first casting my eyes on that mysterious book, and I stood motionless.⁴⁰

The book – which Gil-Martin refers to tellingly as ‘*my Bible, sir*’ – with its red stanzas and inferred symbolic associations of hellfire, invokes a sense of dread in Robert, causing him to be struck immobile.⁴¹ Gil-Martin plays upon the connotations of red, intensifying his imagery with reference to blood, exclaiming

‘[i]s there not enough of merit in the blood of Jesus to save thousands of worlds, if it was for these worlds that he died? [...] dare you say that there is not enough of merit in his great atonement to annihilate all your sins, let them be as heinous and atrocious as they may?’⁴²

Building his argument to Robert that scripture and the doctrine of predestination not only justify but mandate that ““whatever is pre-ordained we *must* do”’,⁴³ Gil-Martin turns to the Bible for validation, quoting ‘[w]hat thine hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might, for none of us knows what a day may bring forth’ (Ecclesiastes 9. 10). It is an example of Gil-

³⁹ James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (London: Penguin, 1987), p.132. First published in 1824.

⁴⁰ Hogg (1987), p.132.

⁴¹ Hogg (1987), p.132.

⁴² Hogg (1987), pp.133-4.

⁴³ Hogg (1987), p.134.

Martin's skilful casuistry that he invokes scriptural orthodoxy and Biblical verse to justify Robert's actions – whatever they may be – on account of '*the infallibility of the elect*'; the doctrine of predestination.⁴⁴ Dougal also cites scripture and Biblical precedent as an exemplar for his own behaviour:

'[i]t seems to me,' Dougal said, 'that my course in life has much support from the Scriptures [...] Consider the story of Moses in the bulrushes. That was a crafty trick. The mother got her baby back and all expenses paid into the bargain'. (*BPR*, p.79)

Dougal's conflation of scriptural precedent with his area of expertise, the "crafty trick" (*BPR*, p.79), again fuses the Biblical with the folkloric. His is a milder, less malevolent justification than that of Gil-Martin, but it is worth remembering that he also creates his own litany of chaos and suffering through his trickster behaviour in the Borough of Peckham. Mr Blanchard cautions Robert Wringhim that "[t]here is not an error into which a man can fall, which he may not press Scripture into his service as proof of the probity of".⁴⁵ In contrast, Dougal's invocation of scripture is unconvincing and parodic, but entirely in keeping with his need to convey his contrived semi-diabolical image. Here Dougal embodies what Christopher Vecsey states of trickster, that 'he is a paradoxical figure whose antics mock the seriousness of rules, the sacrality of beliefs'.⁴⁶ For Dougal, referring to the Bible and scripture is simply another method to be utilised in order to construct the image he requires. By reducing the story of Moses' birth to a "crafty trick" (*BPR*, p.79), Dougal illustrates his trickster-ish capacity to 'mock [...] the sacrality of beliefs'.⁴⁷

As previously noted, Hogg's novel remains ambiguous as to whether the character of Gil-Martin is a figment Robert Wringhim's mind, or whether Gil-Martin actually exists.

⁴⁴ Hogg (1987), p.151. Hogg's italics.

⁴⁵ Hogg (1987), p.138.

⁴⁶ Christopher Vecsey, 'The Exception Who Proves the Rules: Ananse the Akan trickster', in *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, ed. by William J. Hynes and William G. Doty (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993), pp.106-121 (p.106).

⁴⁷ Vecsey (1993), p.106.

Whichever is the case, the implication is that Wringhim's religious fanaticism has led to his soul being primed to become contaminated by evil, if it has not already, and that this pre-existing potential is required for Gil-Martin's influence to take hold. This is similar to Dougal's situation, where he cannot carry out acts of evil on behalf of the residents of Peckham, but rather must entice and persuade them into action by appealing to and exacerbating their pre-existing moral weaknesses. He identifies Dixie's weakness as "[a]varice [...] must be her fatal flaw. We all have a fatal flaw. If she took sick, how would you feel, would she repel you?" (BRP, p.29) he asks Humphrey, in what appears to be an effort at tempting Humphrey into rejecting Dixie. This works the first time, but not the second. As Robert Hosmer states, 'Dougal does not introduce evil into the town of Peckham, he merely activates that potential inherent in some of its citizens'.⁴⁸ Gerard Carruthers also notes this correspondence between the two novels, and expanding on Hosmer's point he notes that:

[h]ere the folk rules operate, as these are to be found also in Hogg's *Confessions*. The devil cannot simply create evil out of nothing (since in the divine economy God is ultimately omnipotent). Rather, he must be allowed in through the keyhole of freely chosen human badness, but can then exacerbate the situation of moral turpitude to which he has gained admittance.⁴⁹

This is illustrated when Dougal's actions initiate a series of events that lead to Druce murdering his secretary Merle Coverdale in much the same fashion as Gil-Martin manipulates Robert into killing his brother and (possibly) Mr Blanchard.⁵⁰

The confluence of the religious or demonic with these folk rules are, as discussed above, common in depictions of the Devil in art, literature, and oral mythologies where the Devil, as commonly represented, is an amalgam of such varying influences and sources.

⁴⁸ Robert Ellis Hosmer, Jr., 'Muriel Spark', in *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature*, ed. by Gerard Carruthers and Liam McIlvanney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.203-216 (p.204).

⁴⁹ Gerard Carruthers, "'Fully to Savour Her Position': Muriel Spark and Scottish Identity", in *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives*, ed. by David Herman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp.21-38, (p.29). Subsequent references will be dated '(2010)a'.

⁵⁰ Hogg's narrative depicts Gil-Martin as firing the shot that kills Mr Blanchard, but given the dubiety regarding the existence or not of Gil-Martin, it remains plausible that Robert is the guilty party, encouraged into action by his imagination's creation.

Indeed, Hogg constructs Gil-Martin with reference to such oral and folkloric materials. As Ian Duncan notes, ‘Gil-Martin is Gaelic for ‘fox’ – the trickster-figure of Highland oral tradition’,⁵¹ while Robert Crawford gives the actual translation, stating that ‘*gille-martuinn* is Gaelic for ‘fox’’.⁵² This illustrates Hogg’s fusing of specifically local folklore, with a wider, global tradition of oral cultures within which the trickster is a recurring figure. Add to this the recurring presence of the Devil in these same tales of folklore and Hogg is skilfully drawing upon the combination of deeply religious sentiment, alongside superstition and mythological cultural influences to counterbalance the religious and psychological readings of the novel. As the following quotation from J. G. Frazer shows, oral mythologies have resulted in the fox being imbued with both secular and religious connotations:

serpents and foxes used sometimes to be burnt in the midsummer fires [...] all these victims, we may surmise, were doomed to the flames, not because they were animals, but because they were believed to be witches who had taken the shape of animals for their nefarious purposes.⁵³

This shows the presence of shape-shifting as a long-standing superstition in folk culture, long before Hogg modifies the template to enable Gil-Martin to take on the appearance of other humans. Hogg’s oblique inference of the figure of the fox-trickster is representative of a wider methodology of invoking oral mythology alongside religion and superstition throughout his novel, resulting in a tale which has a depth of inference and connotation across spiritual, folkloric, and psychological terrain. In constructing Dougal with reference to Wringhim / Gil-Martin, Spark is therefore drawing directly upon a Scottish literary inheritance imbued with all of these associations, both sacred and profane.

In terms of the Scottish literary tradition, it is highly probable that both Spark and Hogg would have been aware of Robert Henryson’s *The Morall Fabillis of Esope the*

⁵¹ Duncan (2003), p.116, footnote 47.

⁵² Robert Crawford, *Scotland’s Books: The Penguin History of Scottish Literature* (London: Penguin, 2007), p.432.

⁵³ Frazer (1993), p.657.

Phrygian, most likely written in or around the 1480s, and which includes the tale ‘The Cock and the Fox’.⁵⁴ Speaking of Henryson’s *Fabillis*, R.D.S. Jack and P.A.T. Rozendaal state that ‘[d]espite the title, they originate from a variety of sources – some from the Aesopic tradition and Gualterus Anglicus; others from the ‘beast epic’ popularised in the *Roman de Renart*’.⁵⁵ Jill Mann notes that the *Roman de Renart* is the title given to a collection of poems which first emerged in France around the 1170s, and which consisted ‘of a series of isolated episodes, mostly relatively short, and mostly concerning the fox’s irrepressible attempts to hoodwink [...] other animals’.⁵⁶ These poems, or branches, were added to until ‘the middle of the thirteenth century [when] the inspiration that had fuelled the *Roman de Renart* was beginning to run out’.⁵⁷ While the inspiration may have waned in France, the tales were still actively disseminated across a wide range of territories. As Mann states, ‘Reynard the fox is to be found all over the literature of continental Europe from the twelfth century onwards’, eventually becoming the source material for Chaucer’s ‘The Nun’s Priest’s Tale’, and subsequently Henryson’s ‘The Cock and the Fox’.⁵⁸

Both Chaucer’s and Henryson’s versions adhere to the characterisation of the early *Roman de Renart* branches in depicting the fox as ‘craftie and cautelous’.⁵⁹ In both tales the fox initially captures the cockerel by means of deception, but is deceived in turn and loses his prey. As Paul Radin states of the fox’s North American cousin, usually a coyote, ‘[t]rickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself’.⁶⁰ Such a description would appear more

⁵⁴ Robert Henryson, ‘The Cock and the Fox’, in *The Mercat Anthology of Early Scottish Literature 1375-1707*, ed. by R.D.S. Jack and P.A.T. Rozendaal (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2000), pp.87-93, (p.87).

⁵⁵ R.D.S. Jack, ed., and P.A.T. Rozendaal, *The Mercat Anthology of Early Scottish Literature 1375-1707*, (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2000), p.83. First published in 1997.

⁵⁶ Jill Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.19. See Mann’s ‘Introduction’ for a comprehensive summary and analysis of the origins and development of the Reynard tales from Aesop and ancient Greece, through Medieval beast fable and beast epic, to Henryson’s *Fabillis*.

⁵⁷ Mann (2009), p.20.

⁵⁸ Mann (2009), p.220.

⁵⁹ Henryson (2000), p.87, (Stanza 4, l.3). ‘Cautelous’ is glossed as ‘tricky’ (Jack and Rozendaal (1997), p.87).

⁶⁰ Paul Radin quoted in Hyde (1998), p.10. Hyde quotes from Paul Radin, ed. *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p.xxiii.

germane to Dougal than Gil-Martin, with Dougal often being deceived by Jinny into ending their phone calls early, on account of her having ‘left some milk boiling on the stove’ (*BPR*, p.21). He appears none-the-wiser when she repeats the excuse, saying “‘I’ve left some milk on the stove. I’ll ring you back’” (*BPR*, p. 23). She does not ring him back, but instead writes to inform Dougal that she ‘had finished with him’ (*BPR*, p.41). When Dougal later attempts to speak to her, she informs him: “‘I’m getting married next week’” (*BPR*, p.121). The blame is his, given that Jinny has been ill and Dougal admits to “‘a fatal flaw [...] to the effect that I can’t bear anyone off colour’” (*BPR*, pp.89-90), in contrast to her fiancé who, she says, “‘was sweet when I was ill’” (*BPR*, p.121). While Jinny has been less than open with Dougal, leading him to believe they were still together, Dougal has arguably been duped by himself. This is evident early in the novel when Jinny writes to Dougal, informing him ‘not to meet her at the hospital’, before saying that ‘she hoped he would do well in life’ (*BPR*, p.23). The latter statement clearly intimates that they are no longer together, but Dougal seems oblivious to Jinny’s implication. Whether he has been deceived by Jinny, or suffered from self-deception, it fulfils Radin’s categorisation of trickster as one ‘who dupes others and who is always duped himself’.⁶¹ However, in typical trickster fashion, Dougal utilises the news of his split to elicit sympathy from the ladies of Meadows, Meade and Grindley, turning misfortune into his own favour. Perhaps the most blatant example of Dougal being duped is when his notebooks are stolen and he is forced to pay a ransom to the teenage blackmailer Leslie Crewe in order to have them returned.

Radin also refers to the many trickster legends of the North American Indian cultures, enshrining specific manifestations, such as the coyote, the raven, and the hare, within the wider patterning of trickster narratives. Similarly, Hogg’s awareness of the Gaelic meaning of the name Gil-Martin is evidence that this local, oral tradition can be situated within a wider European literary and folkloric trajectory. As the influence of the Reynard tradition on Chaucer and Henryson shows, trickster is a figure that recurs

⁶¹ Radin (1972), p.xxiii.

throughout the various narrative traditions in Europe and Britain, often in the shape of the Reynardian fox. Karl Kerényi highlights the commonalities of the fox and coyote figures, stating that trickster ‘appeared in human form, or as a cunning animal, the proto-type of Reynard the Fox, whose equivalent for some tribes was the coyote, for others the raven’.⁶² Indeed, had Spark given Dougal the physical appearance that Page and Cheyette accord him, the boundary between human and animal form would have been blurred by the symbolism evoked by red hair. A strong connection between Dougal and Reynard would have been strongly inferred, not to mention a further correlation with Hogg’s Gaelic fox, Gil-Martin.

However, perhaps the most direct link between Spark and the extant European trickster tradition is not Hogg’s Gil-Martin, but John Masefield’s poem ‘Reynard the Fox’, the subject of a full chapter in Spark’s 1953 study of Masefield. Writing in an essay titled ‘Fox-Hunting’, Masefield states that ‘[a]t a fox-hunt, and nowhere else in England, except perhaps at a funeral, can you see the whole of the land’s society brought together’.⁶³

Like Masefield’s Reynard, Dougal is the catalyst that brings the highest of society into contact with the lowest. In Peckham the upper strata consists of the Druce and Willis families, owners of the two rival factories, while the lowest strata consists of characters such as Nelly Mahone, and Trevor Lomas and his gang, which includes the blackmailing teenager Leslie Crewe. Spark says of the cast of Masefield’s ‘Reynard’, that ‘[t]he people who ride up one by one, or arrive on foot, on cycles or in dog-carts, at ‘The Cock and Pye’ are as miscellaneous a collection of living people, depicted to the life, as Elizabethan drama produced’.⁶⁴ Spark’s novel is less universal in its scope than an Elizabethan drama or Masefield’s poem, situated as it is in the confined locale of Peckham, but it still depicts a broad range of class diversity and stratification in its characterisation.

⁶² Karl Kerényi, ‘The Trickster in Relation to Greek Mythology’, in *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, ed. by Paul Radin (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), pp.171-192, (p.175). First published in 1956 by Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London.

⁶³ John Masefield, quoted in Muriel Spark, *John Masefield* (London: Peter Nevill Ltd., 1953), p.156.

⁶⁴ Spark (1953), p.159.

Dougal arrives in Peckham with no obviously identifiable social standing, but soon gains the trust of both main employers. In doing so he fulfils the precedent set by Hermes, the trickster of ancient Greece, who, ‘when he moves from periphery to center, he changes the center’.⁶⁵ Dougal’s impact on Mr Druce is almost immediate; as a result of Dougal’s work at Meadows, Meade and Grindley, Druce tells Dougal that ““absenteeism has increased in the six weeks you’ve been with us”” (*BPR*, p.64). He later suspects Dougal of having an affair with Merle, and of spying on the company by being ““in the pay of the police *and* of the board of Meadows Meade”” (*BPR*, p.135). This is untrue, but the source is Dougal himself; part of what he claims is his role in investigating ““certain irregularities in the industrial life of Peckham”” (*BPR*, p.114). Richard Willis, head of Drover Willis’s, suspects Dougal of the same, as according to Mrs Willis, ““a young boy in his teens waylaid Richard and told him you were a paid police informer employed apparently to look into the industries of Peckham in case of irregularities”” (*BPR*, p132). This is another example of Dougal representing himself as that which he is not, a tactic resulting from his need to undermine authority and ‘stir things up, to scramble the conventions’.⁶⁶ However, in another example of Radin’s classification of trickster as one ‘who dupes others and who is always duped himself’, both Druce and Willis are also spying on Dougal.⁶⁷ As a result, Druce brutally murders Merle, suspecting her of colluding in Dougal’s fictional investigation, in addition to his suspicions regarding her affair with Dougal.

Masefield’s *Reynard* is the focus for the varying strata of society at the fox-hunt, and according to trickster tradition, he, like Dougal, escapes relatively unharmed. As a Scotsman in London, Dougal fulfils Hyde’s assertion whereby ‘all tricksters are “on the road.” They are the lords of in-between’.⁶⁸ Like *Reynard*, he is located where thoroughfares and hierarchies converge:

⁶⁵ Hyde (2008), p.250.

⁶⁶ Michael Chabon, *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing Along the Borderlands* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), pp.13-4. First published in 2008 by McSweeney’s Books.

⁶⁷ Radin (1972), p.xxiii.

⁶⁸ Hyde (2008), p.6.

[t]rickster is always associated with borders, no man's lands, with crossroads and intersections [...] Trickster is also the god of the marketplace, of the city as intersection of converging roads and destinies, as transfer point [...] trickster goes where the action is, and the action is in the borders between things.⁶⁹

Dougal likewise ignores the strictly stratified ranks of the micro-society of Meadows Meade and Grindley. He claims that he has been granted this freedom by Mr Druce himself, stating that “[t]he boss advised me to mix with everybody in the district, high and low” (*BPR*, p.28). Although Mr Druce has told Dougal to “find your own level” (*BPR*, p.16), this is followed by the qualifying statement that “[o]f course you will be under Mr Weedin” (*BPR*, p.16). Dougal has therefore only been granted a limited amount of autonomy with regard to movement between the hierarchical orders of Meadows Meade, but in true trickster fashion, he ignores all boundaries and immerses himself ‘in the borders between things’.⁷⁰

Peckham proves to be the ideal situation for one who occupies borders, for as Humphrey notes, “[t]here are classes within classes in Peckham” (*BPR*, p.29). The result of these plentiful class distinctions – and of numerous other categories of differentiation – is an abundance of borders for Dougal to both inhabit and traverse. As a trickster, he recognizes the mileage to be gleaned from this, and exploits it to the full. He states to Humphrey that “Dixie would be upper-working [...] Or lower-middle” (*BPR*, p.29), and then flatters Merle by exploiting the work-place stratifications, saying “[o]f course, I realize you’re head of the typing pool and Dixie’s only a wee typist” (*BPR*, p.34). Merle in turn combines the factory hierarchy with that of gender, demonstrating her elevated position as she addresses ‘the men, ignoring Elaine as she had done all evening, because Elaine was factory, even though Elaine was high up in process-control’ (*BPR*, p.43).

⁶⁹ Chabon, (2010), p.12.

⁷⁰ Chabon, (2010), p.12.

Merle's attitude illustrates how fertile Peckham is for exploitation by a trickster such as Dougal, who 'goes where the action is'.⁷¹ As Lewis Hyde notes:

the best way to describe trickster is to say simply that the boundary is where he will be found – sometimes drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing or moving it, but always there, the god of the threshold in all its forms.⁷²

Dougal stands in stark contrast to many of the Peckham citizens, and his crossing of the boundaries of class, gender (as will be detailed) and morality are in keeping with trickster's capacity to 'suggest an amoral action, something right/wrong that will get life going again'.⁷³ Characters such as Merle Coverdale and Mr Weedon are entrenched in their positions to such an extent that they cannot traverse such boundaries, even when it will be to their own benefit. Merle rejects Dougal's suggestion that she leave Mr Druce and get another job, saying "[a]fter being head of the pool [...] I couldn't. I've got to think of my pride" (*BPR*, p.99). Likewise Mr Weedon refuses to countenance a change in job, on account of his belief "that Dougal Douglas is a diabolical agent, if not in fact the Devil" (*BPR*, p.81). As with Merle, Mr Weedon's pride prevents him from crossing the threshold out of the company. He shouts at Dougal that "[i]t isn't possible to get another good position in another firm at my age. Personnel is a much coveted position. If I had to leave here, Mr Douglas, I would have to take a subordinate post elsewhere" (*BPR*, p.74). Mr Weedon's concerns regarding the supporting of his family if he had to take another post are justified, but his claim that "Druce is impossible to work for [and] [i]t's impossible to leave this firm" (*BPR*, p.74), are tempered by his reluctance to "take a subordinate post" (*BPR*, p.74). This refusal to countenance a move to the boundary results in a nervous breakdown for Mr Weedon and a pay rise for Dougal, evidence that existence at 'the borders between things' is more rewarding than the refusal to subsume one's pride and

⁷¹ Chabon, (2010), p.12.

⁷² Hyde (2008), p.8.

⁷³ Hyde (2008), p.7.

change.⁷⁴ Dougal experiences no such limiting pride, and he remains affiliated with no class, yet he is adept at existing within, manipulating, and traversing the boundaries of all classes.

As a consequence of undermining authority and dissolving boundaries, Dougal inevitably acquires a number of enemies. As a result, Dougal – like Masefield’s Reynard – becomes the prey, pursued by Trevor Lomas and his gang who have been hired by Druce “to run that Dougal Douglas, so-called, out of Peckham with something to remember us by” (*BPR*, p.135). However, like Masefield’s Reynard, Dougal emerges relatively unscathed, and returns to the road. This is entirely in keeping with trickster as

the consummate survivor, always slippery, always able to invert a situation and wiggle free, always willing to abandon a project or an ego position if the danger gets too high [...] Tricksters sometimes suffer, but that is never the end of it; the end is levity and speed.⁷⁵

The danger has become too high, and Dougal’s escape encapsulates the trickster rules that Hyde posits. Abandoning the project of Peckham, he heads for the threshold out, and Dougal – like Reynard – survives, eventually arriving in Africa, ‘the romantic blank of unexplored territory’, where he will again ‘stir things up’ in true trickster manner.⁷⁶

In her chapter on Masefield’s ‘Reynard the Fox’, Spark notes that ‘although there is no ‘moral’ to the narrative, the *moral vision* of the poet, which appears in all his stories, is not lacking here’.⁷⁷ It is worth revisiting Paul Radin’s definition of trickster at this point. Radin states that trickster ‘knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being’.⁷⁸ This aligns closely with Spark’s comment that Masefield’s ‘Reynard’ has no moral; that is, there is no obvious morally didactic message

⁷⁴ Chabon, (2010), p.12.

⁷⁵ Hyde (2008), p.357.

⁷⁶ Chabon (2010), p.18, p.13.

⁷⁷ Spark (1953), p.156. Spark’s italics. Spark defines this moral vision as ‘a profound sense and love of uniqueness in all the visible world’ (Spark (1953), p.156).

⁷⁸ Radin (1972), p.xxiii.

to be gleaned from the poem. This is in contrast to that forebear of Masefield's 'Reynard', Henryson's 'The Cock and the Fox', which closes with a 'Moralitas' warning the reader against pride, presumptuousness, arrogance, and 'flatterie and vaneglore' (Henryson, 'The Cock and the Fox', stanza 31, l.6).

Spark's novel corresponds more closely with the absence of moral didacticism inherent in the influence of Masefield than Henryson. Dougal's antics encapsulate Radin's delineation of trickster as 'neither good nor evil', one who 'possesses no values, moral or social'.⁷⁹ Under such a scheme, Dougal's actions would be categorised as amoral and asocial, however, he does seem capable of undertaking actions which on first view appear morally definable. For example, immediately following news of the death of Mrs Frierne's estranged brother, Dougal seems to recognise the need to distract her from her guilt-ridden grief. He does so by employing dark humour:

'Ever seen a corpse?' He lolled his head back, closed his eyes and opened his mouth so that the bottom jaw was sunken and rigid.
'You're callous, that's what you are,' Mrs Frierne said. Then she screamed with hysterical mirth. (BPR, p.123)

Dougal's actions can be interpreted as both an act of disrespect towards the recently deceased man – who seems to have suffered greatly – and also an act of kindness towards Mrs Frierne at a time of great distress and regret. However, this is to ascribe to Dougal a sense of (im)morality that trickster does not possess. Instead, Dougal's actions can be understood as 'an amoral action, something right/wrong that will get life going again'.⁸⁰ He is simultaneously being humorous to alleviate Mrs Frierne's guilt and grief (a right action), whilst being disrespectful (a wrong action) to her recently deceased brother. The result is that he has behaved amorally in his cruel yet kind disrespect of the dead. However, he is behaving according to the conventions outlined by Vecsey, who notes that trickster 'is a

⁷⁹ Radin (1972), p.xxiii.

⁸⁰ Hyde (2008), p.7.

paradoxical figure whose antics mock the seriousness of rules, the sacrality of beliefs'.⁸¹ This is entirely in keeping with trickster methodology, where 'his seemingly asocial actions continue to keep our world lively and give it the flexibility to endure'.⁸² Mrs Frierne's reaction of hysterical mirth signals her ability to be flexible when in distress, and – as a result of Dougal's amoral, 'right/wrong' actions – to endure and get life going again, at least for the time being.⁸³

Encoded within Dougal's darkly comic routine is the symbolic traversing of the ultimate boundary between life and death. While Dougal's actions here are performative, they are again within the rubric of trickster conventions as outlined by Lewis Hyde, who states that trickster 'is the adept who can move between heaven and earth, and between the living and the dead'.⁸⁴ Dougal's corpse imitation mocks the decorum of grief, acting to illustrate the trickster paradox whereby seeming disrespect can create a beneficial outcome. The passage ends abruptly, and like Masefield's 'Reynard', avoids any moralising on the part of Spark or the narrator.

Dougal is soon behaving in a way which further illustrates his ambivalent, amoral attitude. Shortly after hearing of her brother's death, Mrs Frierne collapses from a stroke. Dougal goes so far as to call a doctor, but his next reaction is to hurriedly pack his bags, and his immediate exit dispels any pretence of concern that would normally be associated with a functioning sense of morality. Even the doctor seems taken aback by Dougal's indifference:

'Well, I'll be off,' Dougal said.
 'Are you a relative?'
 'No, a tenant. I'm leaving.'
 'Right away? [...] She's pretty far gone.' (BPR, p.137)

⁸¹ Vecsey (1993), p.106.

⁸² Hyde (2008), p.9.

⁸³ Hyde (2008), p.7.

⁸⁴ Hyde (2008), p.6.

Dougal explains his swift exit by invoking his customary justification: “‘I’ve got a definite flaw where illness is concerned’” (*BPR*, p.137). What appears as deliberate callousness is, however, nothing of the sort. Rather, this is his trickster amorality manifesting itself as self-preservation. He is in danger from Trevor Lomas and his gang – going as far as to frighten himself with a graphic imagining of being attacked by Lomas with a razor – and as a result, he remains true to his nature as ‘the consummate survivor, always slippery, always able to [...] wiggle free, always willing to abandon a project [...] if the danger gets too high’.⁸⁵

It is worth remembering Spark’s distinction between Masefield’s moral vision and his poem’s absence of a moral, when considering *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. Morality is central to her novel, even if, like ‘Reynard’, it proves difficult to identify any specific morally didactic message. When Dougal presents his first report to Mr Willis, he begins by stating that “‘the moral element lay at the roots of all industrial discontents which lead to absenteeism’” (*BPR*, p.82). Expanding on his topic, Dougal notes “‘four types of morality observable in Peckham [...] One, emotional. Two, functional. Three, puritanical. Four, Christian’” (*BPR*, p.83). Having expanded on the details of these categories, Dougal is asked by Mr Willis, “[w]here does this get us?”, to which Dougal replies “‘I can’t say’” (*BPR*, p.83). Pushed by Mr Willis to identify “‘which of these four moral codes would you say is most attractive’”, Dougal again prevaricates, saying “‘I could not decide until I had further studied the question’” (*BPR*, p.83). We are reminded again of Radin’s configuration whereby trickster ‘possesses no values, moral or social [...] yet through his actions all values come into being’.⁸⁶ Dougal has no intention of identifying which moral code would be attractive or useful to Drover Willis’s, or their rivals at Meadows Meade, because as a trickster, this is not his role.

⁸⁵ Hyde (2008), p.357.

⁸⁶ Radin (1972), p.xxiii.

In a trickster reading Dougal has no identifiable moral position; he changes to suit his situation by modifying his personae and his behaviour to act as a corollary to whichever moral code he is presented with. As these positions are entrenched, Dougal does his utmost to subvert or uproot them; faced with an immoral stance he suggests a moral action, and vice-versa. Of the first of these moral categories, whereby “it is considered immoral for a man to live with a wife who no longer appeals to him” (*BPR*, p.83), Dougal instructs Mr Druce to return to his wife (just as he instructs Merle to leave Mr Druce, knowing she will never do so). Dougal’s blatant rejection of any “class solidarity”, runs counter to the second category; functional (*BPR*, p.83). He has no interest in “monetary advancement” (*BPR*, p.83), the “[p]uritanical” third category, and he mocks the final category of “[t]raditional” through his demonic persona, as this type “in its simplest form is Christian” (*BPR*, p.83). Having identified these incumbent, inert moral codes, trickster’s only course of action is to attempt to destabilise them, to place doubt in those for whom these codes are guidelines. As Gerard Carruthers notes:

[h]e is the first of a number of ‘cockeyed’ characters in Spark’s novels [...] who apply their imaginative energies to the lives of others, bringing them both the potential for insight and chaos [and] “to bring vision into the lives of the workers” (*BPR*, p.16). His real role, however, is to bring into the open the consistent lack of (moral) vision in those with whom he deals.⁸⁷

As Carruthers notes, Dougal’s amorality enables the identification of the immorality – and in some cases the morality – of those around him. If this results in chaos or harm, this is not his concern, just as any good which results will be met with his ambivalence. Dougal’s role is to illuminate the dearth of moral vision, not to identify which moral code will assist industry in dealing with the absenteeism for which Dougal himself is largely to blame.

Carruthers reads Dougal in terms of his demonic characteristics, and as noted previously, he classifies Dougal’s demonic methodology as being subject to ‘the folk

⁸⁷ Gerard Carruthers, ‘The Remarkable Fictions of Muriel Spark’, in *A History of Scottish Women’s Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp.514-525 (p.517).

rules'.⁸⁸ Given the proximity of the supernatural and the folkloric in such a definition, it comes as no surprise that trickster is often mistaken as a demonic figure, or even the Devil himself. Lewis Hyde notes this common misconception, and outlines the distinction:

the Devil and the trickster are not the same thing, though they have regularly been confused. Those who confuse the two do so because they have failed to perceive trickster's great ambivalence. The Devil is an agent of evil, but trickster is *amoral*, not *immoral*. He embodies and enacts that large portion of our experience where good and evil are hopelessly intertwined.⁸⁹

The confusion is exacerbated by Dougal because he portrays himself as demonic in order to adapt to his situation, and positions himself in opposition to any clearly defined moral stance. This results in his actions being misunderstood as good or evil, as Brian Cheyette states, 'much of what Douglas does is good, as he offers those around him "freedom from the confines of artificial moralities"'.⁹⁰ Cheyette is correct that Dougal does offer alternatives to the current moral attitudes of Peckham, but this is not because 'much of what Dougal does is good', but rather because, like the folk rules outlined by Gerard Carruthers, good comes as a result of *some* of what he does. Dougal the trickster is himself neither good nor evil, moral or immoral; he is ambivalent, he is amoral.

Perhaps the most illustrative admission of Dougal's amorality is revealed when he states "I would make an excellent informer. I don't say plain-clothes policeman exactly, but for gathering information and having no scruples in passing it on you could look farther than me and fare worse" (*BPR*, p.130). Dougal would indeed seem to be the ideal candidate for such a role. As a figure located somewhere between the police and the criminal community, an informer is situated at the borderline of morality, the perfect place for a trickster. As Dougal states, his lack of compunction in passing on information would enable him to act as a facilitator and catalyst in destabilising both sides of the police and criminal worlds. While a regular informer may be considered as solely on the side of the

⁸⁸ Carruthers (2010)a, p.29.

⁸⁹ Hyde (2008), p.10.

⁹⁰ Cheyette (2000), p.45. Cheyette quotes from Karl Malkoff, *Muriel Spark* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p.24.

police, Dougal's amorality and habit of lying make it clear that he feels no obligation to tell the police the truth. This is apparent when we learn that Dougal has already visited the police station, and has 'made himself known as an interested archaeologist' (*BPR*, p.102). This is consistent with trickster's habit of 'telling endless [...] stories about himself', but as his fictionalising of the facts of Maria Cheeseman's life shows, he is happy to extend this freedom from the truth to all around him.⁹¹ As an informer with no obligation to factual accuracy and 'no scruples' in circulating information, Dougal's ambivalent and amoral nature would be ideally suited to such a role, given its potential for creating chaos. Here again, we find Dougal the trickster drawn to 'where the action is, and the action is in the borders between things'.⁹²

Dougal's ability to place himself on the boundary is demonstrated by his claim to simultaneously occupy what appear to be opposing positions. He states that he has the "ability to drive devils out of people", despite – as Merle notes – claiming to be "a devil [him]self" (*BPR*, p.102). Yet Dougal claims that "[t]he two states are not incompatible" (*BPR*, p.102). For F. R. Hart, this is evidence that '[h]is fraudulence is obvious',⁹³ yet this is also another example of what Joseph Hynes identifies as Spark being 'a "both/and" writer'.⁹⁴ Hynes states that '[t]he "nevertheless principle" underlies Spark's imaginative scope as well as her consistent efforts to express paradox, oxymoron. Spark is decidedly a "both/and" writer, rather than an "either/or" writer'.⁹⁵ This leads to an encapsulation of what Hynes identifies, as both Hart is correct – Dougal is a fraud, albeit deliberately so – and Hynes's formulation is also correct, manifesting Dougal's oxymoronic stance of claiming to be both devil and exorcist. Dougal's ambivalent morality is Hynes's "both/and" in action; *both* good *and* evil come about because of his actions, despite his

⁹¹ Kerényi (1972), p.176.

⁹² Chabon, (2010), p.12.

⁹³ Hart (1978), p.305.

⁹⁴ Hynes (1992), p.2.

⁹⁵ Hynes (1992), p.2.

own amorality.⁹⁶ Spark's novel therefore illustrates morality through the vehicle of

Dougal's amorality, or as Ruth Whittaker notes:

[h]e is an ambiguous creature, half-angel, half-devil, whose function is to act as a catalyst on the inhabitants of Peckham Rye. Dougal is amoral, but like 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.⁹⁷

Whittaker's categorisation is in religious terms, as she reads Dougal as both angel and devil, but it aligns with Hynes in identifying the 'both/and' nature of Dougal's character, and she also identifies his ambiguity and amorality.

The religious perspective of Whittaker's reading suggests that the angel/devil binary cancels out any moral tendencies, whereby the positive morality of his half-angel component nullifies the immorality of his half-devil, resulting in Dougal's amorality. Reading Dougal as an exclusively folkloric or mythological figure who has no religious or theological elements – other than the ability to mimic them – dispenses with the need for such a balancing act (although the outcome is the same that Whittaker posits; he is amoral).

As previously noted, the overlap between folklore and religion is complex, the boundary indistinct, and it is worth considering at this point, as it returns us to the matter of the confusion between trickster and the Devil. While Lewis Hyde has suggested that the differentiating factor between the two is that trickster is amoral and the Devil is immoral, there are occasional exceptions to this rule in folklore. Jeffrey Burton Russell notes that in folkloric tales of the Middle-Ages, occasionally,

[t]he Devil could be a silly prankster, playing marbles in church or moving the pews about. He could even genuinely help people, repaying kindnesses or finding lost objects, though the people he helps are usually socially objectionable, such as heretics or thieves.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Hynes (1992), p.2.

⁹⁷ Whittaker (1982), p.59.

⁹⁸ Russell (1986), p.76.

This, however, is a rare anomaly in the depiction of the Devil in oral narratives. What it does suggest – beyond the fact that the Devil still appears to favour those whose morality resembles his own most closely – is that here the Devil resembles trickster in the mischievous nature of his behaviour. This shows that in folklore, the identity and character of the figures even as seemingly defined as Satan, can be modified.

While folklore, mythology, and oral narratives have had a significant effect on our conception of the Devil's physical appearance and character traits, in some cases religion has asserted an inverse influence upon folklore, adding to the confusion of trickster and the Devil. Jeffrey Burton Russell notes that 'Loki appears originally to have been an ambivalent, trickster god, analogous to the Greek Hermes, but as he developed through time, particularly under Christian influence, he became more and more evil and ended as analogous to Satan'.⁹⁹ The loss of Loki's amorality and ambivalence signals his move from a mythological, folkloric construction, to one produced under the influence of a religious narrative. This example illustrates the two-way nature of the interplay between the oral narratives of folklore and religion, and the difficulty encountered when attempting to clearly delineate between the two.

This interplay between the oral narratives of Christian and folkloric traditions emerges at various points throughout *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. Hogg's amalgamation of the Devil and the trickster in the figure of Gil-Martin is one of many literary precedents that Spark has drawn upon. The amoral nature of Dougal has echoes of Masefield's 'Reynard', while Spark also makes repeated intertextual allusions to Robert Burns' 'Tam o' Shanter. A Tale'.

Throughout the novel, Dougal claims to have an aversion to crossing water, as he does when he states to Humphrey that "it pains me to cross the river" (*BPR*, p.111). The reference here is to Burns' 'Tam o' Shanter. A Tale', where Tam is fleeing the pursuing

⁹⁹ Russell (1986), pp.64-5. See Russell's chapter 'Folklore' (Russell (1986), pp.62-91), for a more detailed examination of the interplay between folklore and depictions of the Devil in the Middle-Ages.

Satan and his ‘hellish legion’, having alerted them to his presence as he secretly watches their midnight ceilidh following his “‘Weel done, Cutty-sark!’” outburst.¹⁰⁰ As Tam approaches the bridge it becomes clear that this will be his point of safety:

Now, do thy speedy utmost, Meg,
 And win the key-stane* of the brig;
 There at them thou thy tail may toss,
 A running stream they dare na cross. (Burns, ‘Tam o’ Shanter’, ll.205-208)

Burns’s gloss to the asterisk reads: “*It is a well known fact that witches, or any evil spirits, have no power to follow a poor wight any farther than the middle of the next running stream’.¹⁰¹ The symbolic association is clear; Dougal is strengthening his demonic credentials by appealing to the literary tradition out of which he emerges. Again this involves the combining of religious overtones with the influence of folkloric and oral traditions. However, the extent to which Dougal genuinely fears or dislikes crossing water is questionable. He says to Maria Cheeseman, whose biography he is ghost writing, “‘I don’t like crossing the water when I’m in the middle of a work of art’” (*BPR*, p.76). Yet later the same day he mentions to Humphrey that “‘I was over the other side of the river on business this afternoon, and while I was over that way I called in to see my girl’” (*BPR*, p.76). Dougal’s conversational tone here is far from that expected of someone who dreads crossing water, and it suggests that this fear is simply posturing and myth-making, another component of the persona he is creating. It is an example of what leads Brian Chetty to comment that “[t]he reason why Douglas is so often misread as utterly devilish is that he playfully represents himself in these terms [...] Douglas is commenting with subtlety on what he is ‘supposed to be’ or how others perceive him’.¹⁰² By emphasising his commonalities with the Devil or a demonic spirit from ‘Tam o’ Shanter’, Dougal is indulging in exactly the kind of playful representation of himself as the dark stranger, the

¹⁰⁰ Robert Burns, ‘Tam o’ Shanter. A Tale’, in *Robert Burns: Selected Poems*, ed. by Carol McQuirk (London: Penguin, 1993), pp.160-166 (p.165), 1.192, 1.189.

¹⁰¹ Burns (1993), p.166.

¹⁰² Chetty (2000), p.45.

foreign outsider constructed partly out of the Scottish literary tradition, partly out of folklore, and partly out of religion.

As previously noted, the name Dougal is derived from the Gaelic for dark stranger, while in *Scottish Surnames* (1992), David Dorward lists the surname Douglas as

a place-name which became a famous surname and now has perhaps its widest currency as a male Christian name. It is in fact a river name from the Gaelic *dubh glais* meaning black water, a descriptive term which occurs frequently in Scottish topography.¹⁰³

The etymology of his surname therefore suggests that his supposed dislike of water is entirely part of his strategy of self-mythologizing, a fabrication of his persona construction. It would seem that rather than fear crossing water, Dougal is adept at moving from place to place, whether over water or other boundaries. Indeed, whilst Burns himself notes the powerlessness of such evil spirits to cross running water, the Devil is sometimes portrayed in a different light. Jeffrey Burton Russell states that:

[f]resh water, a symbol of renewal, is also an element hostile to evil and the most important element in baptism. In later legends, demons – and witches – were thought to be incapable of crossing rivers or other bodies of fresh water. Yet the Devil was sometimes portrayed with the characteristics of an ancient river god.¹⁰⁴

So the conception of the Devil and the capabilities of the evil spirits as seen in ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ and promulgated by Dougal, is only one version of many folkloric and mythological representations of Satan and his cohorts. Nonetheless, Spark’s intertextual gesture draws upon the literary heritage of Burns in order to expand Dougal with the weight that such a culturally resonant allusion brings. Given the comic nature of Burns’ epic poem, there is also the distinct possibility that Dougal’s reference is deliberately humorous, part of his method of assuming a comically demonic disguise.

¹⁰³ David Dorward, *Scottish Surnames* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press at James Thin, 1992), p.11. First published in 1978 by William Blackwood & Sons Ltd.

¹⁰⁴ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p.191.

One boundary Dougal crosses with ease is that of gender. Hyde states that ‘[w]e constantly distinguish – right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead – and in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction’.¹⁰⁵ Dougal crosses the gender boundary by employing a number of different methods. His alleged dislike of traversing the Thames has one exception, as he notes “‘I don’t like crossing the river [...] not without my broomstick’” (*BPR*, p.87). In so stating, Dougal becomes a witch, modulating his gender from male to female, embodying Michael Chabon’s classification of trickster, where ‘[h]e is hermaphrodite’.¹⁰⁶ While advising Mr Druce on his marriage, Dougal assumes a number of shapes, one of which has him ‘becoming a lady-columnist’ (*BPR*, p.66). Additionally, at one point in the midst of a range of dancing impressions at Findlater’s rooms, Dougal becomes ‘an old woman with an umbrella’ (*BPR*, p.60). Karl Kerényi notes that this gender-blurring has been a component of trickster’s behaviour since ancient Greece. Kerényi states that ‘because [trickster’s] own sexuality knows no bounds, he does not even observe the boundaries of sex’.¹⁰⁷ Dougal’s dancing also seems to have a similar effect to that identified by Kerényi. He states that ‘[d]ancers pretending to be women, yet simultaneously emphasizing their masculinity appeared on the Hellenistic popular stage’.¹⁰⁸ Likewise, Dougal’s performance emboldens him to the extent that he again challenges Trevor Lomas to a fight, saying “[s]ee you up on the Rye” (*BPR*, p.61).

When he is not impersonating a woman or a witch, Dougal’s effeminate behaviour results in him being labelled by Dixie as “‘a pansy’” (*BPR*, p.57). As previously noted, Dougal cries when Jinny ends their relationship. However, the language of the passage suggests that Dougal is less affected than his subsequent weeping implies. The information is conveyed abruptly and to the point: ‘[o]n Monday morning Dougal got his letter. Jinny had finished with him’ (*BPR*, p.41). No emotional reaction is conveyed at this point, either

¹⁰⁵ Hyde (2008), p.7.

¹⁰⁶ Chabon (2010), p.12.

¹⁰⁷ Kerényi (1972), p.188.

¹⁰⁸ Kerényi (1972), p.188.

by Dougal, or the narrator. Indeed, Dougal makes his way to work, types some notes, and is having a cup of tea and a second bun during the morning break before he displays any emotional response. When he does, it is clear that he is playing to a specific audience:

[a] bell rang to mark the end of the tea-break. The men disappeared rapidly. A few girls loitered, as on principle, talking with three of the women who served the canteen. Dougal put his head on his arms in full view of these few girls, and wept.
(*BPR*, p.41)

Dougal has waited for the suitable moment when all the men have left before beginning his performance. It has one desired effect, as Dougal is ‘now surrounded by women’ (*BPR*, p.42), the majority of whom react with sympathy. Elaine Kent, who has become attracted to Dougal, goes as far as to comb his hair in an attempt to calm him down. It also has another consequence, one more in keeping with trickster custom. His crying has caused discord between Annette Wren and Dawn Waghorn, and when Merle Coverdale appears, she remonstrates with the group, telling them “[t]here’s going to be trouble” (*BPR*, p.43). The reaction of the women is to question Merle’s authority; precisely the mode of undermining that trickster thrives upon. They ask:

‘[w]ho you to talk to us like that?’
‘Who’s she, coming it over us?’
And so Merle could do nothing with them. (*BPR*, p.43)

Trickster requires ‘a relationship to other powers, to people and institutions and traditions’, and here it is evident that Dougal has utilised the trickster methodology of ignoring gender boundaries to garner sympathy for himself, and to undermine the structure of authority at Meadows Meade.¹⁰⁹ As with his shape-shifting, Dougal is adept at manipulating those around him by performing the role required, and in doing so he fulfils Lewis Hyde’s observation, that ‘in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction’.¹¹⁰ Not content with sowing discord amongst the workers, Dougal will also embark on a

¹⁰⁹ Hyde (2008), p.13.

¹¹⁰ Hyde (2008), p.7.

relationship with Merle, underlining his lack of affiliation to any of the groups within the highly stratified communities of the workplace, and of Peckham itself.

As suggested, and contrary to his claims regarding fear of water, trickster Dougal conforms closely to the category of the boundary-crosser, exemplifying the convention whereby ‘trickster stirs to life on the open road’.¹¹¹ He arrives as the dark stranger from Edinburgh, and departs to the dark continent of Africa ‘with the intention of selling tape-recorders to all the witch doctors’ (*BPR*, p.142). On returning from Africa he again employs the disguise of religion, becoming ‘a novice in a Franciscan monastery’ as well as again claiming to be an exorcist (*BPR*, p.142). As a result, he is asked to leave, but not before ‘the Prior had endured a nervous breakdown and several of the monks had broken their vows of obedience in actuality, and their other vows by desire’ (*BPR*, p.142). Dougal is adhering to the trickster rules, causing pandemonium but within a specific framework, as outlined by Lewis Hyde, who states:

most modern thieves and wanderers lack an important element of trickster’s world, his sacred context. If the ritual is missing, trickster is missing. If his companions – all the other spiritual forces within whose fixed domains he carries on his mischief – are no longer with us, then he is no longer with us [...] The god of the roads needs the more settled territories before his travelling means very much. If *everyone* travels, the result is not the apotheosis of trickster, but another form of his demise [...] he needs at least a relationship to other powers, to people and institutions and traditions.¹¹²

Dougal thrives on the disruption and undermining of the power of institutions. His disruption of the structure within both of the companies who employ him, his undermining of institutions such as marriage – think of Humphrey’s refusal at the altar, while we are informed of Dougal that ‘[h]e never married’ (*BPR*, p.142) – and the cultural life of Peckham are just some of the ‘fixed domains’ Dougal challenges through his mischief.¹¹³ Just as the demon Dougal must adhere to the folk or demonological rules, so too must trickster Dougal abide by the traditions and conventions of the trickster.

¹¹¹ Hyde (2008), p.11.

¹¹² Hyde (2008), p.13. Hyde’s italics.

¹¹³ Hyde (2008), p.13.

Returning briefly to the Scottish literary tradition; for Drew Milne the consequence of Dougal's origins lying partly within the Scottish literary trajectory of Burns and the ballads does not point to a clearly defined strategy or goal in Spark's use of such associative materials. Milne states that '*The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960) owes something to the poetry of Robert Burns and the border ballads, even if it is hard to specify quite what that debt amounts to'.¹¹⁴ While Milne is correct that these allusions do not provide specific, quantifiable points of connection with which to illuminate Spark's novel, this is entirely in keeping with Spark's methodology throughout her oeuvre, whereby mystery and possibility are ends in themselves, not conundrums to be unlocked.

While particulars may be difficult to identify, the broader point is that Dougal has introduced new possibilities into Peckham society. When Humphrey says no to Dixie at the altar, the subsequent reverberations are felt throughout the community because of the shock to accepted norms and established social institutions that such a rejection demonstrates. When Humphrey changes his mind and agrees to marry Dixie, it is because these possibilities – like Dougal the trickster – are transient, fleetingly illuminating an alternative way. This is encapsulated in the closing paragraph, where Humphrey, who has seen through Dougal's performance, yet seems at times the character most influenced by Dougal's ideas, sees Peckham anew:

it was a sunny day for November, and, as he drove swiftly past the Rye, he saw the children playing there and the women coming home from work with their shopping bags, the Rye for an instant looking like a cloud of green and gold, the people seeming to ride upon it, as you might say there was another world than this.
(*BPR*, p.143)

Whatever the precise influence of Dougal upon the residents of Peckham, it is clear that Humphrey is seeing the Rye in a new light. This transfiguration of Peckham suggests that the alternatives that trickster illuminates through his mischief and his undermining of authority and convention, may be within reach, even if only 'for an instant' (*BPR*, p.143).

¹¹⁴ Drew Milne, 'Muriel Spark's Crimes of Wit', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark* ed. by Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp.110-121 (p.111).

The final sentence may suggest a religious reading, the allusion to a heavenly world, but trickster functions here, amongst ordinary people. Instead, this fleeting metamorphosis of Peckham demonstrates that Dougal the trickster has achieved his goal, however ephemeral. Through his disruptive behaviour, he has managed to ‘disturb the established categories of truth and prosperity, and by so doing, open the road to possible new worlds’.¹¹⁵ It is out of this mystery, and out of the legend and myth that Dougal leaves behind, that the possibility of transfiguration is created, the chance for Humphrey and others to see Peckham in a new light. For some this may be an awakening to new possibilities, for others the outcome will be dark and disturbing, deadly even. It is not, however, the amoral trickster’s role to enable only what is good, but to enable new possibilities, and in this, Dougal has been at least temporarily a success.

Alan Bold discusses the influence of the ballads, noting the specific intertextual correspondences within *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* from ‘Sir Patrick Spens’, before adding that in addition to ‘the traditional ballads, T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) is a powerful poetic influence on Spark’s novel’.¹¹⁶ Other commentators have also identified the effect of Eliot on Spark’s novel.¹¹⁷ Like Bold, they focus on two main areas. These are the commonalities of ‘aspects of working-class dialogue’ in both Spark’s novel and Eliot’s poem, and the tedious, torpid nature of the relationship between Druce and Merle, who echo the loveless couple in ‘The Waste Land’.¹¹⁸ Velma Bourgeois Richmond outlines the nature of the relationship, stating:

[b]oth Merle’s employer and her lover, Druce has not spoken to his wife for five years, since the Sunday lunch when she interrupted him with “Quack, quack ... Quack, quack.” But Druce is bound to Merle only by habit; the description of their sexual encounter, with its unfeeling tedium, echoes T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.

¹¹⁵ Hyde (2008), p.13

¹¹⁶ Bold (1986), pp.54-55.

¹¹⁷ See Bold (1986), pp.54-5, and, Michael Gardiner, ‘Body and State in Spark’s Early Fiction’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, ed. by Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp.27-39 (pp.36-7).

¹¹⁸ Bold (1986), p.55.

This quality is not abated even when Druce routinely murders Merle with a corkscrew.¹¹⁹

Ruth Whittaker identifies the same habitual ‘unfeeling tedium’ by referring to Eliot’s poem in an oblique but scarcely disguised way:

[o]ne of the funniest – and saddest – scenes in the novel is an account of two lovers spending Midsummer’s evening together. Instead of the romantic idyll this suggests, the affair is dull in the extreme, a frightening wasteland of stale and unloving habit.¹²⁰

Meanwhile Bold and Michael Gardiner focus on the poetic elements in the novel’s dialogue as evidence of their contention that alongside the ballads, Eliot’s poem asserts a strong influence upon Spark in *Ballad*. They concentrate on elements of repetition and echo, of ‘the Peckham chorus [...], [of] rhyming and parallel figures’,¹²¹ and of the poetry within the ‘self-congratulatory yet conspiratorial tone of the proletarian monologue’.¹²²

There is, however, another element of Eliot’s poem which Spark utilises, and which has not been commented on. Two repeated phrases in the novel are reminiscent of Eliot’s use of non-linguistic phonetic sound in ‘The Waste Land’. In the passage noted by Velma Bourgeois Richmond above, Mrs Druce interrupts her husband by proclaiming ““Quack, quack”” (*BPR*, p.65). When he tells this to Dougal, Druce repeats the phrase, still unable to comprehend his wife’s actions five years later: ““suddenly she said, “Quack, quack.” She said, “Quack, quack.” She said, “Quack, quack”” (*BPR*, p.65).¹²³ The phrase implies the verbosity which provoked such an unusual reaction in Mrs Druce, and which hints at an element of madness in his wife, a madness which his repetition suggests is now also his. Dougal appears to savour this, and he repeats the phrase twice, whilst repeating Druce’s

¹¹⁹ Velma Bourgeois Richmond, *Muriel Spark* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., Inc., 1984), p.75. Richmond quotes from *BPR*, p.65.

¹²⁰ Whittaker (1982), p.139.

¹²¹ Gardiner (2010), p.37.

¹²² Bold (1986), p.55.

¹²³ See Radin (1972), p.15, for a tale from ‘[t]he Winnebago Trickster Cycle’, where trickster convinces a group of ducks to close their eyes and dance, while he sings for them. The change in tone of the repeated cry of ‘quack’ alerts one duck that trickster is strangling them while they have their eyes closed.

accompanying action of opening and shutting his hand to imitate his wife imitating a duck, and in so doing emphasises the comic absurdity of Druce's pain.

The scene resembles a number of lines from 'The Waste Land', where similarly onomatopoeic renderings of birdsong are used, such as 'twit twit twit / jug jug jug jug jug', and 'Co co rico co co rico' (Eliot, 'The Waste Land', ll.203-4, l.392). Spark's use of 'quack' appears to be a reductive parody of Eliot's avant-garde modernist tendencies in incorporating such non-verbal sounds into a poem, but according to B. C. Southam, such an assertion would be to misunderstand Eliot's use of these sounds. Southam suggests that Eliot's use of phonetic birdsong is itself less than serious, having been inspired by 'Chapman's *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America*'.¹²⁴ Eliot reproduces from Chapman's book the sound of the hermit-thrush as 'Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop' (Eliot, 'The Waste Land', l.356). Southam goes on to state that '[t]he 'water-dripping song' is in Chapman's *Handbook* and Eliot parodies Chapman's procedure in representing bird-song onomatopoeically, the 'customary note' of the hermit thrush being 'a low chuck'.¹²⁵ All of which suggests that – somewhat like Dougal's imitation of Druce's impersonation of his wife imitating a duck, which in turn represents the loquacious Druce – Spark is indulging in a parody of a parody.

The second example of such a phonetic and onomatopoeic reproduction of sound is Dougal's repeated use of "'creak-ooop'" (*BPR*, p.48) to describe the noise emanating from the cupboard next door in Humphrey's room. Like the use of 'quack', Dougal also accompanies this with actions: "'[i]t went creak-ooop, creak-ooop [...] Creak-ooop.'" Dougal bent his knees apart, then sprang up in the air. He repeated this several times. "Creak-ooop," he said' (*BPR*, p.48). Before Humphrey leaves Dougal goes through the routine again, and soon after this he repeats it to Miss Frierne. Finally, Dougal uses the phrase one last time to

¹²⁴ B.C. Southam, *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1994), p.27.

¹²⁵ Southam (1994), p.188.

question Humphrey, “[h]ave you mended those beams in the roof yet, that go Creak-oop?” “I have,” Humphrey said. “Dixie refuses to come anymore” (BPR, p.77).¹²⁶

The repetition of these phonetic sounds is reminiscent of the way in which Spark uses verbal phrases to imitate the ballad refrain, in order to satirise business vernacular such as “the least loss of energy and time [...] the least loss of energy and time” (BPR, p.16). Call and response is also used where phrases are altered slightly, such as: “I want it to be a model bungalow [...] You’ll have your model bungalow” (BPR, p.125). However, while Spark seems to be parodying the language of commerce and the materialism at the heart of these sayings, the repetition of such phrases often reveals the rhythm and poetry contained within, and in this way Spark is again seen to exemplify Hynes’ “both/and” configuration.¹²⁷ As a result, the repetition of these phrases becomes *both* reductive *and* elevatory, turning empty business-speak and the language of acquisition into balladesque musical refrains. As Dougal says to Humphrey – regarding the poetry of the term “refrigerator engineer” – “[i]t brings lyricism to the concept” (BPR, p.26).

Returning to Eliot, the use of phonetic repetition in his poetry, especially the water-dripping song of the hermit-thrush, prompts Southam to note that “[s]ome commentators remark that the repetition of the water sound follows the use in the Vedas of mantras and magic formulae to bring the rains’.¹²⁸ Eliot’s debt to these Vedas, the ancient scriptures of the Hindu faith, is clear in the latter part of ‘The Waste Land’, as the lines ‘Datta, dayadhvam, damyata’ (Eliot, ‘The Waste Land’, l.402), and the closing ‘Shantih, shantih, shantih’ (Eliot, ‘The Waste Land’, l.434) are lifted from these scriptures.¹²⁹ The

¹²⁶ Dougal has been using the term to indicate the noise made by a loose beam, and caused by Humphrey and Dixie as they make love in Humphrey’s cupboard in order to avoid being caught by Miss Frierne.

¹²⁷ Hynes (1992), p.2.

¹²⁸ Southam (1994), p.188. *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* gives the following entry for Veda: ‘[t]he Vedas are the scriptures derived from the Vedic period (c.1500-700 BC) following the migration of Aryan people into the Indus valley [...] The philosophical component of the Vedas is mainly contained in the concluding sections or explanations, known as the Upanishads’. Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.380.

¹²⁹ Eliot’s note to line 402 reads ‘Datta, dayadhvam, damyata’ (Give, sympathise, control). The fable of the meaning of the Thunder is found in the *Brihadaranyaka – Upanishad*, 5. 1’. His note for line 434 reads ‘Shantih. Repeated as here, a formal ending to an Upanishad. ‘The Peace which passeth understanding’ is

onomatopoeic soundscapes function in Spark's novel similarly to those in Eliot's poem, as mantra-like reminders of the mythological and folkloric worlds, the 'borderlands and liminal territories' from which characters such as trickster may appear.¹³⁰

Another commonality between *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and 'The Waste Land' is the reliance on an anthropologic strain of mythology. Eliot's poem is full of references to figures from the narrative cultures of antiquity, indeed he opens with a reference to the Cumaean Sibyl, a prophetess of Greek and Roman mythology who gained long life, but omitted to ask for youth.¹³¹ Dougal is characterised as such by Regina Barreca, who refers to Dougal as 'sibylline',¹³² and although he is not identified as such in the text, he is referred to by the narrator as a figure from medieval mythology; the succubus. During his first full conversation with Humphrey, the narrative reveals that 'Dougal gazed at him like a succubus whose mouth is its eyes' (*BPR*, p.28).

The central figure in Eliot's poem is the Fisher King, and while he may not appear at first to bear any resemblance to Dougal the trickster, closer inspection reveals some similarities. The figure of trickster can be considered as existing within the anthropologic tradition of Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), and J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1922). Karl Kerényi states that trickster

appeared in human form, or as a cunning animal, the proto-type of Reynard the Fox, whose equivalent for some tribes was the coyote, for others the raven, but who in all his manifestations was a primordial being of the same order as the gods and heroes of mythology.¹³³

Kerényi situates the trickster within the same trajectory and context as the mythological figures of antiquity that populate Eliot's poem. In creating Dougal from the materials of

our equivalent to this word'. T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2002), pp.75-76. First published in 1974.

¹³⁰ Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.72. First published in 1983.

¹³¹ Entry on Sibyl in M.C. Howatson, and Ian Chilvers, *The Concise Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.492.

¹³² Regina Barreca, 'Breaking Free of the Grave: Muriel Spark's Uses of Humor and the Supernatural', in *Hidden Possibilities: Essays in Honor of Muriel Spark*, ed. by Robert E. Hosmer Jr (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), pp.71-85 (p.73).

¹³³ Kerényi (1972), p.175.

the trickster figure, Spark is coalescing elements of myth, primitive narrative culture, oral traditions, and literary culture, all in the figure of Dougal. While Spark's utilisation of the Diana of Nemi mythological figure in *The Takeover* (1976) is perhaps a more direct appropriation of classical mythology, the tradition of trickster in European literature has been outlined above, and his universality in all narrative cultures is clearly evident, as Paul Radin notes:

[f]ew myths have so wide a distribution as the one, known by the name of *The Trickster* [...] For few can we so confidently assert that they belong to the oldest expressions of mankind. Few other myths have persisted with their fundamental content unchanged. The Trickster myth is found in clearly recognizable form among the simplest aboriginal tribes and among the complex. We encounter it among the ancient Greeks, the Chinese, the Japanese and in the Semitic world [...] Although repeatedly combined with other myths and frequently drastically reorganized and reinterpreted, its basic plot seems always to have succeeded in reasserting itself.¹³⁴

Just as Eliot draws upon antiquity, so too does Spark by moulding Dougal in the form of trickster; the universal, primordial, semi-mythical, ever-changing but always present figure of creative disruption and random change.

With this in mind, a correlation between Eliot and Weston's Fisher King and Spark's Dougal begins to emerge. As Robert Crawford notes, '1970s events in *The Takeover* (1976), set in Nemi, Italy, depend on the ancient worship of Diana as explained by J. G. Frazer'.¹³⁵ Not only is Spark influenced by Eliot, but she has utilised materials from the same source. Like the central figure of Eliot's poem, the goddess Diana is associated with fertility, and while Dougal is not directly analogous with the Fisher King, he does bring fertility to Peckham in the form of the possibility of new ideas and alternatives, the opportunity for and recognition of 'another world than this' (*BPR*, p.143).

Like the mythological figures and rituals that Eliot draws upon from Weston and Frazer, Dougal indulges in ritualistic performances, a form of which is his dance-hall

¹³⁴ Radin (1972), p.xxiv.

¹³⁵ Crawford (2007), p.628.

routine. The dance-hall is depicted as stultifying and dull: ‘Findlater’s rooms were not given to rowdy rock but concentrated instead upon a more cultivated jive, cha-cha, and variants’ (*BPR*, p.58). Spark is employing the word ‘cultivated’ ironically, as the culture is one of repetition and formula. This is illustrated by the ‘next dance – forward half a step, one fall and a dip, back a half step, one fall and a dip’ (*BPR*, p.58). Into this repetitive series of unimaginative and prescriptive routines, Dougal injects a burst of vitality and animation. He begins with a burst of Highland dancing, before acquiring a dust-bin lid as a prop and continuing with ‘a Zulu dance with the lid for a shield’ (*BPR*, p.60). Next, he ‘sat on his haunches and banged a message out on a tom-tom’ (*BPR*, p.60), before impersonating a Chinese man eating rice, a cyclist, ‘an old woman with an umbrella’ (*BPR*, p.60), and a number of other imitations before being escorted off the dance-floor by the manager.

Dougal is not simply dancing and acting; as with all rituals, there is a strong narrative element. As Christopher Vesey notes, trickster’s tales,

are sometimes myths, sometimes legends, sometimes connected with ritual, sometimes not. They can be entertainment, education, a form of humorous rebellion. They can evaluate, explain, and reflect upon realities, thereby making those realities clearer and more profound to the people who tell and hear the tales. By breaking the patterns of a culture the trickster helps define those patterns.¹³⁶

Dougal’s routine is a story, a narrative in dance; a simultaneously mocking and eulogising panoramic evocation of life through cultural identity.¹³⁷ Indeed, most of the miniature tableaux he creates depict actions that are enshrined in the rituals of many cultures. His ‘man in a rocking boat rowing for his life’ (*BPR*, p.60) evokes the danger of the quest, of an epic voyage of discovery on high seas. His Zulu dance, with the lid used as a shield, conjures images of war and combat, while his imitation of tom-toms represents communication in his banging ‘a message out’ (*BPR*, p.60). His impression of a Chinese

¹³⁶ Vecsey (1993), p.106.

¹³⁷ Jessie L. Weston notes ‘[t]he importance of movement [...] as a stimulant to natural energies, is thoroughly recognized among primitive peoples; with them Dance holds a position equivalent to that which, in more advanced communities, is assigned to Prayer’ (Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957), p.88. Originally published by Cambridge University Press in 1920).

man eating highlights the centrality and importance of food and eating; his cyclist is a picture of a more local form of travel, with leisure-time also implied. The ‘man at the wheel of a racing car’ (*BPR*, p.60) and his band-leader respectively symbolise the excitement and danger of sport, and the cultural importance of music and dance. His ‘old woman with an umbrella’ evokes the importance of shelter and the need for wisdom, and, if the influence of Eliot, Frazer, and Weston has not already been deduced, Dougal’s imitation of a man spearing ‘fish from his rocking canoe’ (*BPR*, p.60) makes literal the debt to the central figure of Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’. Most of the subjects that Dougal represents in his montages have their own rituals attached; the others often arouse ritualistic behaviour in those who enjoy or participate in them.

Two related subjects that are missing from the range of human experience that Dougal imitates are mating and childbirth rituals. Lewis Hyde explains why this would be the case, noting that ‘tricksters are ridden by lust, but their hyperactive sexuality almost never results in any offspring, the implication being that the stories are about non-procreative creativity and so get assigned to the sex that does not give birth’.¹³⁸ So Dougal omits childbirth from his catalogue of rituals, and he also avoids any reference to mating. Presumably mimicking the reproductive act in a dance-hall would be too provocative even for Dougal, especially one where jive and cha-cha have been ‘cultivated’ of any suggestive sensuality (*BPR*, p.58). The crowd is unsure how to read Dougal, and their divided response is an indication of his ambiguity. His mimicry causes both offence and admiration in the onlookers, illustrating his trickster characteristics as ‘the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox’.¹³⁹

The dance Dougal chooses to begin his performance is suggestive in a number of ways. A Highland Fling announces to the crowd Dougal’s Scottish-ness, which in this context is an avowal of his outsider status, an affirmation of the etymological origins of his

¹³⁸ Hyde (2008), p.8. See Hyde (2008), pp.335-343; here Hyde goes into further detail regarding trickster and gender in an appendix to his book. Dougal mimics the other notable missing subject of ritual – death – when he imitates Miss Frierne’s recently deceased brother; see *BPR*, p.123.

¹³⁹ Hyde (2008), p.7.

name as the ‘dark stranger’ of ‘black water’.¹⁴⁰ The dance itself, like his subsequent acts of mimicry, seems chosen not only to gain the crowd’s attention, but to articulate a much deeper symbolism than that of an unusual character dancing for attention.

It is worth briefly considering the symbolic possibilities encoded in Dougal’s choice of opening dance. The exact origin of the Highland Fling is unclear. George S. Emmerson states that the ‘Fling, they say, was danced by a warrior on a targe, the shakes of the leg representing the casting off of evils spirits’,¹⁴¹ while on the *Scottish Official Highland Dancing Association* website, Charlie Mill states that the dance is in imitation of a stag, ‘hence the steps and the graceful curve of the arms and hands, depicting the stag’s antlers combined in the human body. Another tale states that it was originally danced on a Targe or Shield – this presumably accounts for the precise stepping on the one spot’.¹⁴² The stag explanation appears commonplace, with other sources suggesting it ‘is considered the oldest Highland dance and is said to be based on the rutting of stags. It is thought it may be in origin an ancient fertility dance’.¹⁴³ Michael Newton initially seems to confirm these possibilities by noting that ‘[m]any early solo and couple dances imitate animals or act out dramatic scenes’.¹⁴⁴ However, Newton also outlines the difficulties faced in accurately identifying these roots, due to dance being ‘a highly dynamic form of expression capable of responding to cultural changes without leaving much of a trace in the written record’.¹⁴⁵ Newton’s broad contextualising allows for the possibility of the dance as a fertility ritual,

¹⁴⁰ Abernethy (2009), p.16, Dorward (1992), p.11.

¹⁴¹ George S. Emmerson, *A Social History of Scottish Dance: Ane Celestial Recreation* (Montreal: McGill-McQueen’s University Press, 1972), p.2. A targe is the Highland warrior’s round shield.

¹⁴² Charlie Mill, ‘Highland Dancing History’, *Scottish Official Highland Dancing Association* [accessed 29th November 2014]

<http://www.sohda.org.uk/article_highland_dancing_history_by_charlie_mill_sohda_article.htm>

¹⁴³ No Author, ‘Scottish Dances’, *The Best of Scotlandsmusic.com* [accessed 25th November 2014]

<<https://www.scotlandsmusic.com/Explore/Dances>>. Meanwhile, Kirsty Duncan notes that ‘the Fling may extend back to the first centuries AD, and may in fact have been an ancient fertility dance. The supporting evidence is the raised hands, representing a ‘stag’, an ancient sign of virility.’ Kirsty Duncan, ‘Introduction to Highland Dancing’, *ElectricScotland.com*,

<<http://www.electricscotland.com/dance/intro.htm>> [accessed 26th November 2014].

¹⁴⁴ Michael Newton, *Warriors of the Word: The World of the Scottish Highlanders* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Limited, 2009), p.274.

¹⁴⁵ Newton (2009), p.273.

even if, like the ancient Sword Dance from which it may also be related, and in the words of Evelyn Hood, it ‘teases the dance historian’.¹⁴⁶

Most of the evidence provided here for either the stag or the targe origin of the Highland Fling is anecdotal. There is, however, one exception printed in the *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, a very brief article from 1950 by Jean Milligan of Glasgow. She states that:

[m]ost famous are the Highland step dances, the sword dance, Highland flings and Seann truibhaes. These are men’s dances and were originally danced to celebrate victories in raids and forays [...] The arms play a part but no body movement is allowed. The position of the arms represents, when raised above the head, the horns of the deer and when at the waist, the horns of the ram.¹⁴⁷

Milligan posits the same two sources, the warrior’s victory dance, and the mimicry of the stag, however, Scottish dance historians J.P and T.M. Flett query the latter of these narratives, stating:

[i]t is probable that this raising of the arms was primarily an aid to balance, notwithstanding the many theories which ascribe the custom to an unexplained desire on the part of male dancers to imitate the shape of the antlers of a stag.¹⁴⁸

Meanwhile, George S. Emmerson questions both theories, offering a technical explanation and debunking the mythology in the process:

[i]t is customary to seek romantic reasons for the characteristics of Highland Dance, such as the Fling’s being a warrior dance of victory performed upon his targe. This reasoning may well be nonsense, like most of these tales, but it serves to highlight a characteristic of the dance, namely, that it is performed on the spot, with no travel.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Evelyn Hood, *The Story of Scottish Country Dancing: The Darling Diversion* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons and Company Limited, 1980), p.18.

¹⁴⁷ Jean Milligan, ‘Scottish Country Dancing’, in *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, Vol. 2, (1950), p.32. The implied relationship between the Sword Dance (or Gille Chaluum) and the Highland Fling is based upon the conception that both celebrate victory in battle, while Jessie L. Weston claims that ‘[w]e know now, absolutely, and indubitably, that these Sword Dances formed an important part of the Vegetation ritual’ (Weston (1957), p.100).

¹⁴⁸ J.P. Flett, and T.M. Flett, *Traditional Dancing in Scotland* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p.139. First published in 1964.

¹⁴⁹ Emmerson (1972), p.185.

Emmerson's de-mystification of the 'romantic reasons' often cited for such dances, demonstrates that they function in a similar way to the border ballads.¹⁵⁰ As Newton has noted, these dances, like the ballads, were not tabulated or written down until long after they became established, enabling them to be modified and altered, and for their origins to be sentimentalised. The origins and lineage of dances such as the Highland Fling therefore entered into the culture via the folkloric traditions of both oral storytelling and narrative dance, evolving in the telling and the performance. As Charlie Mill notes, these explanations are – like Dougal himself – 'legend'.¹⁵¹ In this respect, the Highland Fling is the perfect dance and a fitting metaphor for Dougal. Both are clouded by romanticising and (self) mythologizing, they outline an alternative, alien culture from that of Peckham, their legends – whether truth-based or Romance – articulate virility, and they both emerge from a folkloric, oral tradition.

All of these characteristics also apply to the border ballads, and Evelyn Hood suggests that this is no coincidence. She states that

[m]any of the oldest ballads in the language have a recurrent line or chorus which suggests to some historians a link between ballads and dancing. It is easy to imagine a repeated word like 'benorie, benorie' or a phrase such as 'in this New Yeir, in this New Yeir' being chanted as a chorus by a ring of dancers round a central miming figure.¹⁵²

If we compare the above passage to the one depicting Dougal's performance, a number of congruencies appear. As Dougal dances his Highland Fling, we are told that '[t]he jiving couples slowed down like an unwound toy roundabout, and gathered beside Dougal [...] Those who were talking were all saying the same thing' (*BPR*, p.59). In depicting the crowd as 'all saying the same thing' (*BPR*, p.59), the passage suggests a chorus in two senses. Firstly, the crowd function as a theatrical or Greek chorus, speaking with a

¹⁵⁰ Emmerson (1972), p.185.

¹⁵¹ Mill, 'Highland Dancing History', [2014]. It should be noted that Dougal claims to hail from Edinburgh, not the Highlands. In this sense the Highland Fling is another of his untrustworthy narratives, like those suggested regarding the origin of the dance, and entirely in keeping with his trickster spirit.

¹⁵² Hood (1980), pp.23-4.

collective voice. Secondly, the repetitive nature of their ‘saying the same thing’ (*BPR*, p.59) functions like ‘a recurrent line’ or chorus in a ballad.¹⁵³ As in the historians’ configuration outlined by Hood, Dougal is the ‘central miming figure’ surrounded ‘by a ring of dancers’ with lines ‘being chanted as a chorus’, as the trickster performs his narrative in movement and mimicry.¹⁵⁴

As with his Highland Fling, almost all of Dougal’s scenes are depictions of a world beyond Peckham. What is implied in his performance enriches Peckham, a broadening of possibilities as enacted in his ritualistic world-tour of cultural alternatives. As Christopher Vecsey notes, ‘[b]y breaking the patterns of a culture the trickster helps define those patterns’.¹⁵⁵ As with Vecsey’s formulation above, Dougal’s imitations are ‘entertainment, education, a form of humorous rebellion’,¹⁵⁶ they mock the way in which the lively imports of American jive and Cuban cha-cha have become – to paraphrase the narrator of *The Driver’s Seat* – subdued into obedience and stripped of their energy and vitality under the pressures of culturally conservative Peckham.¹⁵⁷

Dougal’s performance in the dance-hall is reminiscent of a fertility ritual; in typical trickster fashion it disturbs the complacency and stirs up new attitudes and new possibilities for the culture of Peckham; alternatives to the staid, regimented forms of expression currently being enacted. Even the jumping action which seems like a warm-up for his Highland Fling, and which coincides with Dougal’s “creak-ooop” utterances, has connotations of a fertility ritual.¹⁵⁸ J.G. Frazer notes that ‘[i]n many parts of Europe dancing or leaping high in the air are approved homeopathic modes of making the crops

¹⁵³ Hood (1980),p.23.

¹⁵⁴ Hood (1980),p.24.

¹⁵⁵ Vecsey (1993), p.106.

¹⁵⁶ Vecsey (1993), p.106.

¹⁵⁷ Muriel Spark, *The Driver’s Seat* (London: Penguin Books,1974), p.15. First published in 1970 by Macmillan & Co. The phrase ‘subdued into obedience’ is a paraphrase of the passage: ‘[t]he swaying tall pines among the litter of cones on the forest floor have been subdued into silence and into obedient bulks’.

¹⁵⁸ As previously noted, ‘Dougal bent his knees apart, then sprang up in the air. He repeated this several times. “Creak-ooop,” he said’ (*BPR*, p.48).

grow high'.¹⁵⁹ Just as his trickster amorality enables the revealing of the moralities of Peckham, so too does his ritualistic performance function in the same way to reveal the cultural deficiency of Peckham.

Dougal attempts to tell another tale, incorporating dance into his narrative as he describes to Humphrey a recurring dream. As he depicts his dream of “girls in factories doing a dance”, he ‘waggled his body and wove his arms intricately. “Like Indian dancing, you know”’ (*BPR*, p.50). Dougal tells Humphrey that the choreographer of this ritualistic dance “is a projection of me. I was at the University of Edinburgh myself, but in the dream I’m the Devil and Cambridge” (*BPR*, p.50).¹⁶⁰ The song and dance routine is part of Dougal’s on-going attempt to fashion a persona as a demonic presence, with his performance akin to a form of ritualistic identity appropriation. Unlike the dance-hall performance, here Dougal adopts the masks of religion and the supernatural, while gesturing towards the Indian cultures and Eastern mysticism that Eliot employs in ‘The Waste Land’ through his dancing. Dougal’s portrayal of himself as “a projection of [...] the Devil” (*BPR*, p.50) is reminiscent of ‘the mythology of another American Indian tribe, the Wichita, [who credit] the coyote with the faculty of telling endless roguish stories about himself, the animal equivalent of the trickster’.¹⁶¹ We are already aware of Dougal’s shape-shifting capacity, but here Dougal contrives to use his dream as the basis for a self-mythologizing ritual which he performs for Humphrey. In *The Golden Bough*, J. G. Frazer references a Norwegian myth to illustrate the way in which myths become ritual. He states that the Norse story ‘belongs to that class of myths which have been dramatised in ritual, or, to put it otherwise, which have been performed as magical ceremonies for the sake of producing those natural effects which they describe in figurative language’.¹⁶² Dougal’s language is figurative, but only just; “this choreographer is a projection of me [...] in the

¹⁵⁹ Frazer (1993), p.28.

¹⁶⁰ This is a reference to a previous employee at Meadows Meade, “a man from Cambridge advising on motion study [who] speeded up our output thirty per cent” (*BPR*, p.16).

¹⁶¹ Kerényi (1956), p.176.

¹⁶² Frazer (1993), pp.608-9.

dream I'm the Devil'" (*BPR*, p.50) he states. The implication is therefore also plain; dream corresponds with reality and Dougal is devilish. Here, however, Dougal's ritual fails, not only because of a lack of 'magical' content, but because Humphrey remains sceptical, and ultimately sees through Dougal's 'figurative language'.¹⁶³ Before we dismiss Dougal's attempt at convincing Humphrey of his devilish character, it should be noted that others, such as Mr Weedon, are entirely convinced by Dougal's act.

The Devil dream-scene again demonstrates Vecsey's categorisation of trickster narratives as 'sometimes myths, sometimes legends, sometimes connected with ritual, sometimes not'.¹⁶⁴ Another of Dougal's dance performances, on the carpet in front of the television in the Crewe household, illustrates Vecsey's contention that sometimes the trickster's antics function on a simple, literal level, where '[t]hey can be entertainment' unconnected to ritual.¹⁶⁵ As the passage reveals however, not all are entertained: 'Mavis was shrieking with joy. Humphrey was smiling with closed lips. Dixie sat also with closed lips, not smiling' (*BPR*, p.38). This scene illustrates that trickster does not always get his way.

However, as Dougal's dance-hall ritual suggests, sometimes trickster does succeed in illuminating new alternatives; whether these are acted upon is another matter. As previously discussed, there is a strong suggestion in the novel's final paragraph that Dougal has brought about some beneficial change in Peckham. The scene depicts Humphrey and Dixie driving past Peckham Rye following their second – and now successful – attempt at getting married, and it is worth re-consideration with specific focus on the imagery Spark employs. The passage reads:

it was a sunny day for November, and, as he drove swiftly past the Rye, he saw the children playing there and the women coming home from work with their shopping bags, the Rye for an instant looking like a cloud of green and gold, the people seeming to ride upon it, as you might say there was another world than this.

(*BPR*, p.143)

¹⁶³ Frazer (1993), p.609.

¹⁶⁴ Vecsey (1993), p.106.

¹⁶⁵ Vecsey (1993), p.106.

For Gerard Carruthers, this paragraph is evidence of Spark's coalescing of religious and folkloric materials. He states that

Dougal is gone but his influence lingers, and we see that he is almost as much an agent of God as of the Devil. In Spark's beloved border ballads, the color green is very often notice of an ambiguous supernatural/fairyland sphere and its presence here extends the offer of possible grace to Peckham.¹⁶⁶

The ambiguity here is not attributed to the trickster element of Dougal's character, but to the religious – and subsequently implied moral – nature of his seemingly contradictory behaviour. His actions have lead directly and indirectly to outcomes both good and bad, and it is therefore correct that in religious and moral terms Dougal should be categorised as being 'as much an agent of God as of the Devil'.¹⁶⁷ Carruthers also identifies the strong ballad influence in the numinous imagery of the passage, citing the colour green as evidence of Spark's debt to the Scottish (oral) narrative tradition.

In addition to the impact of Scottish folklore in the form of the border ballads, there is also the influence of Eliot to consider. As previously discussed, Dougal is not directly comparable to the Fisher King; however, the imagery of the above passage suggests a reading whereby Dougal has enabled fertility and growth in Peckham. In addition to the folkloric associations noted by Carruthers, the colour green is also symbolic of vegetation, growth, health, and rebirth, with gold symbolic of wealth and affluence.¹⁶⁸ The scene presents a vision of wellbeing with the presence of 'the children playing', while employment, commerce, and equality appear robust with 'the women coming home from work with their shopping bags' (*BPR*, p.143). The effect on Humphrey is that the scene appears almost as an apparition, where the people float, and the result is the implication of the existence of 'another world than this' (*BPR*, p.143). The ending is ambiguous, as this other world remains unidentified. A literal reading of the novel with Dougal as a demon, or

¹⁶⁶ Carruthers (2010)a, p.30.

¹⁶⁷ Carruthers (2010)a, p.30.

¹⁶⁸ Frazer (1993), p.476, notes that 'red-haired men [...] were representatives of the corn-spirit himself, that is, of Osiris, and were slain for the express purpose of making the corn turn red or golden'.

the ‘angel-devil’ (*BPR*, p.30) figure he poses as, would suggest that this other world is spiritual in nature, a vision of the afterlife. However, a reading which foregrounds the folkloric, the oral narrative traditions, and the figure of trickster, suggests that this is a vision of an alternative Peckham, a transfigured Rye made fertile with possibility, where the conventions and moralities of old Peckham have been challenged by a strange outsider, now vanished and having left only ‘a legend’ (*BPR*, p.14) in his wake. Whichever reading is preferred, the fact that Humphrey’s vision occurs ‘for an instant’ (*BPR*, p.143) suggest the fleeting nature of the possibilities depicted. The ending is therefore still ambiguous; it remains unclear whether Dougal has brought about any lasting change or fertility. He has, however, been able ‘to stir things up’ with his tragi-comic, chaotic brand of fertility, and passed into a mythology (partly) of his own making, and in true trickster fashion he has escaped and returned to the road.¹⁶⁹

It is significant that the vision of the closing scene is experienced by Humphrey. Vision is a recurring motif throughout, and when the term is used by Mr Weedon, Dougal asks for clarification, saying: “[d]o you speak literally as concerning optics, or figuratively, as it might be with regard to an enlargement of the total perceptive capacity?” (*BPR*, p.72). Given the spying and counter-spying going on, with Dougal watching Druce and Willis, both of whom are watching Dougal, and Dougal being blackmailed by the Lomas gang, the literal meaning of vision is imbued with a sense of the novel’s concern with morality. In terms of the figurative meaning, Dougal has been employed by Meadows, Meade and Grindley as “‘an Arts man’” (*BPR*, p.15), because as Mr Druce explains, “[w]e feel the time has come to take on an Arts man. Industry and the Arts must walk hand in hand [...] We feel we need a man with vision” (*BPR*, pp.15-6). Dougal’s figurative vision is characterised at the close of the novel as ‘cockeyed’, a reference to the books he writes, drawn from ‘the scrap ends of his profligate experience’ (*BPR*, p.142). Humphrey’s vision in the final scene combines both senses of the word. The

¹⁶⁹ Chabon (2010), p.13.

image of Peckham is something he literally witnesses with his eyes, but it is also figurative, an embodiment of Dougal's phrase identifying "'an enlargement of the total perceptive capacity'" (*BPR*, p.72), and it is this capacity which enables Humphrey to envisage a transfigured, alternative world.

Humphrey therefore possesses both categories of vision as outlined by Dougal. Humphrey has the vision to see the positive aspects of Dougal's character and behaviour, but ironically, it is also his vision which enables him to see through Dougal's devilish act. When Dougal claims his horns were removed by plastic surgeons, Humphrey dismisses Dougal, noting that they are nothing more than "'[a] couple of cysts [...] I've got one myself'" (*BPR*, p.77). His scepticism is clear when he subsequently asks Dougal if he is "'supposed to be"' Satan (*BPR*, p.77), an acknowledgement of Dougal's performative strategy. Humphrey is not the only character that sees beyond Dougal's purported identity. Merle also understands the way in which Dougal 'playfully represents himself',¹⁷⁰ questioning his contradictory sounding claim to "'have powers of exorcism'" when also claiming to be a devil (*BPR*, p.102). However, Merle's vision does not extend to seeing her situation with Mr Druce clearly, an oversight which has fatal consequences. Mr Weedon also fails to perceive Dougal's true nature, believing him to be the Devil, and he suffers the indignity of having his vision questioned while being told to "'[s]tudy Dougal [...] watch his methods'" (*BPR*, p.73).

Dougal's other job as a biographer allows him to develop his figurative vision. This is most obvious in his self-mythologizing and his determination to alter the facts of Maria Cheeseman's life in order to foreground his own artistic vision. In typical trickster fashion, Dougal crosses boundaries in his writing. As with his understanding of vision, he does this both literally and figuratively. The former he achieves by moving the accurate details of Cheese's youth across the boundary from Streatham to Peckham, and the latter he manages by deliberately apportioning the narratives of other characters into her biography. As Alan

¹⁷⁰ Chetty (2000), p.45.

Bold notes, the result is that ‘the division between fact and fiction is blurred’.¹⁷¹ Or, put more bluntly, Dougal lies in order to create the work that aligns with his wishes, and which bears little resemblance to the facts of Maria Cheeseman’s life. Despite this being a biography, he is upset when his creative vision is questioned, although his excuse – that he is not “‘a straight ghost. I’m crooked’” (*BPR*, p.76) – allows him to pun his way out of the reader’s disapproval. As Bold notes, Dougal is functioning at the border ‘between fact and fiction’, operating in the ‘borderlands and liminal territories’¹⁷² that Michael Chabon asserts are the territory of the trickster as writer.¹⁷³ Dougal’s issue appears to be that rather than writing mimetically, he is applying the creative techniques of a writer of fiction. Whether this renders him as a creative visionary, or an inveterate liar, remains to be seen.

If the latter is the preferred choice, then his narrative strategies correspond to a familiar claim made regarding writers specifically, and artists in general. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle note that ‘[a]s Georges Bataille makes clear in his pathbreaking study, *Literature and Evil* (1953), a collusion between creation, imagination and evil is characteristic of literary works in general’.¹⁷⁴ In this respect, Dougal’s diabolic appearance and his propensity for lying are reflections of each other; manifestations of what Katarzyna Nowak has identified as the ‘Augustinian theory of distorted body reflecting distorted soul’.¹⁷⁵ Lewis Hyde observes that the proximity of evil with narrative creativity has led to the identification of the Devil as ‘the father of lies’.¹⁷⁶ Norman Page also notes this connection, identifying Dougal as ‘a fictional maker of fictions and a close relative of the Father of Lies’.¹⁷⁷ Hyde notes that some of the most influential narratives in Norse mythology featuring the trickster Loki have been influenced by this Christian definition. One example occurs in the rewriting of the tale *Edda* by Snorri Sturluson, the thirteenth

¹⁷¹ Bold (1986), p.58.

¹⁷² Bold (1986), p.58, McGann (1985), p.72.

¹⁷³ Bold (1986), p.58.

¹⁷⁴ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory, Fourth Edition* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2009), p.193.

¹⁷⁵ Nowak, ‘The Distorted Body’, [2014].

¹⁷⁶ Hyde (2008), p.104.

¹⁷⁷ Page (1990), p.32.

century Icelandic cataloguer of myths. Hyde notes that: ‘[w]hen Snorri says that Loki is “father of lies,” [...] he doubtless knows that this is what Christians call Satan’.¹⁷⁸

However, there is another narrative tradition that also reifies the act of creative lying. Hyde states that:

[t]rickster [...] is master of the kind of creative deception that, according to a long tradition, is a prerequisite of art. Aristotle wrote that Homer first “taught the rest of us the art of framing lies the right way.” Homer makes lies seem so real that they enter the world and walk among us. Odysseus walks among us to this day, and he would seem to be Homer’s own self-portrait, for Odysseus too, is a master of the art of lying, an art he got from his grandfather, Autolycus, who got it in turn from *his* father, Hermes.¹⁷⁹

Hyde identifies the classical Greek precedents that enshrine a specific form of lying as central to creative and artistic endeavour. Homer’s *Odyssey* is the reference point for Aristotle’s claims that Homer perfects lying as a creative act, and the way in which the characters of such epics transcend their narratives to become legend. Michael Chabon refers to one such figure – Prometheus – when he notes that trickster is the ‘stealer of fire, the maker of mischief, teller of lies’.¹⁸⁰ Trickster therefore emerges from a number of disparate historical traditions featuring mythical figures such as Loki, Prometheus, Odysseus and Hermes, who lie creatively and as a result find themselves – as well as those such as Homer and Snorri who are credited with capturing their images in writing – rendered legendary. Perhaps this is Dougal’s intention as he mythologizes the life of Maria Cheeseman.

As the novel closes, Dougal is seen heading for Africa, ‘with the intention of selling tape-recorders to all the witch doctors’ (*BPR*, p.142). Dougal states that “[w]ithout the aid of this modern device [...] the old tribal authority will rapidly become undermined by the mounting influence of modern scepticism” (*BPR*, p.142). Here we see Dougal attempting to save a culture whose mystical elements rely on the same type of creative

¹⁷⁸ Hyde (2008), p.104. The phrase is based upon scripture; in particular on the passage from John 8:44 on Satan, which states ‘for he is a liar, and the father of it’.

¹⁷⁹ Hyde (1998), p.17.

¹⁸⁰ Chabon (2010), p.12.

lying of which he is an expert. As a supposed “wicked spirit” (*BPR*, p.77) claiming powers of exorcism, Dougal occupies a similar space to the witch doctor; convincing others of unfounded powers, and creating narratives from imaginative forms of deceit. It also highlights the paucity of both his and any witch doctors’ claim to supernatural powers; it is hard to imagine any self-respecting demon or spirit requiring a concealed tape recorder to convince anyone of their paranormal capabilities. This, however, only serves to highlight Dougal’s trickster credentials, where creative deceptions are his tools, not any inherent otherworldly powers. As F. R. Hart notes, ‘[h]is fraudulence is obvious; the legend he creates and exploits is undeniably real’.¹⁸¹

Dougal has become legendary like Loki, Hermes, or the coyote of the Winnebago, albeit ‘on a smaller scale’;¹⁸² he has entered the narrative space of Peckham, and as he returns to the road, he leaves his myth behind, his image being re-imagined in his absence through every new telling of the ‘legend referred to [...] when the conversation takes a matrimonial turn’ (*BPR*, p.14). Whether Dougal is mentioned by name is not the important point, the most significant matter is the positive effect that the legend illustrates.

Humphrey’s response to the vicar’s question “[w]ilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife?” (*BPR*, p.8) almost replicates that of Dougal as he earlier pantomimes a wedding scene: “[n]o [...] I won’t, quite frankly” (*BPR*, p.112) says Dougal. Humphrey’s response is “[n]o [...] to be quite frank I won’t” (*BPR*, p.8). The similarity emphasises the influence Dougal has exerted on Humphrey, where the effect of Humphrey’s rejection is to articulate wider possibilities enabled by a rejection of accepted modes of behaviour and thought. Karl Kerényi defines this as the way in which disorder opens up a new understanding of what is possible and permissible. He states:

[d]isorder belongs to the totality of life, and the spirit of this disorder is the trickster [...] the function of his mythology, of the tales told about him, is to add disorder to

¹⁸¹ Hart (1978), p.305.

¹⁸² Bold (1986), p.57. Bold identifies Dougal as being ‘built on a smaller scale’ than Satan, not the mythological figures mentioned, but the comparison stands.

order [...] to render possible, within the bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted.¹⁸³

Dougal's legacy is to reinvigorate this concept of 'an experience of what is not permitted' as an enriching addition to the 'totality of life' in Peckham.¹⁸⁴ It is possible to argue that Dougal has had a negligible effect on Peckham, that Humphrey subsequently agreeing to marry Dixie illustrates that no substantive change takes place. However, each time the story of the refusal at the altar is told, his legend is reinvigorated, and as a result the enriching rejection of what is permitted becomes possible, encapsulated each time 'everyone remembered how a man had answered 'No' at his wedding' (*BPR*, p.143).

So deception and lies are the both the material and territory of trickster, but as both Hyde and Chabon note, these are the foundations of fiction, a fact that Spark has herself acknowledged. In an interview with Frank Kermode she states:

I don't claim that my novels are truth – I claim that they are fiction, out of which a kind of truth emerges [...] what I write is not true – it is a pack of lies [...] if we are going to live in the world as reasonable beings, we must call it lies. But simply because one puts it out as a work of fiction, then one is not a liar.¹⁸⁵

Spark employs the same terminology of 'lies' as Hyde, Chabon and Aristotle to define the creative act of writing, although she is at pains to make the distinction between the creative utilisation of lying in fiction, and lying as a non-creative or non-artistic act. It is this distinction that allows us to read Dougal as an amoral trickster, as opposed to the lying "“wicked spirit”" (*BPR*, p.77) he claims to be.

While we have seen Dougal's self-mythologizing in his numerous tales about himself, he also appears to be writing Peckham itself into mythology. His re-appropriation of Miss Cheeseman's childhood from Streatham to Peckham coincides with stories such as his claim that "“Boadicea committed suicide on Peckham Rye probably where the bowling

¹⁸³ Kerényi (1972), p.185.

¹⁸⁴ Kerényi (1972), p.185.

¹⁸⁵ Frank Kermode, 'Muriel Spark's House of Fiction', in *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*, ed. by Joseph Hynes (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992), pp.29-32 (p.30). Excerpted and reprinted from 'The House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists', *Partisan Review* 30, 1 (1963), 61-82.

green is now, I should imagine” (BPR, p.28). It is as though he believes that in fictionalising a history for Peckham, he will facilitate the possibility of a fertile, creative future. In this, Dougal’s actions are reminiscent of a line from Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark*, when the character Thaw states that “[i]f a city hasn’t been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively”.¹⁸⁶ While London has featured extensively in artistic representation, the district of Peckham – perhaps not considered one of London’s glamorous, artistic, or creative locations – has not, and Dougal constructing a narrative mythological history can be considered as his attempt to enable the “inhabitants [to] live there imaginatively”.¹⁸⁷ If the majority of the residents of Spark’s Peckham lack anything, it is imagination, and in this respect Dougal is simply being trickster; lying to create culture by unearthing a fertile territory for ideas.¹⁸⁸ As Alan Bold has noted, he simply fails to recognise the boundaries between fact and fiction, with his amorality extending to his writing practice. As a result, he becomes ‘a ghost writer, a creator of fantasy lives for those caught in [a] torpid existence’.¹⁸⁹

Dougal’s tendency to fictionalise suggests that he resembles his creator. Martin Stannard makes this point directly, positing that Dougal is ‘a metaphor for the novelist [...] he is Muriel transfigured’.¹⁹⁰ Gerard Carruthers makes a similar point, but stops short of suggesting that Dougal is a version of Spark. He notes their shared marginal status, echoing the Gaelic etymology of Dougal the ‘dark stranger’¹⁹¹ when he says that ‘Spark as author here might be thought to be very much like Dougal, himself as an outsider, making elegant oxymoronic patterns she is in full control of but from which she stands in comprehensive ironic detachment’.¹⁹² Based on the hypothesis of this chapter, the similarity noted by Stannard and Carruthers between Dougal and Spark suggests Spark

¹⁸⁶ Alasdair Gray, *Lanark* (London: Paladin, 1989), p.243. First published by Canongate Publishing Limited in 1981.

¹⁸⁷ Gray (1989), p.243.

¹⁸⁸ Hyde (2008), p.iii. The subtitle to Hyde’s book is ‘How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture’.

¹⁸⁹ Richmond (1984), p.77.

¹⁹⁰ Stannard (2009), p.221.

¹⁹¹ Hanks and Hodges (1990), p.90, Abernethy (2009), p.16.

¹⁹² Carruthers (2010)a, p.31.

may also share attributes of trickster. As noted above, she has talked about her fiction as ‘a pack of lies’, a characteristic which aligns with trickster’s liberty with truth.¹⁹³ However, Spark outlines her method by describing how lying to create fictional narratives can lead to the opposite outcome. She states that ‘[f]iction to me is a kind of parable. You have to make up your mind it’s not true. Some kind of truth emerges from it, but it’s not fact’.¹⁹⁴ Consistent with the methodology employed in this chapter and subtracting the religious connotations of the word parable and substituting one of its synonyms, we are left with an approach that attempts to reveal ‘[s]ome kind of truth’ by utilising fable, legend, allegory, and tales of folklore.¹⁹⁵ In other words, Spark occupies the territory which is both the origin and the practice of trickster. Michael Chabon identifies a literal correspondence in the approaches of Spark and trickster, stating that ‘trickster is both the teller of parables, the “teller of lies”, but also the subject of them’.¹⁹⁶ Spark may not initially appear to be the subject of lies, but if one permits any biographic reading of her fiction, her admission that her fiction is ‘a pack of lies’ must include the reasonable assumption that she is the subject of at least some of these lies. The characters Barbara Vaughan, Caroline Rose, and Fleur Talbot all appear to be strongly biographical, and as such, Spark’s fictionalising of her own experiences accords with Chabon’s definition of trickster as the “teller of lies”, but also the subject of them’.¹⁹⁷

As Gerard Carruthers notes above, Spark and Dougal share a position on the periphery as outsiders, with his identification of her ‘ironic detachment’ suggesting something in common with trickster’s ambivalence.¹⁹⁸ This move to the fringes is also noted by Chabon, who states that ‘[t]rickster haunts the boundary lines, the margins’.¹⁹⁹ While Lewis Hyde states that ‘[m]y own position [...] is not that the artists I write about

¹⁹³ Spark in Kermode (1992), p.30.

¹⁹⁴ Spark (1992)b, p.28.

¹⁹⁵ Spark (1992)b, p.28.

¹⁹⁶ Chabon (2010), p.12.

¹⁹⁷ Chabon (2010), p.12.

¹⁹⁸ Carruthers (2010)a, p.31.

¹⁹⁹ Chabon (2010), p.14.

are tricksters but that there are moments when the practice of art and this myth coincide',²⁰⁰ Chabon sees trickster in those novelists who are situated on the margins, in 'the borders between things'.²⁰¹ For Chabon, authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Thomas Pynchon, A.S. Byatt, Kurt Vonnegut and Cormac McCarthy have 'plied their trade in the spaces between genres, in the no man's land'.²⁰² While it is not possible to give full consideration here to Chabon's claims, it is clear that Spark fits the description of a writer who has evaded any easily identifiable assertion of genre to her work. *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, with its combination of the contemporary and the folkloric is a perfect example, as are many of her genre-defying fictions.

Another area in which Spark appears to resemble trickster is in her perceived ambivalence towards her characters. She has spoken about this, stating:

[p]eople say my novels are cruel because cruel things happen and I keep an even tone. I'm often deadpan, but there's a moral statement too, and what it's saying is that there's life beyond this and these events are not the most important things. They're not important in the long run.²⁰³

Just as the final scene of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* closes with the inference of a life and world beyond the present, so too does Spark explain the often cruel treatment of her characters as part of her use of parables, and their evocation of a 'life beyond this'.²⁰⁴ The most obvious example of this perceived cruelty occurs in the scene where Merle is murdered. The horror of the cold-blooded attack is indeed exacerbated by the 'even tone' employed in the narrative: '[h]e 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*, p.136). The scene is shocking; however, if, in the spirit of trickster we reject authorial authority and read against Spark's stated position by subtracting the religious and spiritual implications of her explanation, we can identify another correspondence with

²⁰⁰ Hyde (2008), p.14.

²⁰¹ Chabon (2010), p.12.

²⁰² Chabon (2010), p.13.

²⁰³ Spark in Maley (2008), p.28.

²⁰⁴ Spark in Maley (2008), p.28.

trickster in her methodology. The ambiguity and ‘ironic detachment’ identified by

Carruthers can then be considered in relation to what Chabon quantifies as trickster spite.

He talks of the drive he experiences as a writer

to say, and to do, and to write things that you know you must or ought not say, do, or write [of being] in thrall, at least some of the time, to the spirit of doing things *af tselokhis*, out of spite, a kind of magical, Trickster spite that, like Coyote or Loki of the Northmen, is responsible for all destruction and all creation too.²⁰⁵

Chabon articulates the ambiguous and contradictory impulses of invention and obliteration, of rejecting expectation and convention, and of defying incumbent modes of authority and accepted standards. These are all trickster methodologies, and many of these are as applicable to Spark and Dougal Douglas as they are to Chabon. It would perhaps be too much to suggest that Spark is a modern-day trickster, but there is something in the way in which she draws upon folklore and myth, and in her subverting of the narrative expectations of fictional decorum that resembles the activities of trickster.

Another possibility is that at the root of her rejection of such conventions is a simple desire to avoid categorisation or entrapment in any kind of readerly expectation. As Flannery O’Connor says, “[t]he writer is only free when he can tell the reader to go jump in a lake. You want, of course, to get what you have to show across to him, but whether he likes it or not is no concern of the writer”²⁰⁶. Just as Dougal is ambivalent, so too is Spark in creating a text for which there is – like Masefield’s ‘Reynard’ – no moral, and no simple decoding or revealing of meaning. Whether this represents a failure to “‘get what you have to show across”’ to the reader, or a successful encapsulation of the mystery and complexity Spark wishes to convey, the sense that the reader should look for the nearest body of dark water is never far away.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Chabon (2010), p.179.

²⁰⁶ Flannery O’Connor, quoted in Betsy Lochridge, ‘An Afternoon with Flannery O’Connor’, in *Conversations with Flannery O’Connor*, ed. by Rosemary M. Magee (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), pp.37-40 (p.39). Originally published in *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine*, 1st November 1959, pp.38-40.

²⁰⁷ O’Connor in Lochridge (1987), p.39.

However, there are an additional set of rules that apply here. In the case of Merle's murder, Spark is adhering fully to the narrative conventions of the ballad tradition. In *Patterns in Oral Literature* (1977), Heda Jason notes that 'an investigation of a sample of Scottish ballads from the eighteenth century showed that 50 percent of them deal with illicit love affairs of some sort, all of which end tragically for at least the female partner'.²⁰⁸ Under these conditions, Merle's death is a pre-condition of the ballad conventions which influence Spark's novel. Jason notes that this, however, is not meant as an accurate reflection on the levels of adultery or murder within the societies depicted, but rather that such tales function as 'rituals of rebellion'.²⁰⁹ She suggests that such narrative rituals emerge in part because

it was pleasant to sing about emotions which could not be realized in real life. The ballad could play the role of a ritual of rebellion in spite of the fact that in order to conform to the accepted social norms the ballad hero who dared to violate them found a tragic end in the ballad. Thus, the ballad fulfilled a certain function in keeping up the emotional balance of society's members and was not a direct reflection of the social conditions.²¹⁰

The application of the ballad framework allows for a continuation of the folkloric reading strategy, whereby Spark's religious and theological explanation for the cruelty in her fiction can be placed to one side, just as the attempt has been made throughout this chapter to marginalise Dougal's supernatural characteristics. The explanation that Jason outlines suggests that Spark is enacting 'a ritual of rebellion' whilst at the same time adhering to the ballad conventions.²¹¹ Yet again we see the oxymoronic and paradoxical at play in Spark's fiction, as she rebels and adheres simultaneously.

The ritualistic ambivalence of the ballads brings us back to the territory of Romanticism. The central hypothesis of this chapter is that accepting Dougal at his word,

²⁰⁸ Heda Jason, with comments by B. N. Colby, R. A. Georges, and P. Maranda, 'Content Analysis of Oral Literature: A Discussion', in *Patterns in Oral Literature*, ed. by Heda Jason and Dimitri Segal (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1977), pp.261-310 (p.289).

²⁰⁹ Jason (1977), p.289. The term 'rituals of rebellion' is quoted by Jason from Max Gluckman, *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa* (London: Cohen and West, 1963), p.110.

²¹⁰ Jason (1977), p.289.

²¹¹ Jason (1977), p.289.

and reading him as a “wicked spirit” (BPR, p.77) has resulted in Spark’s use of mythology, folklore, and the oral and literary traditions of trickster being overlooked. Her debt to T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’ is often discussed, but here again the emphasis of the critical discourse has been the way Spark has absorbed Eliot’s influence in her use of the vernacular, and in the loveless torpor of many of her characters. These elements are present, but Spark’s use of the trickster tradition can be read as owing something to Eliot’s reliance on Weston and Frazer, which while acknowledged in relation to *The Takeover*, has remained overlooked in criticism of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*.

Alan Bold suggests that elements of Spark’s language and imagery suggest another related emphasis. He says that,

[b]y describing an affair central to *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* as ‘a legend’ (p.14) in her first chapter and ending the book on a vision of the Rye looking ‘like a cloud of green and gold’ (p.143) Spark appeals primarily to the emotion, rather than the intellect, of the reader.²¹²

Bold does not fully articulate the point, but his proposition strongly implies that the novel owes an obvious debt to Romanticism through its emphasis of emotion over intellect. Notwithstanding the debates regarding the manner in which this binary often misrepresents the complexity of Romanticism, especially regarding its relationship with the preceding Enlightenment and Neoclassical periods, it is a distinction that Spark herself has recognised. In her 1951 study of Mary Shelley titled *Child of Light*, Spark states that ‘[r]eason had not yet given way to feeling as the cult of the elect [...] when we look back now on that period of transition between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’.²¹³ It is impossible to be sure whether her understanding of this transitional period altered in the intervening nine years until *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* was published in 1960, but it is clear that *Ballad* does not render a simplistic position regarding such a binary. While Bold

²¹² Bold (1986), p.58. Bold mistakenly references ‘a legend’ as p.145. This cannot be the case as his second quote comes from the final paragraph of the novel, which he lists as p.143, therefore any other quote taken from the novel must be prior to this. The first quote can be found on p.14, and I have referenced it as such.

²¹³ Spark (1951), p.9.

is correct to identify a visionary and transfigurational – and therefore Romantic – element in the novel’s closing scene, there are a number of warnings about the dangers of ignoring reason in favour of emotion. For example, Miss Frierne misses the opportunity to speak to her estranged brother. She says that “[s]omething stopped me. It was an instinct” (*BPR*, p.86). When the brother dies, there is a strong suggestion that Miss Frierne’s unreasoning reaction causes her so much guilt that it becomes a contributory factor in her subsequently suffering a stroke. Similarly, when Merle Coverdale complains to Dougal that she cannot leave Mr Druce, Dougal’s suggestion may seem rational to the point of being callous, but it is undoubtedly sage advice. He says, “[g]et another job [...] and refuse to see him any more. It’s easy” (*BPR*, p.98). Merle, however, cannot countenance her pride being compromised, and the outcome of her decision being dictated by the emotion of pride, and without reference to her reasoning or rationality, is catastrophic.

However, as ever with Spark, a contrasting episode provides evidence to counter these examples. Dougal’s African adventure represents such a case, where the ‘old tribal authority’ based upon myth, superstition and legend (the witch doctors are evidence of this), is threatened by the rationality and reasoning of ‘modern scepticism’ (*BPR*, p.142). However, this is not simply an attempt by Dougal to interfere in another culture; there is the matter of self-preservation to consider. Stanley Diamond outlines why a trickster such as Dougal would undertake what appears to be another of his ‘cockeyed’ schemes (*BPR*, p.142). He states that the

principle or rather *personification* of ambivalence, since we are dealing with primitive perceptions and not abstract conceptualizations, is, as Jung, Kerényi, and Radin have sufficiently indicated, most directly realized in the figure of the trickster [...] With the appearance of civilisation [...] the concrete image of the trickster is suppressed.²¹⁴

²¹⁴ Stanley Diamond, ‘Introductory Essay: Job and the Trickster’, in Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, ed. by Paul Radin (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), pp.xi-xxii (p.xii-xiii).

Dougal's selling of tape-recording machines to the witch doctors is evidence of his determination to preserve a mode of existence that situates the elevation of emotion over reason at its core, and it shows Dougal, ever contradictory, struggling to preserve the incumbent power against a new, intrusive, foreign ideology. It also suggests that in order for trickster to maintain a presence in the civilised world, he must remain visible in matter, and not simply exist as an abstraction.

Whatever the extent of Spark's reservations regarding the danger of overly emphasising emotion over reason, it is clear that she utilises some of the strategies and materials of the Romantic era in her reliance on ballads, myths and, as previously discussed, legend. In *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1992), Martin Gray notes some

of the topics typical of so-called romantic literature: natural, 'primitive' human existence, whether in the form of the noble savage, the peasant or the outcast from society [...] uncorrupted by society's rigid way of comprehending the world of things; ghost stories, legends, myths and dreams.²¹⁵

As with Bold's quote above, Gray's outline of some of the concerns of Romantic writing exhibits a number of correspondences with Spark's novel. The "'primitive' human existence' is manifested in Spark's use of the ballads and in the influence of Eliot, Weston and Frazer, while Dougal the trickster emerges from a myth and departs a legend, his ambivalent amorality still 'uncorrupted by society's rigid ways'.²¹⁶ As Flannery O'Connor says of the character Enoch Emery from her 1952 novel *Wise Blood*, 'I am much interested in this sort of innocent person who sets the havoc in motion'.²¹⁷ Whether or not Dougal is truly innocent of the havoc he creates is left – like him – ambiguous for the reader to decide.

Throughout the novel, Dougal's attempts to mythologize himself and the district of Peckham have illustrated his attraction to what could be termed the narrative remains of

²¹⁵ Martin Gray, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Harlow: Longman, 1992), p.252.

²¹⁶ Gray (1992), p.252.

²¹⁷ Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters Edited and with an Introduction by Sally Fitzgerald* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), p.434.

the area's history. His research into the character of Peckham involves studying – and inventing – a mythological past, evoking legends such as Boadicea in the process. His fictionalising of Maria Cheeseman's biography is undertaken with the same creative approach to her life narrative, taking the historical remains of her story and those of others to create a new, reinvigorated, semi-fictional, alternative version of Peckham. Whether it is an improvement is another matter, but it has been subject to his 'cockeyed' vision (*BPR*, p.142). Spark's approach can be seen to mirror this in many respects. As discussed, her appropriation of ballad form and her utilisation of mythology and folklore are evidence of her tapping into the recent and distant past; in other words the remains of oral and narrative cultures. As Martin Gray has noted, this utilisation of mythology and legend, alongside Dougal's trickster figure being an 'uncorrupted [...] outcast' illustrates Spark's debt to Romanticism's fascination with such remains.²¹⁸

Ian Duncan notes a similarly dual-faceted debt to remains in Hogg's *Justified Sinner*. Here the manuscript of the 'Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Sinner: Written by Himself' is unearthed from the grave of Robert Wringhim.²¹⁹ In having the corpse and the narrative exhumed in such a way, Duncan states that 'Hogg literalizes the central metaphor of modern antiquarian romance revival: the recovery of "remains," "reliques," or "fragments" of a departed, organic culture'.²²⁰ This exhumation of remains is reflected in Dougal's archaeological unearthing of the myths of Peckham past, whether in terms of his work with Cheese, or in his notebook entry, which reads:

Entry Parish Register 1658. 5 May.
 Rose, wife of Wm Hathaway buried
 Aged 103, who boare a sonn at the age
 Of 63. (*BPR*, p.92)

²¹⁸ Gray (1992), p.252.

²¹⁹ Hogg (1987), p.107.

²²⁰ Duncan (2003), p.110.

The relevance of Dougal's highlighting of this particular relic of information from Peckham's past remains a mystery, seemingly unrelated to the other events in the novel.²²¹ However, alongside his mythologizing of Peckham's historic narratives, it does fit in with his programme of 'the recovery of "remains," "reliques," or "fragments" of a departed, organic culture'.²²²

Dougal is interested in the exhumation of Peckham's history, but his behaviour is also illustrative of a 'modern antiquarian romance revival: the recovery of "remains"' in his fascination with exactly that; human remains.²²³ Early in the novel we learn of Dougal's fondness for graveyards, when he leads Merle through the New Cemetery before posing 'like an angel-devil' (*BPR*, p.30). Her query, "[e]njoying yourself?" (*BPR*, p.31), seems less of a question than a confirmation of Dougal's obvious pleasure. Later Dougal lists the local graveyards, noting that "'we have five cemeteries up here round the Rye within the space of a square mile'" (*BPR*, p.74). His fascination is fully engaged by the excavation of an old tunnel at the police station, which has resulted in the discovery and disturbance of the burial site of an order of nuns. Having 'already made himself known as an interested archaeologist' (*BPR*, p.102), Dougal is now literally amongst remains, as a policeman states that "'[t]here's bodies of nuns down there'" (*BPR*, p.102). Dougal uses the tunnel to make his escape from Peckham, and while doing so, he indulges in a bizarre episode before his fight with Trevor Lomas. Given his fascination with 'figurative' remains – the narrative history of Peckham – Dougal now enacts Duncan's process of literalizing by juggling with the dead nuns' bones.²²⁴ Just as Hogg has the body of the sinner and his

²²¹ There are two interpretive or allusive possibilities here. The first is that the longevity and the fertility of Rose Hathaway are of significance, given her advanced age at both motherhood and death. If this is related to Dougal's attempts to reinvigorate the fertility of Peckham through his trickster behaviour and the exhuming of narrative remains, then the implication is oblique. The second is possibly a faint reference towards Shakespeare's wife Anne Hathaway, given that her surname and Shakespeare's forename are combined in the husband's name of William Hathaway. There is, however, no obvious way in which this would be more broadly significant to the narrative. Nelly Mahone perhaps comes closest to the truth, when in regard to Dougal's entry on Rose Hathaway, she tells Trevor Lomas that "'[i]t's only his larks. He's off his nut, son'" (*BPR*, p.97).

²²² Duncan (2003), p.110.

²²³ Duncan (2003), p.110.

²²⁴ Frazer (1993), p.609.

manuscript exhumed, so too does Dougal unearth the stories and the bodies of old Peckham. Dougal, however, takes the exhumation one step further, as he

[h]eld the torch between his teeth and juggled with some carefully chosen shin bones which were clotted with earth. He managed six at a time, throwing and catching, never missing, so that the earth fell away from them and scattered.

(*BPR*, p.139)

We have already seen Dougal's attitude towards death in his 'right/wrong' impersonation of Miss Frieme's dead brother, but his behaviour here is part of what Lewis Hyde identifies as trickster's 'great attraction to dirt'.²²⁵ The reason behind this is the symbolic significance of dirt to trickster. As Hyde notes, 'stories about tricksters and dirt [...] speak to the sterility that hides in most all human systems and design'.²²⁶ The sterility of Peckham has already led to Dougal's immersion in dirt, but he has until this point been dealing mostly with dirt in the figurative sense.

Dougal's involvement with this version of dirt has been through his involvement with the Lomas gang, with Dougal being blackmailed by Leslie Crewe in exchange for the return of his stolen notebooks. Spark uses blackmail throughout her fiction as symbolic of the lowest form of criminality, the activity of those occupying dirt in the metaphoric sense. She does not, however, base her disapprobation on class; the Lomas gang are hired by Mr Druce, while Mrs Willis, wife of the owner of Drover Willis, illustrates one of the possible causes of the problem when she writes, '[b]efore the war these boys used to be glad of a meal and a night's shelter, but now quite frankly...' (*BPR*, p.132). Her condescension and snobbery are clear; it is she who looks upon the lower classes of Peckham as dirt, not Spark or Dougal.

Dougal is in fact entirely comfortable with those regarded as belonging to the lowest strata of Peckham society. Indeed, it is through his relationship with Nelly Mahone that he comes into contact with dirt in the literal sense. Nelly's room is filthy, but she is at

²²⁵ Hyde (2008), p.8.

²²⁶ Hyde (2008), p.179.

pains to point out that “[i]t’s all clean dirt” (*BPR*, p.78), her oxymoronic phrasing reflecting Dougal’s contradictory ambivalence. Dougal is comfortable in these surroundings, his ease being indicative of trickster’s ‘great attraction to dirt’.²²⁷ This is in contrast to Lomas and his gang, with Leslie Crewe proclaiming, “I’m not stopping in this dirty hole” (*BPR*, p.94), before abruptly attempting to leave. The irony is clear; those who occupy the metaphoric dirt are unable to stomach the real substance.

Dougal has no such aversion; indeed, as he exits Peckham he undertakes the trickster ritual of ‘revivification through dirt’.²²⁸ As noted above, Dougal’s act of juggling bones appears somewhat absurd, but if we note that the bones are ‘clotted with earth’ (*BPR*, p.139), then the ritual begins to gain significance. For trickster, ‘when the order is in fundamental crisis these rituals can become the focal points for change, catalytic moments for dirt’s revaluation and true structural shifts’.²²⁹ Dougal’s juggling of the bones is a dirt ritual in the following ways. In the simplest sense, handling the bones requires Dougal to enter into contact with the dirt in which they were buried. While the narrative tells us that they were, in fact, ‘piled in a crevice ready to be taken away’ (*BPR*, p.139), they are situated underground, and are still covered in earth. Dougal makes no attempt to remove the dirt, but instead undertakes his carnivalesque act of juggling the bones, allowing the earth to fall from the bones naturally. This exhumation of remains has necessitated Dougal’s contact with dirt, and he now symbolically allows the dirt of Peckham’s metaphoric past to fall from the bones as he prepares to undertake his new adventure, evoked by ‘the new gravel, trodden only, so far, by the workmen, and by Dougal as he proceeded with his bags’ (*BPR*, p.139).

That ‘the order [of Peckham] is in fundamental crisis’ is clear, but before he can embark on his next episode, Dougal must face Trevor Lomas, the character perhaps most

²²⁷ Hyde (2008), p.8. Nelly illustrates the danger of judging by appearance, as the following suggests that she is closest in outlook to Spark herself: “Nelly did not like the word blackmailer at all” (*BPR*, p.79).

²²⁸ Hyde (2008), p.177.

²²⁹ Hyde (2008), p.188.

symbolic of Peckham's sterility and need for change.²³⁰ Revivified by his dirt ritual amongst the remains, Dougal is now able to face Lomas, and despite minor injury, emerges victorious from the tunnel, ready to begin his African quest.²³¹ Dougal has, in fact, gone beyond what is usually faced by trickster in a dirt ritual. Often these ritualistic interactions are undertaken as symbolic attempts to revitalise a jaded culture, ways to challenge the orthodoxy by 'avoiding, on the one hand, the violence and sterility that seem to accompany purified order'.²³² In fighting Lomas, Dougal has instead faced up to the violence of incumbent power in Peckham, and his victory is symbolic of the possibility for the reinvigoration of life in the area. Dougal's trickster behaviour throughout has been indicative of his attempts to unsettle the barren sterility of Peckham, and this has finally been enabled, at least partly, by his 'revivification through dirt'.²³³

Writing in 1960, Spark said, 'I wrote *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, the story of a curious young man who causes trouble and high jinks wherever he goes'.²³⁴ This chapter has argued that by considering Dougal as trickster, it has been possible to draw to the surface previously overlooked debts to the folkloric and mythological ancestries of Romanticism. This strategy has been employed deliberately in order to consider Spark's novel without reference to the supernatural; the predominant critical reading. What is notable about Spark's words above are that she does not define Dougal as a devil or evil spirit, but rather as 'a curious young man'.²³⁵ Neither, however, does she define him as a trickster, but her words suggest the possibility that even for Spark, Dougal is not entirely demonic.

Nonetheless, Dougal does display the characteristics and traits of trickster, and even allowing for a deliberate marginalisation of his supposed religious or spiritual

²³⁰ Hyde (2008), p.188.

²³¹ Dougal's earlier dancing and mimicry performance emboldens him in much the same manner as his dirt ritual revivifies him for the adventures ahead.

²³² Hyde (2008), p.190.

²³³ Hyde (2008), p.177.

²³⁴ Spark (2014)a, p.76.

²³⁵ Spark (2014)a, p.76.

elements, the novel can be considered as such without overlooking any of the important themes. As noted above, the identification of Dougal as an amoral catalyst who illuminates the moral landscape of Peckham and its inhabitants does not deny a religious reading, but rather adds to the interpretive possibilities. Such a reading also highlights the extent to which Spark relies on the materials and strategies of Romanticism. Jerome J. McGann says that ‘the Romantic poem [...] characteristically haunts [...] borderlands and liminal territories. These are Romantic places because they locate areas of contradiction, conflict, and problematic alternatives [...] these subjects occupy areas of critical uncertainty’.²³⁶ McGann’s configuration of the Romantic poem comes then to act as a metaphor for the trickster of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. Dougal is ‘contradiction, conflict’, an embodiment of ‘problematic [but fruitful] alternatives’.²³⁷ For McGann, the Romantic poem ‘characteristically haunts [...] borderlands and liminal territories’, just as for Michael Chabon ‘[t]rickster haunts the boundary lines, the margins’.²³⁸ These ‘liminal territories’ may be the preserve of Romantic poets, but they are also the preserve of the oral tradition and the mythologies of folklore upon which Romanticism has nourished itself.²³⁹ *Ballad* is no work of Romanticism, but in its central trickster figure, it owes a debt to all the trickster figures out of which Dougal has evolved. Whether Reynard or Coyote, Raven, or dark, mysterious Scotsman, trickster is alive, chaotic and – for a short time only – in Peckham, a manifestation of the remains of numerous cultures, back amongst those who require the replenishment that his ambivalence and amorality can unveil.

²³⁶ McGann (1985), pp.72-3.

²³⁷ McGann (1985), pp.72-3.

²³⁸ McGann (1985), p.72, Chabon (2010), p.14.

²³⁹ McGann (1985), p.72.

Chapter 4: ‘Above the Height of the Vulgar Commonplace’: Performance, *Nouveau Roman*, and the Utopian Sublime in *The Driver’s Seat* (1970)¹

In his essay ‘Parodying Postmodernism: Muriel Spark (*The Driver’s Seat*) and Robbe-Grillet (*Jealousy*)’, Aidan Day notes Spark’s dualistic position on the *nouveau roman*, or anti-novel movement,² outlining her ‘simultaneous appreciation and, as it were, denial of Robbe-Grillet [as] the starting point’ of his essay.³ A similarly dualistic attitude toward Romanticism – and, indeed, a number of philosophies, ideologies, and critical modes of thought; not least toward the adherents of her own Catholic beliefs – can be found throughout Spark’s fiction. A brief index of themes reveals this dualism as an on-going, back-and-forth tussle with Romantic and post-Romantic thought. From her first novel, *The Comforters* (1957), to her last, *The Finishing School* (2004), Spark is concerned with the author-God analogy, with characters who attempt to control the lives of others, and the moral absolutism seemingly granted to the Romantic and post-Romantic artist and author. She considers and subsequently satirises a number of other aspects of Romantic thought – such as the solipsism of the self and the ‘wordsworthian or egotistical sublime’ – and she questions the Romantic credo of secular transcendence as attained through the aesthetic elevation of art.⁴ The Romantic notion of the artist as a prophet-like figure gifted with access to transcendent truth is also consistently ridiculed in her numerous depictions of writers.

Nonetheless, Spark’s attitude towards Romanticism is not one of absolute opposition. Rather, it is an on-going struggle which indicates a much more complex and nuanced relationship with Romantic thought than simply that of outright rejection. While

¹ Kant (1973), p.111.

² Aidan Day, ‘Parodying Postmodernism: Muriel Spark (*The Driver’s Seat*) and Robbe-Grillet (*Jealousy*)’, in *English*, 56 (2007), pp.321-337 (p.321). Day uses ‘*nouveau roman*’ and ‘anti-novel’ synonymously, as does Alan Bold in his *Muriel Spark* (London: Methuen, 1986), p.92.

³ Day (2007), p.321.

⁴ John Keats, ‘Letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October, 1818’, in *John Keats: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.418.

her staple methods ‘of satire and of ridicule’ are wielded against Romanticism as frequently as her other targets, they also indicate a level of fascination and engagement which leads to a complex and often contradictory relationship with Romanticism and Romantic influenced thought.⁵ The acknowledgement of this dual – or, indeed, multifaceted – position in relation to the influence of Romanticism in Spark’s writing, is the starting point of this chapter.

On first reading *The Driver’s Seat* (1970) may not appear to provide an opportunity to discuss the place of Romanticism in Spark’s work. However, the novel’s investigation of the impact of loneliness and psychosis, and the subsequent treatment of individuality and control return us to the familiar Romantic issues of the self and the resulting solipsism caused by an over-emphasis of such. Michael Herbert notes that Romanticism is overwhelmingly concerned with interiority, with its focus on ‘turning from merely external events to concentrate upon inner experience, the life of the mind as the essence of existence’.⁶ Subsequently, Spark’s use of *nouveau roman* influenced stylistic techniques initiates a debate on her rejection of the interiority prevalent in Romantic and subsequent so-called realist fiction. By eliminating “‘he or she thought” or “‘he or she felt””,⁷ and denying the reader the insight resulting from such narratorial qualifications, Spark aligns herself with some of the postmodern methods of the *nouveau roman*, approaches which appear anti-Romantic in their rejection of ‘inner experience [and] the life of the mind’.⁸ As no motivation is provided for the characters’ behaviour, this creates a novel somewhat akin to a script or a screenplay, and the resulting performative elements are therefore worth considering within the context of Spark’s understanding and treatment of Romanticism.

As *The Driver’s Seat* opens we witness Lise being unnecessarily confrontational while purchasing gaudily-coloured clothes. Lise has been trying on a dress, but having

⁵ Muriel Spark, ‘The Desegregation of Art’, in *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*, ed. by Joseph Hynes (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1992), pp.33-37 (p.35). Subsequent references will be dated ‘(1992)c’.

⁶ Michael Herbert, ‘The Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Novel’, in *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. by Nicholas Roe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.620-630 (p.620).

⁷ Spark in McQuillan (2002), p.216.

⁸ Herbert (2005), p.620.

been informed that “the material doesn’t stain”, [Lise] is suddenly tearing at the fastener at the neck, pulling at the zip of the dress. She is saying, “[g]et this thing off me. Off me. At once”” (*DS*, p7). Following a number of similarly melodramatic episodes, the narrator remarks, ‘[s]o she lays the trail’ (*DS*, p.51), confirming what the reader already suspects; Lise is ensuring that her final days will be easily retraced by the authorities following her death. Subsequently, Lise’s actions in the period leading up to her death can be understood as a performance, a way to be noticed and easily remembered by those she encounters. However, this performance, or series of performative acts, functions as something more than simply attention seeking and ensuring she is memorable.

The narrator reveals a clue as to the nature and possible source of Lise’s behaviour. As she leaves the first shop, ‘she turns to look back and says, with a look of satisfaction at her own dominance over the situation with an undoubtable excuse, “I won’t be insulted!”’ (*DS*, p.9). Her over-the-top reaction to the shop assistant’s comment regarding the garment’s stain-resisting qualities, and the narrator’s interpretation of her expression as one of ‘satisfaction at her own dominance’ (*DS*, p.9) indicate Lise’s attempt to assert herself through control and the imposition of authority, and to her seeming satisfaction of the sense of power gained in doing so. (It is worth noting at this point that the narrator has deduced these emotions from Lise’s external expressions, from ‘a look’; neither the reader nor the narrator is privy to Lise’s internal thought processes, a matter which will be returned to presently). Aidan Day comments on Lise’s behaviour, noting that

[e]verything she does, however daft it may at times seem, resolves into this desperate attempt to resist determination, to gain self-possession and with that self-possession to be able to act on her environment rather than be acted on [...] [it] is part of her attempt to establish individuality in a social condition where she feels deprived of it.⁹

Day’s use of the verb ‘to act’, with its dual connotations of both taking positive action, but also of performance, alerts the reader to two elements combined in Lise’s behaviour; to be

⁹ Day (2007), p.329.

assertive (rather than passive), but also to perform or to act (to be noticed as opposed to ignored; to be on stage and in the limelight, rather than situated anonymously in the audience). In doing so, Day conflates Lise's methodology of gaining attention through theatrical performance with her objective, which is to assert her individual subjectivity and gain control having seemingly been denied it up to this point.

A similarly voluble incident occurs in the next shop, where Lise again asserts her individuality by contradicting the assistant's opinion that "the two [garments] don't go well together" due to the clash of their garish, patterned designs (*DS*, p.11). Lise's reply is that "[t]hey go very well together [...] [t]he colours go together perfectly. People here in the North are ignorant of colours. Conservative; old-fashioned. If only you knew! These colours are a natural blend for me. Absolutely natural" (*DS*, pp.11-12). Following this condescending outburst, Lise adds a further theatrical element as she 'laughs aloud and descends the elevator' (*DS*, p.13). These two fraught shopping episodes are interposed by a scene in Lise's office which offers some context as to the possible causes behind this newly-fledged assertive theatricality. As she is encouraged to take time off to pack for her holiday we are told that 'she had begun to laugh hysterically. She finished laughing and started crying all in a flood' (*DS*, p.10). As the situation worsens 'a flurry at the other desks, [and] the jerky backward movements of her little fat superior, conveyed to her that she had done again what she had not done for five years' (*DS*, p.10). What is being obliquely revealed here is a history of emotionally disturbed behaviour, with the strong inference of a previous nervous breakdown. This is subtly inferred when we are informed that Lise 'has worked continually, except for the months of illness, since she was eighteen, that is to say, for sixteen years and some months' (*DS*, p.9). The modulation between what appears to be genuine, unaffected emotional suffering – encapsulated in her instantaneous and uncontrolled shift from hysterical laughter to floods of tears – and the absurdity of Lise's affected, melodramatic, exaggerated performances in both shops, has a deeply unsettling effect, suggesting a form of bi-polarity on Lise's part. The question of whether

this bi-polar change is either the manifestation of a deliberate strategy on Lise's part, or an uncontrolled consequence of a second psychotic episode resulting from stress, is never clarified. We are left to deduce for ourselves whether or not Lise's subsequent performative behaviour is a rational adjustment or a series of psychotic episodes.

This is followed by a description of Lise's home, which she keeps 'as clean-lined and clear to return to after work as if it were uninhabited' (*DS*, p.15). The majority of the furniture is designed to fold away, to remain unseen until required. The chairs are 'stackable [...] when the desk is not in use it, too, disappears into the pinewood wall [...]' A small pantry-kitchen adjoins this room. Here, too, everything is contrived to fold away into the dignity of unvarnished pinewood' (*DS*, p.14). It is difficult not to read Lise's home space as metaphorically depicting elements of her character. She also remains unseen when not in use, an embodiment or incarnation only of her workplace function (which remains unstated), an anonymous figure in an office where she is the median point in a workforce that is paradoxically both uneven yet symmetrical. We are told that 'she has five girls under her and two men. Over her are two women and five men' (*DS*, p.9), meaning that while the structure of her office reveals a bias in favour of the males, numerically Lise is average, the exact middle employee, implying she is ordinary and entirely unremarkable.

Lise arranges her flat as though it is 'uninhabited', a lifeless space where '[t]he swaying tall pines among the litter of cones on the forest floor have been subdued into silence and into obedient bulks' (*DS*, p.8). Just as Lise's job appears to have robbed her of vivacity and life, so too have the breathing forests been rendered lifeless; the living and moving made inert, while the uneven, idiosyncratic curves and rough surfaces of the wood have been rendered symmetrical, inert, smooth and linear. The description of Lise in similarly geometric terms condenses the metaphoric proximity between her emotional and physical landscapes. She is rendered as follows:

[h]er lips, when she does not speak or eat, are normally pressed together like the ruled line of a balance sheet, marked straight with her old-fashioned lipstick, a final and a judging mouth, a precision instrument, a detail-warden of a mouth. (*DS*, p.9)

Just as the forest is made lifeless, Lise too is reduced from human to object, her mouth ‘subdued’ from a living physical feature to an inanimate ‘balance sheet’, ‘a precision instrument’ (*DS*, p.9). The opposite of personification, she is dehumanised, made object, characterised in the same language of linearity, functionality and geometry as her home. All of which renders Lise’s existence as a conflation of the loneliness and lifelessness of her flat and the cold geometric linearity of her appearance. It appears, therefore, that Lise is the perfect inhabitant for her flat, and her flat is the perfect encapsulation of its occupant, the symbiotic relationship intensifying the depiction of Lise as an isolated, marginalised figure. Lise’s public behaviour will convey the opposite impression to those who encounter her, but the reader is aware of at least some of the private reality behind her subsequent performative outbursts.

For Vassiliki Kolocotroni, the ways in which Lise’s public performances are rendered in the narrative as contingent – encapsulated in the narrator’s repetition of the phrase ‘as if’ (*DS*, pp.28, 29, 39, 40) – illustrate Spark’s

belief in the fundamental theatricality, or the literally spectacular nature of even the most solitary or singular act [...] it is as if the individual subject is only confirmed through a show, a performance open to the interpretation (or more often than not, misinterpretation) of others.¹⁰

Lise’s theatrical behaviour in *The Driver’s Seat* conforms to this configuration; where she attempts to confirm – or as Aidan Day has suggested, to assert – her ‘self’, ‘to establish individuality’ through performative acts.¹¹ In rendering Lise as a performer in this way, Spark rejects any easy identification of motivation, a technique exacerbated by the omission of the interior thought process of any of the characters (more on this presently).

¹⁰ Vassiliki Kolocotroni, ‘Poetic Perception in the Fiction of Muriel Spark’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark* ed. by Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp.16-26 (pp.24-5).

¹¹ Day (2007), p.329.

Yet the possible paradox that Kolocotroni identifies is that this performative scheme, which allows for the ‘individual subject’ to be ‘confirmed through a show’, also allows for the individual to be misinterpreted, for the motivations underpinning the performance – and the performance itself – to be misunderstood.¹² The result is a possible false confirmation of the individual on the part of the fellow characters, but also by the reader (and perhaps even by the performer herself). As a result, the reader is placed on a similar level to that of the narrator and the characters in the novel, unable to establish with anything approaching certainty the true nature or motivation of the character of Lise.

This in effect has the consequence of deepening the sense of mystery, of magnifying the already unsettling and strange atmosphere – created initially via the juxtaposition of Lise’s genuine and artificial (or performed) emotion – through this lack of interiority. Additionally, Kolocotroni’s phrase ‘the literally spectacular nature of even the most solitary or singular act’, suggests that at the root of performance lies the possibility of a form of self-mythologizing.¹³ This points to another mysterious element, where the mundane and the quotidian are rendered ‘spectacular’, perhaps even sublime. This ‘Transfiguration of the Commonplace’¹⁴ certainly appears to be one element of Lise’s attempt to assert her new, self-determining persona through performance, but it also raises the possibility that she now regards herself as in some way ‘above the height of the vulgar commonplace’, raised higher than those around her, different from the crowd.¹⁵ All of which combines to create a mysterious and unsettling narrative, a strange and disquieting story, even before Lise’s ultimate intent – or, her intent of the ultimate and the infinite; her intention to be murdered – becomes apparent.

For Spark, the lack of interiority is a technique she borrows from the *nouveau roman*. Speaking to Martin McQuillan, Spark states: ‘[w]hat I loved about Robbe-Grillet

¹² Kolocotroni (2010), p.25.

¹³ Kolocotroni (2010), p.25.

¹⁴ Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p.127. First published by Macmillan in 1961.

¹⁵ Kant (1973), p.111.

[...] he would write a book without once saying “he or she thought” or “he or she felt”. It has a strange atmospheric effect’.¹⁶ This ‘strange atmospheric effect’ is brought about in the deviation from the literary convention of an omniscient narrative perspective with access to the thoughts of the characters, and this omission – as previously noted – places the reader on the same level of unfamiliarity as the other characters in the novel.¹⁷ This is the conundrum of trying to know a character through their words and actions only – in other words through performance – leaving the reader in the dark as to their motivations and the nature of their true self. As Chikako Sawada notes, the result is that ‘no original Lise can be found under her abandoned social identity’.¹⁸

Spark’s adoption of a technique widely utilised by the writers of the *nouveau roman* suggests a postmodern aesthetic is at the heart of her narrative approach in *The Driver’s Seat*.¹⁹ Indeed, while as readers we may be accustomed to omniscient narrative qualifications revealing the emotions and thoughts of the characters, in the reality of day-to-day life, we are afforded no such insight. This creates an ironic situation whereby Spark creates a greater sense of mystery by in effect more closely mirroring reality than fiction, an approach similar to the *nouveau roman* novelists.

In other aspects, however, Spark’s formal choices reject accurately depicting reality in favour of further deepening the mysterious possibilities. Her use of prolepsis transforms the chronological accumulation of knowledge, and replaces it with(in) a disorienting presentation of plot disjunction. We are informed early in the novel that Lise ‘will be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab-wounds [...] in a park of the foreign city to which she is travelling on the flight now boarding at Gate 14’ (*DS*, p.25). Lise herself

¹⁶ Spark in McQuillan (2002), p.218.

¹⁷ Spark in McQuillan (2002), p.218.

¹⁸ Sawada (2011), p.78.

¹⁹ I use the term ‘postmodern’ in the sense that M.H. Abrams invokes regarding the *nouveau roman* or antinovel, which he defines as ‘a work which is deliberately constructed in a negative fashion, relying for its effects on deleting traditional elements, on violating traditional norms, and on playing against the expectations established in the reader by the novelistic methods and conventions of the past’ (M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms: Fifth Edition* (Orlando FL: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1985), p.121). The absence of any interiority renders Spark’s novel as adhering to Abrams’ configuration of the antinovel as postmodern.

characterises the result of this rejection of chronology when she describes the book she has been carrying as ‘a whydunnit in q-sharp major’ (*DS*, p.101), a metafictionally comic reference to the novel she is a part of, and a recognition of the central mystery being not what happens or who does it, but why.²⁰ While the performative nature of the characterisation of Lise eschews interiority, there remains the question as to whether Lise’s theatricality is revealing or disguising her deepest self. It remains to be determined as to whether acting and performance become methods by which to camouflage or reveal the self.

This question is part of the wider problem facing both reader and characters; the inability to fully know the other. During an interview with Martin McQuillan, Spark discusses this difficulty:

MMcQ: in *Symposium* you refer to the philosophy of ‘les autres’

[...]

MS: [...] I think it just means a philosophy of recognizing the existence of others and really trying to see what other people are thinking. It’s very very difficult; we’re all very much aware of ourselves, self-conscious. It’s not a bad thing because we can express ourselves and meet other people through words, music, art. But to be really sort of ‘under the skin’ of others is a very big exercise.²¹

The first major challenge (the shop episodes were no such thing) to Lise’s attempt to enforce her will on the other characters – who are unaware they are players in Lise’s final act – occurs while the plane is awaiting take-off. Having boarded the plane, Lise sits beside Richard in an attempt to ascertain whether he is the ideal candidate to murder her, however, her interaction with Bill, sitting on the other side provokes a strong reaction in Richard:

[s]uddenly her other neighbour looks at Lise in alarm. He stares as if recognizing her [...] Something about Lise, about her exchange with the man on her left, has caused a kind of paralysis [...] He opens his mouth, gasping and startled, staring at her as if he she is someone he has known and forgotten and now sees again [...] He trembles as he unfastens his seatbelt (*DS*, p.27).

²⁰ All of which formal, *nouveau roman*, and narrative related material will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter.

²¹ Spark in McQuillan (2002), p.218.

Fleeing from Lise, he finds another seat, where he ‘heaves a deep breath as if he had escaped from death by a small margin’ (*DS*, p.29). Spark is being both playful and macabre here, foreshadowing the novel’s ending. At this point, Richard indeed appears to have escaped death. He has no way of knowing that it is not his own death he has to escape from, rather it is his involvement in Lise’s death that, for now, he has evaded. As Richard panics and subsequently relocates, the narrative relates that ‘Lise and her companion have watched the performance. Lise smiles bitterly’ (*DS*, p.29). The narrator’s use of the term ‘performance’ is telling. Lise is the performer, the star of her own drama, and Richard’s performance, or rather his improvisation, is not part of Lise’s script. Richard has stolen the scene and upstaged her, and the result is that she ‘smiles bitterly’ (*DS*, p.29), betraying her true emotional response. Lise’s self-absorption is such that she neither allows for, nor countenances, the notion that any other individual will gain the attention she craves; she seems unable to comprehend the other. Her desire to control is absolute, and her bitterness is a result of ‘a pitiless frustration of her own will’ (*DS*, p.28), itself a foreshadowing of the novel’s ending and a lesson which for Lise remains unheeded. Her plan is to leave her own trail, not to be part of another’s ‘performance’ – improvised as it is – and her attempt to control or stage-manage the final act of her life is such that any deviation from her planned script exposes her rancour.

This episode therefore begins to reveal the solipsism at the heart of Lise’s performative and theatrical behaviour. Richard’s response to Lise has been deemed by the narrator as a ‘performance’, however, his reactions – ‘gasping and startled [...] He trembles’ (*DS*, p.27) – seem genuine. It is becoming evident that Lise’s blindness to the other is such that she misreads Richard’s reactions and can only understand Richard in relation to her own wishes. She seems incapable of comprehending his emotional reaction as genuine, seeing only through the lens of her own will, of her own wishes. This is further encapsulated in the description of her reaction at the time Richard leaves his seat: ‘Lise

looks, for an instant, slightly senile, as if she felt, in addition to bewilderment, a sense of defeat or physical incapacity' (*DS*, p.28). The depiction of Lise's 'bewilderment' at Richard's moving is so all-encompassing as to invoke what the narrator deems as 'a sense of defeat or physical incapacity' (*DS*, p.28). Lise is utterly stunned to find that Richard will not adhere to her will, and instead acts upon his own.

Richard is the first candidate in Lise's hunt for her murderer. However, following his panic and change of seat, Lise turns her attention elsewhere. The result is that Richard remains offstage for the majority of the novel, only to reappear when it then becomes apparent that he will, after all, enact his main role as Lise's murderer. He appears therefore to fulfil a dark, secular version of the text from Matthew 20:16, where 'the last shall be first, and the first last' (Matthew, 20: 16). As the first candidate to be called he is initially deemed unsuitable – or rather, he deems himself unsuitable as a result of having "sensed something" (*DS*, p.28) about Lise which frightens him – but as the final candidate, he is given the role; he is the chosen one of all those called.²²

This could be interpreted as a meditation or commentary on the inescapable nature of fate or destiny, where Richard almost avoids his involvement in Lise's murder, only to be drawn back into Lise's scheme at the last. However, it also categorises his role in terms of a form of absurdist Calvinism; he's chosen – against this will; "I don't want to do it" (*DS*, p.106), he says – for this role, promoted to the elect in a form of antinomianism by proxy, a solipsistic superimposing of Lise's indomitable will with no regard for his. Her faith in the absolute and undeniable nature of her own will and agency is such that she believes it affords her the right to inculcate Richard into her narrative, into her scheme. Lise's desire for self-determination has evolved into a form of sovereignty to determine for others, and the self-ordained power she has bestowed upon herself suggests that she has begun to venerate the new version of her 'self'. F. R. Hart notes that Spark 'sees the cult of

²² The following part of the Biblical passage is 'for many be called, but few chosen' (Matthew, 20: 16). In the auditioning process to find her murderer, Lise 'calls' many: Richard, macrobiotic Bill, the sick-looking businessman – who it later transpires is the big game hunter and school friend of the Sheik – and Big Carlo. However, only one is finally chosen; Richard.

character-worship as an anarchy generated by the romantic egoism that grew from Calvinism'.²³ Lise is one of Spark's 'false individualists', displaying the unquestioning solipsism of just such 'romantic egoism' as her particular brand of self-assuredness expands to something resembling Calvinism in both her unflinching conviction that she is above reproach and judgement, and in and her domineering manipulation of others to her own will.²⁴

Returning to the opening stages of the novel, Lise remains on her pseudo-romantic quest to find her chosen one, believing now that Richard is not that person. As the most significant other in the novel and a fellow player in Lise's final act, Richard encapsulates how difficult it is 'to be really sort of 'under the skin' of others'.²⁵ This is achieved in two ways: firstly, the lack of interiority gives us no insight into Richard's thought processes, so we are no closer to understanding him than any other character. Secondly, he acts several roles or parts in the novel, creating difficulty in ascertaining his true self (much like Lise). As noted above, he is the first possible candidate in Lise's search, although at this point the reader is unaware as to what exactly success in this criteria will entail. Lise's imminent death has been revealed, and there is a strong implication that Richard is involved in some way, when a flash-forward reveals him being questioned by the police '[o]n the evening of the following day' (*DS*, p.27). However, the passage reveals nothing about his direct involvement in Lise's murder, and it is possible that he is simply one of the many witnesses who have encountered her in the days prior to her death. He claims she made him afraid, "'frightened [...] I must have sensed something'" (*DS*, p.28), but the narrator returns to the present before the full nature of his involvement is disclosed.

However, as he changes seat and retreats from centre stage, he fulfils his first role in this dark parody of detective fiction; that of a diversion, seemingly a red herring.²⁶ He

²³ Hart (1978), p.303.

²⁴ Hart (1978), p.303.

²⁵ Spark in McQuillan (2002), p.218.

²⁶ Here Spark subverts the reader's expectation by having Richard dissolve into the background, creating the impression that he is irrelevant to the narrative when he will, in fact, re-appear and be central to events.

reappears later to act out his second and main role as Lise's murderer, having avoided her for the duration of the day. When she finally accosts him in the lobby of the hotel where his aunt is staying, he exclaims "I came here this morning, and when I saw you here I got away. I want to get away" (*DS*, pp.101-2), a seemingly genuine expression of his desire to escape Lise and her intentions for him. It would seem that he recognises and fears Lise's will and her power to enforce it, but also fears his own dark desires. But Lise is not concerned with Richard's agency and freedom to determine his own choice; he is simply a component part to be manipulated according to her needs, a co-performer required to act out her version of the script, the role she has written for him.

Nonetheless, the nature of her manipulation is that Richard comes to play a third role, the contradictory part of the guilty victim, the patsy, left to explain the inexplicable; that a woman sought him out in order to be murdered. At the hotel he puts up some resistance: "[n]o, I don't want to come. I want to stay" he pleads (*DS*, p.101). Not only does Lise manoeuvre him into the situation against his wishes, she even gives him specific details as to how her murder should be carried out: "[a]fter you've stabbed", she says, "be sure to twist it upwards or it may not penetrate far enough" (*DS*, p.106). However, after this manipulation at the hands of Lise, it is (paradoxically) in the act of rejecting Lise and asserting his own will that Richard proves his absolute guilt. A (weak) case can be made that as a murderer he is in fact acting at her behest; a co-conspirator. If murder is defined a premeditated act, Lise is the guilty party. Her murder is solely her plan, with hers being the starring role in the closely scripted, staged, costumed and co-acted performance. However, in ignoring her pleas of "I don't want any sex" (*DS*, p.106) and raping her, Richard goes from an accomplice in the fulfilment of what Lise wished for – her death – to the perpetrator of a crime she expressly stated as against her wishes. His guilt in her murder is arguably lessened, shared to some extent with Lise herself, but he then acts entirely of his own volition, ignoring her instructions, and the culpability and subsequent guilt for his own choice cannot be pardoned, ignored or mitigated.

Spark's skill in handling the absurdity of the episode is such that the reader is placed in the position whereby a murderer can appear as though the victim of a set-up. Until Richard rapes Lise he has followed her every instruction, and as his entreaties to the police suggest – "[s]he told me precisely what to do. I was hoping to start a new life" (*DS*, p.107) – he appears to be committing murder against his will. But in a novel concerned with the exaggerated, solipsistic will of the individual, of the Romantic ego unrestrained, it is Richard's act of 'resist[ing] determination', which proves both his guilt and Lise's mistaken trust in her own judgement, and her inability to conceive of the will another coming into conflict with her own.²⁷ In acting according to his own volition he destroys Lise's script, and in doing so her attempt to attain the sublime through the fulfilment of her vision for the end of her life. If the performance is to be sublime, or 'above the height of the vulgar commonplace', it has to be enacted precisely according to Lise's visualisation.²⁸ Richard denies Lise this, and in doing so contravenes her vision and renders her death what it is; a horrifying, painful and bitter termination of life, not the culmination of a piece of sublime performance art. Richard is a paradigm of the complexity of Spark's vision and the dark, contradictory materials and concerns of the novel. He is a symbol of the risk in defining the other by any simplistic characterisation or appropriation of morality, and alongside Lise (re)presents the difficulty of 'really getting under the skin', and of understanding the other.²⁹

There is however, an alternative reading suggested by Lise's language in the final scene. She instructs him to leave promptly after the act, saying "afterwards, don't waste too much time staring at what you have done, at what you have done" (*DS*, p.106). However, in the immediate aftermath, he 'stands up, staring at what he has done. He stands staring for a while and then, having started to turn away, he hesitates' (*DS*, p.107). On both counts – no sex and no staring – he has rejected her directly expressed wishes, and in

²⁷ Day (2007), p.329.

²⁸ Kant (1973), p.111.

²⁹ Spark in McQuillan (2002), p.218.

Lise's instruction there is the inference that she knows this will be the case. This creates the possibility that Lise cedes at least some responsibility to Richard. The repetition of the phrase "at what you have done, at what you have done" (*DS*, p.106) suggests an admission that for all that Lise has planned and staged her murder, Richard's role in the committing of the act places him the ascendancy, with the power shifting from Lise to Richard even before he defies her. His previous attempt to tease Lise has seemingly failed: "[y]ou're afraid of sex," he says, almost joyfully, as if sensing an opportunity to gain control' (*DS*, p.103). She brushes this off, appearing to regain control as she asks Richard "[w]hy are you shaking? [...] [i]t will soon be over" (*DS*, p.103). However, her repetition of "what *you* have done" (*DS*, p.106),³⁰ and specifically in the word 'you', suggests that perhaps Lise feels control slipping from her grasp in the moments before the end.

Nonetheless, as noted above, Richard still believes himself to be the victim, to have followed Lise's instructions and Lise's choices, not his own. He tells the police that "[s]he told me to kill her and I killed her [...] She told me precisely what to do" (*DS*, p.107). Without any interiority we have no way of knowing whether Richard believes what he says to the police. It is possible he believes himself innocent of murder, and it is telling that he makes no mention of the act which proves his absolute guilt. As a consequence, and as Jonathan Kemp notes, 'there is, ultimately, no one, no self, that could be said to be in the driver's seat'.³¹ Neither Richard nor Lise are able to assert absolute control over the other, and whether responsibility for the act of murder is primarily Richard's or Lise's (it is a measure of the paradoxical absurdity of the novel that Lise could appear to bear more responsibility for her own death than her murderer), the novel ends in an impasse where the will of one negates that of the other.

If, however, we accept that Lise has not ceded any responsibility, then the manner of her death and Richard's refusal to act according to her wishes represents something of a

³⁰ My italics.

³¹ Jonathan Kemp, "Her Lips Are Slightly Parted": The Ineffability of Erotic Sociality in Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*, in *Muriel Spark*, ed. by David Herman (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp.173-186 (p.185).

failure on her part to identify the correct one, and a further example of the unknowability of the other. When Lise and Richard finally meet again at the hotel near the end of the novel, she exclaims “I was right first time. As soon as I saw you this morning I knew that you were the one. You’re my type” (*DS*, p.102). Alan Bold states that

[e]ventually her dream seems about to come true when she finds her perfect homicidal type – the man from the plane. Lise presents him with a knife, although she knows, intuitively, that he is a sex maniac recently charged with attempted murder.³²

This, however, contradicts what Lise has stated earlier. At the point where Richard panics and changes seat on the plane, Lise’s reaction is “I knew [...] [i]n a way I knew there was something wrong with him” (*DS*, p.30). Spark is again being very darkly ironic here; Lise is looking for someone to murder her, someone who by definition therefore must have “something wrong with him” (*DS*, p.30). Yet implied in own her statement is what Lise herself does not realise, that when it matters, Richard will reject her will in favour of his own agency, and in this sense, there is indeed “something wrong with him”. Bold, as does Judy Sproxton, credits Lise with intuitively identifying her killer as ‘her perfect homicidal type’, but unfortunately her intuition does not stretch to considering Richard’s subjectivity and choice.³³ It would seem that Lise’s powers of intuition are somewhat annulled by her solipsism.

As Spark’s comments above reveal, she sees art as the method by which one can attempt to bridge the gap of unknowability that renders another person as the other. She states that ‘we can express ourselves and meet other people through words, music, art’, but while Lise attempts to turn her life into art through performance, the nature of her art is such that she makes no attempt to ‘meet other people’, to understand them, or to use

³² Bold (1986), p.93.

³³ Judy Sproxton notes that ‘it is not clear to the reader how Lise could have been able to identify this man as a psychopath who had a history of attacking women [...] [t]he implication is that Lise had some strange intuition, similar in fact to her murderer’s unaccountable recognition of her on the plane and his resulting fear’ (Sproxton (1992), p.139).

performance as a method to connect.³⁴ Her art is solipsistic, a way to enforce her sense of self, and this inward focus results in her performance being a method by which she can raise her existence to something above the norm. Lise's performance can therefore be understood as the outward manifestation of an inward looking, solipsistic character. Subsequently, Lise appears to act in the hope of elevating herself and her life 'above [...] the vulgar commonplace', to lift herself out of her lonely, anonymous existence through the transfiguration of her own life – and paradoxically, her death – into a piece of theatrical performance art.³⁵

There is a precedent (of sorts) for Lise's behaviour elsewhere in Spark's writing. In *Emily Brontë: Her Life and Work*, Spark has the following to say about Emily's turn inward as the result of the 'later dissatisfaction and disintegration in her life', arising from

her shift of apprehension of the Absolute; she shifted it from an objective, to a subjective position. She became her own Absolute; so that she would be forced to expend passion, adoration, worship, contemplation, on herself – a destructive process, since sources of replenishment are not self-generated. Emily's inspiration would dry up; her whole being would be thrown into disorder.³⁶

In many ways this passage reflects the upheaval and subsequent reaction in Lise's life. Her solipsism and its outward manifestation of performative theatricality closely resemble the traits outlined above, and are a result of a similar shift from 'an objective, to a subjective position'.³⁷ As *The Driver's Seat* progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that Lise, like Emily, sees herself as 'her own Absolute'.³⁸ Her behaviour is the manifestation of a character who has come to regard her will, her desire to control, and her need to manipulate as unquestionable, the result of such misplaced self-adoration and self-worship.

³⁴ Spark in McQuillan (2002), p.218.

³⁵ Kant (1973), p.111.

³⁶ Spark (1985), p.95.

³⁷ Spark (1985), p.95. This is not to say that Emily Brontë was guilty of behaving like Lise, only that the nature of these inward-focussing traits are such that they also cause Lise 'to be thrown into disorder' (p.95).

³⁸ Spark (1985), p.95.

Lise has developed through the novel from a performer gaining the attention, control and power she previously lacked, to a figure resembling an author/God, writing the parts for herself and all who appear in her storyline. When she realises that a character falls out-with the scope of her narrative, they are immediately discarded, deemed surplus to requirements. When later in the novel she again encounters the sick man from the plane, and realises that he is not her type, her response is swift and emotionless. As she leaves the hotel, she ‘looks at him and through him as if he were already a distant memory and leaves without a goodbye, indeed as if she had said good-bye to him long ago’ (*DS*, p.89). This is the behaviour of one for whom self is everything, whose only state of mind is solipsism. The second he is extraneous he ceases to exist; she looks ‘through him’ as though he is air (*DS*, p.89).

As a result of becoming ‘her own Absolute’, Lise has transfigured herself via ‘passion, adoration, worship [and] contemplation [of] herself’,³⁹ into what Paddy Lyons calls ‘the Romantic posture of sublimity, the stance of high priest’.⁴⁰ Lyons states that ‘Romanticism’s usual allusions were towards an infinite located in some Beyond’, but Lise now attempts to find this ‘infinite’ or this ‘Absolute’, not ‘in some Beyond’, but in herself.⁴¹ What Lyons identifies as an external, objective position, becomes for Lise a belief in the self, an utter conviction of the sublimity of her own subjectivity. Lise encapsulates what Gerard Carruthers identifies in Spark’s fiction, where ‘[h]er characters are sometimes presumptuous in their belief [...] that their constructed narratives of their own and other people’s lives are properly definitive’.⁴² Unable to see beyond her own

³⁹ Spark (1985), p.95.

⁴⁰ Lyons (2010), p.86.

⁴¹ Lyons (2010), p.87. If we allow the possibility that Lise owes some of her origins to the figure of Emily Brontë, then this would perhaps illuminate Lise’s repeated exclamation of ‘I don’t want any sex’ (*DS*, p.106), and ‘I have no time for sex [...] sex is no use to me, I assure you’ (*DS*, p.94). Coded within these statements is the sense that sex is beneath her, that Lise has loftier, more elevated concerns than those of the flesh. There is a danger of conflating the characters of Emily and Lise here. Perhaps some elements of Emily’s character did go into Spark’s design of Lise; but we have no way of knowing, and should remain wary of oversimplification and taking too literally what are commonalities in a few specific areas.

⁴² Gerard Carruthers, ‘Muriel Spark as Catholic Novelist’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, ed. by Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp.74-84, (p.83). Referenced in bibliography as (2010), B.

constructed narrative, or beyond her self, Lise turns inward. This is similar to the process Spark identifies as Emily's downfall, of her shift 'from an objective, to a subjective position'; from inspiration being found externally to internally.⁴³ Lise, like Emily, becomes her own inspiration.

Lise has therefore come to resemble a grotesque version of the Romantic author/God; an exaggerated version of what Keats termed the 'wordsworthian or egotistical sublime', where the poet's focus and imaginative energy is expended inwardly, with the self as the subject of contemplation.⁴⁴ It is perhaps ironic that in the same letter, Keats also outlines the very process by which Lise may have come to terms with the loneliness and dissatisfaction in her life. Keats writes to Richard Woodhouse, saying:

As to the poetical character itself, (I mean that sort [...] distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—it has no character.⁴⁵

This abnegation of the poetic self functions through the subsuming of the poet's ego, or the poet's identity, to the extent that they inhabit the character of the other, and in doing so 'enter imaginatively into the existence of others and other kinds of existence'.⁴⁶ This strategy deals directly with the difficulty Spark has discussed about 'recognizing the existence of others and really trying to see what other people are thinking'.⁴⁷ However, for Spark, art provides the possibility to greater understand others through the kind of imaginative leap that Keats infers, where the negation of the poet's self allows 'the artist's sympathetic imagination' to inhabit characters of all types, and not simply versions of one's self as is the case with Lise.⁴⁸

⁴³ Spark (1985), p.95.

⁴⁴ Keats, (2001) [1818], p.418. Original spelling and capitalisations are left intact.

⁴⁵ Keats, (2001) [1818], p.418. In relation to Keats' scheme, Lise mistakes poetic self-negation with self-termination; not a subduing of the self, but an entire self-obliteration; she takes literally what should be creative, artistic, and metaphoric.

⁴⁶ Gray (1992), p.192.

⁴⁷ Spark in McQuillan (2002), p.218.

⁴⁸ Gray (1992), p.192.

Percy Shelley outlines a stance similar in many ways to that of Keats' '*Negative Capability*' noted above;⁴⁹ however, Shelley explicitly extols the power of the imagination in this process, stating that

[a] man to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination: and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause.⁵⁰

Lise is either unwilling or unable to 'put [herself] in the place of another', or as Spark herself says, 'to be really sort of 'under the skin' of others'.⁵¹ Instead she expends all of her energy in the outward expression of her inward looking solipsism. Conflating the ideas outlined by Spark, Keats, and Shelley, it becomes apparent that Lise's greatest flaw is her lack of imagination, her dearth of vision. The resulting absence of empathy or understanding for any of the other characters around her further proves that her elevation of the self is at the expense of the relegation of the other.

However, Lise undoubtedly manifests a skill in improvisation, which in itself suggests the capacity to imagine being another. In a rare instance of Lise losing control of her narrative, Lise and Mrs Fiedke are caught up in a student demonstration, with Lise being swept into shelter in a garage. Having been mistaken for a student and verbally abused by the proprietor Big Carlo for her apparent involvement in the demonstration, she masterfully turns the situation to her advantage by pretending to be a tourist. Claiming to be "'a teacher from Iowa, New Jersey'" (DS, p.76), she then goes on to give a remarkable

⁴⁹ John Keats, 'Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21, 27 December 1817', in *John Keats: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.369-70 (p.370). Keats' italics and capitalisation retained.

⁵⁰ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) [1821], p.682. Shelley's position encapsulates the possible risk inherent in considering Romanticism as a coherent term. While his notion of the moral imagination involves a similar negation of the poetic self as outlined in Keats' '*Negative Capability*' (Keats (2001) [1817], p.370.), Shelley's motivation – for '[a] man to be greatly good' – suggests a desire for the poet to be regarded as embodying 'the Romantic posture of sublimity, the stance of high priest' (Lyons, (2010), p.86.). His identification of poets as 'the unacknowledged legislators of the World' (Shelley, (2003), p.701), also suggests he considers them as capable of 'bringing the reader in touch with an outside higher force' (Lyons, (2010), p.89), again embodying the 'stance of high priest'. While these are not necessarily opposing positions – it is entirely possible for a poet to regard him or herself as having access to higher truths, while imagining 'himself in the place of another' in order to do so – it creates a sense of tension, a paradoxical self-negation in the service of self-assertion.

⁵¹ Spark in McQuillan (2002), p.218.

short speech, lamenting that “[i]t’s best never to be born. I wish my mother and father had practised birth-control. I wish that pill had been invented at the time. I feel sick, I feel terrible” (DS, p.76).⁵² This gains the sympathy of the mechanics – whether they are genuinely sorry for her predicament, or are impressed by her attitude towards birth control remains unclear – and she soon has Big Carlo attending to her as though it is he who is in her debt. In doing so she regains control, having adapted to the unfamiliar ‘stage’ and setting with a new, improvised persona. There is, however, a brief moment when she is in danger of pushing her performance beyond its limit and revealing her inexperience as an actor. She asks Carlo if he is married, to which he replies, “[y]es, lady, I’m married,” and pauses in his energetic task to look at her with new, appraising and cautious eyes’ (DS, p.77). He becomes suspicious when she over-acts; it is as though he sees through her façade, and the mechanics (ironically) of her performance are briefly revealed. However, she rescues the situation, and once Carlo is dismissed as a possible candidate she makes off with his car. She has employed her imagination in the skilful rendering of the hapless holidaying teacher only to benefit her own narrative, to adapt to the present predicament, and to ensure her continuing manipulation of others to her own gain. It is an empty, performative inhabiting of another, not the full, imaginative submersion of Keats’ ‘*Negative Capability*’.⁵³

The solipsism and ‘absurd self-assertion’ that F.R. Hart identifies in Romanticism therefore appears to be at the root of Lise’s trouble, yet, through the concepts of moral imagination and ‘*Negative Capability*’, the tenets of Romanticism are also capable of providing a solution to the very problems it poses.⁵⁴ This perhaps explains the equivocal and dualistic treatment of Romanticism in Spark’s fiction. Lise is the solipsistic, egotistical Romantic – the ‘high priest’, the author/God who becomes her own ‘Infinite Absolute or

⁵² In having Lise claim to be from two locations simultaneously – Iowa is not a town in New Jersey, they are separate States – Spark infers something of the bi-polar nature of Lise’s character.

⁵³ Keats (2001) [1817], p.370.

⁵⁴ Hart (1978), p.303, Keats (2001) [1817], p.370.

Ideal'.⁵⁵ Yet the solution to this 'fraudulent romanticism bent on self-assertion', this 'anarchy generated by [...] romantic egoism' can paradoxically be found within Romanticism itself, in the writings of Shelley and Keats.⁵⁶

So Lise performs her way through *The Driver's Seat*, but, in a curious omission, the settings – the various stages upon which she performs – are never explicitly or directly identified. The northern city where Lise lives, works, and leaves in order to die is Copenhagen, but this only becomes apparent obliquely when late in the novel Mrs Fiedke's nephew Richard arrives at the Hotel Tomson in the unnamed southern city. Mrs Fiedke has told Lise that her nephew "was to have arrived on this morning's flight from Copenhagen" (*DS*, p.65), and when he finally does reach the hotel, the narrative reveals him to be the businessman from Lise's flight earlier in the day, who now 'looks neat in his business suit and white shirt, as he did this morning when Lise first followed and then sat next to him on the plane' (*DS*, p.101).⁵⁷ Richard's absence between his arrival on the morning flight and his appearance at the hotel is due to Lise's presence, as he exclaims, "I came here this morning, and when I saw you here I got away. I want to get away" (*DS*, pp.101-2). The result is that for the majority of the day, Lise's presence ensures Richard's absence; an absurd(ist) fulfilment of her prophetic statement made earlier in the day when Mrs Fiedke asks:

'Will you feel a presence? Is that how you'll know?'
 'Not really a presence,' Lise says. 'The lack of an absence, that's what it is. I know I'll find it. I keep on making mistakes, though' (*DS*, p.71).

It is only when Richard believes Lise is absent that he feels free to assert his presence and meet with his aunt. This, however, proves to be his mistake, and as it transpires, it also will prove to be yet another of Lise's. Richard's arrival at the hotel can therefore be seen as

⁵⁵ Lyons (2010), p.86, p.89.

⁵⁶ Hart (1978), p.303.

⁵⁷ Mrs Fiedke extols the virtues of the Scandinavian airlines over those "from countries where the pilots believe in the afterlife. You are safer when they don't" (*DS*, p.68).

being “[n]ot really a presence”, but “[t]he lack of an absence”, and is the literal fulfilment of Lise’s earlier statement to his aunt (*DS*, p.71).

So Lise and Richard have set off from Copenhagen, but the destination and setting for the remainder of the narrative remains unidentified. There are, however, a number of hints as to the possible location of the city. The macrobiotic lifestyle evangelist, Bill, refers repeatedly his intention to “start a centre in Naples” (*DS*, p.33), and to “get the young people of Naples interested in it” (*DS*, p.37), believing that “[i]t should do well in Naples once we get the youth movement started” (*DS*, p.38). Despite Bill’s enthusiasm, Lise’s only input is that “[t]he men in Naples are sexy” (*DS*, p.38), a reductively surface observation which undermines Bill’s grandiose lifestyle plans. When Lise later meets with Bill at the Hotel Metropole, he mentions that he has borrowed a car from a friend, and he is driving “to Naples as soon as possible to get started on the Ying-Yang Young Culture Centre” (*DS*, p.92). This suggests that that they are within driving distance of Naples, perhaps on the outskirts, perhaps further away. During the day, Mrs Fiedke mentions that “[w]e have to leave for Capri tomorrow morning” (*DS*, p.73), and with the island of Capri lying just off the coast, some twenty miles south-west of Naples, it would again seem plausible that they are staying either in Naples, or close by. She also mentions to Lise that “[w]e ought to see the sights [...] [w]e shouldn’t let this golden opportunity go by without seeing the ruins” (*DS*, p.68), and with Pompeii and Herculaneum nearby, there is plenty to infer that Naples is the southern city.⁵⁸

Another possible clue lies in Spark’s use of literal and visual puns throughout the novel, as she does throughout her fiction. Her short story ‘The Portobello Road’ involves the search of haystacks for a character named Needle, while in *Not To Disturb* (1971) the murder of Baron and Baroness Klopstock provides the opportunity for Spark to employ the

⁵⁸ There are plenty of ruins in Italy, so this is not definitive proof. Rome, Sorrento, Florence, Salerno or any number of cities may be the possible site of the novel, more likely the novel has no real-life specific location, only an imaginative one.

phrase “Klopstock and barrel”⁵⁹. In *The Driver's Seat*, Lise's economic use of facts and her performative nature suggest we read her name as an anagram of lies, whilst Bill literally – and ironically, never metaphorically, despite his macrobiotic lifestyle and his recommended ‘one orgasm a day’ (*DS*, p.38) – spills his seed in a taxi and all over the foyer of the Hotel Metropole.⁶⁰ Continuing in this vein, we are told that Mrs Fiedke's nephew is named Richard. Given that he has been in prison for two years and in therapy for six years having been found guilty of sexual assault, it is slightly disturbing when Mrs Fiedke says that “[w]e never called him Dick. Only his mother, but not us” (*DS*, p.68).⁶¹ This excessive punning is typical of Spark, and it suggests that she has her main character act out the saying ‘see Naples and die’ literally; that the splendour of the city and its surroundings are such that once viewed, the beholder is free to die in the knowledge that they have witnessed sublime and transcendent beauty. Spark's love for Italy is, of course, a biographic detail, but it has also been voiced by characters in her fiction. In *Symposium* (1990), Margaret Damien says to her husband William that “Florence was magnificent, it was sublime.” She spoke as if Florence no longer existed except in their memory’.⁶² The paradoxical idea that Florence exists as a tangible, sublime location, while it simultaneously no longer exists ‘except in their memory’ has echoes in the unnamed utopia of *The Driver's Seat*.⁶³ Given the nature and circumstances of Lise's death, the inversion of the original meaning of ‘you can die happy’ – now inverted into ‘Naples will be the last landscape you behold’, and where the freedom to die is corrupted into the intention to be

⁵⁹ Muriel Spark, *Not To Disturb* (Frogmore: Granada, 1982), p.89. First published in 1971 by Macmillan London Ltd.

⁶⁰ Lise asks “[w]hat's all that on the floor?” and points to a scatter of small seeds. Bill looks at them closely and then at his zipper-bag which has come unzipped by a small fraction. “Rice,” he says’ (*DS*, p.42). Later at the Metropole we learn that ‘a plastic bag that he is clutching, insufficiently sealed, emits a small trail of wild rice’ (*DS*, p.91), and finally, ‘[s]he gets up with him and lets him, trailing rice, lead her past every eye of the Metropole lobby into the street, up the road, and into a small black utility model which is parked there’ (*DS*, pp.92-3).

⁶¹ It is slightly unclear whether Richard has been incarcerated for six years in total, or eight; two years in jail followed by six in the clinic. He says “I've had six years' treatment”, then Lise asks him “[b]efore you went to the clinic how long did they keep you in prison?” “Two years,” he said.’ (*DS*, p.102). Mrs Fiedke tells Lise that Richard is “[o]nly twenty-four” (*DS*, p.66), which makes him either sixteen or eighteen when he committed the crime.

⁶² Spark (2006), p.20.

⁶³ Spark (2006), p.20.

murdered – seems entirely in keeping with Spark’s dark and disturbing punning throughout.

Nonetheless, the fact that the location remains explicitly unnamed is curious – unsettling even – and the omission leads one to question why Spark leaves the identity of the city alluded to, but unidentified. There are a number of possible reasons for this absence, the first of which alludes to the notions of the sublime and transcendent inferred by the phrase ‘see Naples and die’ and the drive to death that is the macabre manifestation of Lise’s ego and self-will. In her collection of essays, *Changing My Mind*, Zadie Smith discusses the commonalities linking Franz Kafka and David Foster Wallace. She suggests that

their deep currents run parallel: the attachment to parables, the horror of the self in its fullness [...] the dream of self-less-ness. And despite their attempts to root themselves in ‘relationships between persons’ they both expressed a longing for the infinite, which is nothing and is nowhere and is endless.⁶⁴

Smith identifies a number of issues here that have resonance with *The Driver’s Seat*. As Lise’s performance has shown, her final act is a contradictory, paradoxical attempt at self-assertion through the act of self-negation. This self-negation initially seems comparable to what Smith identifies in Kafka and Wallace as the ‘the dream of self-less-ness’, but in Lise’s case her ego makes it something dark and twisted.⁶⁵ For Lise, this desire to attain a sense of self lies not in ‘relationships between persons’ – something which appears to be beyond her capacity – but in ‘a longing for the infinite’.⁶⁶ This infinite is both the assertion of her self-will through the stage-management and performance of her murder; and the resulting infinite sublime ‘which is nothing and is nowhere’; in other words her annihilation.⁶⁷ Lise’s movement from presence to absence – which given the anonymity of her life and her post-death notoriety, could easily be categorised in the opposite way; the

⁶⁴ Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), p.297.

⁶⁵ Smith (2009), p.297.

⁶⁶ Smith (2009), p.297.

⁶⁷ Smith (2009), p.297.

perfect example of Spark's fiction rendering meaning as "both/and" – signals her attempt to attain sublimity.⁶⁸ Her desire for 'self-less-ness' is the desire to transcend a life where she already exists as a self-less entity, unable to enforce her will on others.⁶⁹ However, her attempt to attain the transcendent infinite (whether through death or self-assertion or both simultaneously) is not manifested as an attempt to connect through 'relationships with people', but by mistakenly inverting the notion of self-less-ness outlined by Smith.⁷⁰ Instead Lise's self-less-ness becomes the grotesquely exaggerated enforcing of her self and ego onto those she encounters in the final days of her life, while paradoxically her self assertion is to occur through her death. Her drive for the sublime refuses to allow for the choice or agency of any other; her drive to self-less-ness becomes the exaggeration of the self to grotesque and unsustainable proportions.

This is metaphorised in the southern city's namelessness, where Spark refuses to specify the location of Lise's attempt to attain sublimity, because the transcendent, infinite sublime that Lise is seeking is an inverted rendering of utopia; literally no-place. As a result, the southern city of Lise's death cannot be named; it is utopia in the sense that it is no-place; the sublime she desires is unattainable, and subsequently it 'lies outwith representation'.⁷¹ The site of Lise's death remains unidentified because Lise's conception of self-less-ness entails the paradox of grotesque self-assertion through self-negation, and this grotesque manifestation is 'nothing and is nowhere and is endless'.⁷² The concept of the 'endless' is embodied in the final moments of her life, when 'she screams, evidently perceiving how final is finality' (*DS*, p.107). The finality that Lise fleetingly perceives is the infinite blank of eternal nothingness.

⁶⁸ Hynes (1992), p.2.

⁶⁹ Smith (2009), p.297.

⁷⁰ Smith (2009), p.297.

⁷¹ Day (2007), p.330.

⁷² Smith (2009), p.297.

This, however, presents a paradox where ‘the real, material end of the natural body’s life’⁷³ – Lise’s death – signals the beginning of this infinite non-existence that is ‘nothing and is nowhere and is endless’, and this has been inferred by the way in which the reader can identify Lise’s home as Copenhagen, but cannot identify the location of her death.⁷⁴ This is implied when we recall Mrs Fiedke’s observation that it is more dangerous to fly with “‘airlines from those countries where the pilots believe in the after-life. You are safer when they don’t. I’ve been told the Scandinavian airlines are fairly reliable in that respect’” (*DS*, p.68-9). The identification of Lise’s home being in Scandinavia therefore signals the possibility of Lise’s lack of belief in the after-life, and in doing so raises the concepts of eternity and infinity. This lack or absence is rooted in a specific place (Copenhagen), whereas her destination remains unnamed because the sublimity and the transcendence that she strives for is utopian and unattainable, to be found literally no-place, and subsequently remains beyond her reach, and beyond the identification of the narrator.

Lise herself verbalises the notion of a utopian no-place, but surprisingly this is in reference to her hometown of Copenhagen. When asked where she lives, the reply is telling: “‘nowhere special,” says Lise waving aside the triviality’ (*DS*, p.54). This reply points towards a number of possible implications, bearing in mind Lise’s subsequent course of action. As she is currently in the unnamed southern city where she intends to meet her death, her hometown – which she will never see again – is now irrelevant to her; it is a ‘triviality’ at this point (*DS*, p.54). It is merely the site of her empty life, the place where she has led such an ‘uninhabited [...] subdued [...] obedient’ existence that constructing her own murder becomes a seemingly plausible solution to her inability to impose any self-will in her life (*DS*, p.15). Yet there is a deep sense of irony at work; as noted previously Copenhagen is only identified indirectly, and remains unmentioned by

⁷³ Day (2007), p.330.

⁷⁴ Smith (2009), p.297.

Lise, hence it is ‘nowhere’, yet the implication is that her words expose a deeper meaning in her use of the phrase “‘nowhere special’” (*DS*, p.54). This is possible if the word ‘nowhere’ is read as synonymous with ‘no-place’, as congruent with the concept of utopia. By placing the idea of a utopian ideal next to ‘special’, the implication is that Lise is inadvertently revealing her programme, vocalising her desire to find a utopian ideal, a ‘nowhere special’ – or rather, in keeping with the inversion of expectation throughout the novel – a special nowhere.

In another of Spark’s inversions of expectation, Lise will again give inadvertent voice to the impossibility of her drive for transcendence. Lise now laments for loneliness itself, an absence which was present in her hometown. She makes this loneliness, this absence of connection into a tangible presence, or “[t]he lack of an absence, that’s what it is” (*DS*, p.71):

‘the inconceivable sorrow of it [...] at night when you’re sitting in a café, the last one left [...] It makes me sad,’ she says. ‘I want to go home, I think. I want to go back home and feel all that lonely grief again. I miss it so much already’. (*DS*, p.96)

This passage encapsulates Joseph Hynes’ formulation of Spark’s work where meaning is conceivable within the framework of “‘both/and’”.⁷⁵ Lise’s hometown is the physical location she wishes to *both* escape from *and* return to; *both* the “‘nowhere special’” (*DS*, p.54) *and* the special nowhere that she also desires, albeit fleetingly, to see again. She calls this sorrow and “‘lonely grief [...] inconceivable’” (*DS*, p.96), yet she conceives of these emotions through her words, articulating the contradiction of a loneliness for loneliness itself. The phrase “‘I think’” (*DS*, p.96) registers the presence of doubt in Lise’s realisation of her connection to home. However, this doubt is soon dismissed, and Lise continues with her death-drive despite having briefly realised that the absence of loneliness is in fact a presence in her life, a presence she will now dismiss as beyond attaining. Instead she will

⁷⁵ Hynes (1992), p.2.

‘see Naples and die’, and her death will not be the transcendent moment she wishes for, and she will not achieve the sublime utopia of ‘self-less-ness [...] which is nothing and is nowhere and is endless’.⁷⁶ She will be murdered by a rapist in the dark, on the gravel.

Aidan Day categorises Lise’s death-drive as the attempt to escape the void of disconnectedness that is her life. Speaking of her quest to locate the right person to murder her, Day notes that ‘[f]inding this man is the key element in Lise’s attempt to achieve self-possession and by that self-possession to escape *a felt sense of nothingness*’.⁷⁷ Day goes on to argue that Lise’s death signifies a rejection of the postmodern concept ‘of the inventedness of reality’, of ‘the artifice of the world’, where Lise’s attempt at self-possession through death is such ‘that the ending of the life in her body may contradict any idea that life is only a matter of invention’.⁷⁸ However, what becomes clear is that it is paradoxically also ‘a felt sense of nothingness’ – an infinite, an ideal – that she strives for.⁷⁹ It becomes increasingly apparent that Lise is striving for both self-possession and self-negation, or as Day notes, ‘the only way [Lise] [...] can prove the content of her life is by the ending of it’.⁸⁰

However, the problem in Lise’s quest for the sublime is that in doing so she involves others, yet she overlooks the will, the agency and the choice of these others, and it is this solipsistic inability to think beyond her self that Spark is attacking in the form of Lise. Day is correct, Lise is attempting to escape nothingness, but she is attempting to do so by paradoxically achieving nothingness through self-negation or self-less-ness, both apprehending and becoming the infinite through the contradictory notion that in her death she will make the connections and attain the sublimity that she failed to in life.

⁷⁶ Smith (2009), p.297.

⁷⁷ Day (2007), p.329.

⁷⁸ Day (2007), p.325, p.324, p.331.

⁷⁹ Day (2007), p.324, p.331.

⁸⁰ Day (2007), p.331.

As mentioned above, Aidan Day reads *The Driver's Seat* as evidence of Spark's contradictory relationship with Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman*.⁸¹ In an interview with Robert Hosmer in 2001, Spark states that

my vision is nearer to Flaubert or Proust or [...] Robbe-Grillet, and the *nouveau roman* he wrote which was rather devoid of emotions; devoid of stated emotions, but not devoid of felt emotions that you read between the lines [...] All I have from him is a certain detachment.⁸²

However, in a significant departure from the narrative technique of Robbe-Grillet, Spark employs a narrator who does interject with 'stated emotions', opinions, observations and judgements on incidents and characters.⁸³ Unlike Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* – which Day categorises as offering 'no first person narrator who might be undertaking these descriptions' – the narrative is not a series of camera shots which describe events with an unadorned detachment, documentary-like in its disinterest.⁸⁴ The narrative in *The Driver's Seat* is seemingly the work of a single character with a single voice, and although the narrative gives some account of Lise's experiences before the action of the novel begins, it is apparent that the narrator has a limited perspective. As previously discussed, the narrator has no insight into the thoughts of the characters, yet does have access to knowledge of events prior to the time-frame of the novel. This is evident when we are informed of Lise's work history at an 'accountant's office where she has worked continually [...] for sixteen years and some months [where] she had done again what she had not done for five years' (*DS*, p.9, p.10). The revealing of Lise's work history and reference to incidents five years previous is evidence of an unusual combination; a semi-omniscience, where the narrator

⁸¹ Day (2007), p.321.

⁸² Spark in John Mortimer, 'The Culture of an Anarchist: An Interview with Muriel Spark', in *Hidden Possibilities: Essays in Honor of Muriel Spark*, ed. by Robert E. Hosmer Jr. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), pp.220-226 (p.233).

⁸³ Spark in Mortimer (2014), p.233.

⁸⁴ Day (2007), p.322. Day also notes (p. 323) that Robbe-Grillet describes *Jealousy* as having an 'invisible narrator'.

lacks insight into the character's thoughts, yet has knowledge of their previous experiences from out-with the time-frame of the novel.⁸⁵

However, perhaps the most significant departure from the narrative stylistics of the *nouveau roman* occurs in the narrator's interjections and commentary throughout. This primarily takes the form of deciphering outward physiognomy in order to attribute internal emotion to the characters. In doing so, Spark, rejects the absolute emotional detachment of the *nouveau roman* for a partial detachment, placing a translucent layer of narratorial bias through which the reader must view the text. For example, do we accept that Lise is bitter because the narrator tells us that 'Lise smiles bitterly' (*DS*, p.29), and later, when she is smiling 'with a sudden gentleness' (*DS*, p.55), are we to understand that this accurately reflects Lise's internal emotional state? This presents the reader with the problem of having to accept or reject the judgements of the narrator, further complicating the reading experience.

It is as though Spark is reminding the reader that any story told by another must be heard with a level of caution, with an understanding and awareness of the mediating role of the narrator. This relates back to the problem of '*des Autres*',⁸⁶ where the difficulty in truly understanding the other is reflected not only in the absence of interiority, but also through the partiality of (the character of) the narrator, especially one who interjects with qualifying statements and who attributes the characters with emotions despite having no access to the interiority such attributions would seem to require.⁸⁷

For example, following the first shopping incident, the narrator states that as Lise leaves, she has 'a look of satisfaction at her own dominance over the situation' (*DS*, p.9). This seems accurate given what we subsequently come to learn about Lise's attempts to assert control in contrast to her previous experiences of marginalisation. Yet the narrator

⁸⁵ Day (2007), p.333, states that 'there are peculiar limitations set on the apparently omniscient narrator of the novel'.

⁸⁶ See Spark's *Symposium* (1990), p.24, and as '*Les Autres*', p.28. McQuillan (2002), p.218, refers to this as '*les autres*'.

⁸⁷ There are exceptions, such as the scene (*DS*, p.96) where Lise verbalises her emotions aloud, negating the narrator's need to interpret on behalf of the reader.

also interjects with expressions of judgement. When quizzed by Bill as to the meaning of “[y]in”, Lise replies “[w]ell it’s a kind of slang, isn’t it? You say a thing’s a bit too yin ...”, to which the narrator dismissively adds, ‘plainly she is groping’ (*DS*, p.32). While the narrator’s comments do not reveal Lise’s thoughts, they offer a critical observation on her actions unlike anything in Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy*. Additionally, an early passage describing Lise’s physical appearance becomes an opportunity for the narrator to attribute Lise with a stern, condemnatory persona on account of her features. She has, we are told, ‘lips [which] are normally pressed together like the ruled line of a balance sheet [...] a final and judging mouth, a precision instrument, a detail warden of a mouth’ (*DS*, p.9). Here we learn less about the actual appearance of Lise’s face, instead, the narrator asserts through simile and metaphor that her lips are an outward signifier of her personality.

When we do learn of Lise’s physical appearance, this is again accompanied with the narrator’s judgement. Chapter two begins with the following description:

Lise is thin. Her height is about five-foot-six. Her hair is pale brown, probably tinted, a very light streaked lock sweeping from the middle of her hair-line to the top of her crown; her hair is cut short at the sides and back, and is styled high.
(*DS*, p.18)

Nothing stands out to make Lise particularly memorable, and this is conveyed in the narrator’s subsequent qualification that ‘[s]he is neither good-looking nor bad-looking’ (*DS*, p.18), a sentiment repeated somewhat arbitrarily shortly after, when ‘she is pushing through the gate into the departure lounge. She walks to the far end, then turns and walks back. She is neither good-looking nor bad-looking’ (*DS*, pp.20-1). The narrator appears determined to convey a sense of the overwhelming ordinariness of Lise. As previously noted, her position at work places her at the median point of the workforce. All of which renders her in the definitive position of anonymity; the middle. The result is that Lise, unremarkable in her averageness, initially functions as a kind of everywoman. This exaggerates her modulation from passive to assertive, and while the emotions behind the transformation into her new persona(s) remain unstated, this has an intensifying effect. As

Spark notes, '[f]eelings and thoughts are even more emphasised when you don't mention them'.⁸⁸ The problem for the reader lies in the attempt to decode these 'feelings and thoughts' in order to solve the mystery surrounding Lise's motivations, even after the endgame of her performance – her death-drive – is revealed.⁸⁹

Returning to the character of the narrator, the repetition of the phrase 'neither good-looking nor bad-looking' (*DS*, p21) seems somewhat unnecessary, or perhaps even unkind. The repetition emphasises her average appearance, and along with the observation that Lise 'is groping' (*DS*, p.32) and that she has a 'judging mouth' (*DS*, p.9), it reveals that the narrator is not only opinionated, but they hold a somewhat negative opinion of Lise. This is far from the disinterested narrative of the *nouveau roman*. If this seems like an unnecessary narrative interjection, it is because the narrator is also a character, someone prone to giving their opinion whether called for, or not. Spark has written about this, stating that 'the narrative part – first or third person – belongs to a character as well. I have to decide what the author of the narrative is like. It's not me, it's a character'.⁹⁰ This narrator's judgemental intercessions place her (or him) in a similar vein to a number of women in the novel who laugh openly at Lise's – admittedly vibrant – appearance.⁹¹ The porter 'throws back her head, looking down through half-closed lids at Lise's clothes, and gives out the high, hacking cough-like ancestral laughter of the street' (*DS*, p.17), while another woman states "'[d]ressed for the carnival!" [...] laughing as she goes her way' (*DS*, p.69). Through these unsolicited opinions Spark emphasises that the narrator is a character and not merely a passive observer recording the events of the novel with an objective eye.

The employment of a single narrative voice with the freedom to express opinion is perhaps the most significant difference between the narrative in *The Driver's Seat*, and that commonly found in *nouveau roman* fiction such as Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*. Aidan Day

⁸⁸ Spark in Mortimer (2014), p.244.

⁸⁹ Spark in Mortimer (2014), p.244.

⁹⁰ Spark (1992)b, p.27.

⁹¹ Lise is consistently mistaken for an American in a running joke regarding European attitudes to American fashion aesthetics. See pp.22, 48, 60, and 76.

suggests that the writers of the *nouveau roman* reject an omniscient narrator – or single narrative perspective – and instead ‘[t]here is a blank where the narrator as traditionally understood ought to be’.⁹² For Day, this is a result of *nouveau roman* and ‘postmodern notions of the inventedness of reality’, whereby the kind of omniscient narrative position displayed in ‘the realist novel of the nineteenth century’ is rejected as an outmoded method by which to present the constitutive nature of the contemporary world.⁹³

Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy* presents a series of contradictions in the narrative, where the same event is returned to numerous times, and on each occasion a number of ‘facts’ have changed. Day describes the reasoning behind such narrative contradictions, stating:

[w]hat is new in the new novel is its self-consciousness that description is not an imitative but a constitutive device [...] According to Robbe-Grillet the point of contradiction in a narrative such as *Jealousy* is that it draws explicit attention to the constructive or creative rather than merely mimetic role of description [...] The contradictory and therefore plural *potential* narrative lines in *Jealousy* find their concomitant in the absence of a clearly defined narrator. The presence of such a narrator would cohere the narrative within a single, linear perspective.⁹⁴

In *The Driver’s Seat*, the ‘constructive or creative’ is located primarily in two places.⁹⁵ The first is in the self-constructed performative character created by Lise, and the second is the creative control the narrator wields through the managed release of information throughout the narrative. This however, is radically different from that outlined by Day above. The narrator in Spark’s novel does not offer ‘contradictory [or] plural *potential* narrative lines’ which would allow the reader to collaborate in a creative role with the narrator.⁹⁶ None of the scenes are returned to with facts altered as is the case in *Jealousy*. While there are descriptive passages – such as the layout and condition of Lise’s hotel room – which resemble the *nouveau roman* in their ‘tonally flat’ lack of emphasis, at no point does the

⁹² Day (2007), p.322

⁹³ Day (2007), p.325, p.322.

⁹⁴ Day (2007), p.323. Day italicises ‘*potential*’.

⁹⁵ Day (2007), p.323.

⁹⁶ Day (2007), p.323.

narrative contradict the plot by altering what has been previously related.⁹⁷ The reader does not collaborate in deciding the events of the novel; the reader is left only to interpret the meanings and motivations behind these events. This leaves a narrator who wields more control over the narrative than the ‘invisible narrator’ of the *nouveau roman*.⁹⁸

Spark’s narrator is especially creative in revealing narrative events in the form of flash-forwards, asserting control over the release of information, a method hinted at by Lise when she says of the book she has been carrying: “‘it’s a whydunnit’” (*DS*, p.101). This accurately reflects the realignment of the narrative impetus from what happens to why it happens, which occurs early in the novel following the description of Lise’s appearance: ‘[h]er nose is short and 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). Matthew Wickman rightly notes that ‘the revelation of Lise’s impending death prompts the incorrect but logical conclusion that this will happen without her consent’.⁹⁹ The reader’s knowledge of Lise’s demise does not coincide with an uncovering of the mystery of the novel, nor does it void the narrative of tension, it simply readjusts the reader’s focus as prompted by a narrator in control of how and when the events of the narrative are revealed. As Wickman observes, this disclosure creates an expectation in the reader that will ultimately be subverted; the perceived consequence does not come to be fulfilled. For Spark, this is a signifier of postmodernism, as she details when asked by McQuillan for her definition of the term. She says: ‘I think it means that there is another dimension which is a bit creepy [...] not supernatural but not necessarily, consequential’.¹⁰⁰

Unsurprisingly then, aspects of Spark’s narrative methods in *The Driver’s Seat* appear to align with her own definition of postmodernism. However, the term becomes

⁹⁷ Day (2007), p.326.

⁹⁸ Robbe-Grillet quoted in Day (2007), p.323.

⁹⁹ Matthew Wickman, ‘Spark, Modernism and Postmodernism’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, ed. by Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp.63-73 (p.68).

¹⁰⁰ Spark in McQuillan (2002), p.216.

problematic when it is applied by others. In her study *Muriel Spark's Postmodernism* (2011), Chikako Sawada invokes Jean-François Lyotard as a point of origin from which to consider Spark's fiction, especially with relation to postmodernism. Sawada states that

[a]s for postmodernism itself, which has become elaborated and mutated in the course of Spark's career, a useful starting definition for the almost indefinable notion was given by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979):

'I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives'. (Lyotard xxiv)

Thus, there is no grand narrative, which can legitimise knowledge or truth.¹⁰¹

The problem with such a statement is that *The Driver's Seat* appears to contradict this assertion in its very structure. As Aidan Day has rightly noted above, the multiple narrative possibilities and subsequent constitutive form of Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* encapsulates the rejection of any 'grand narrative', yet in *The Driver's Seat*, Spark offers no such constitutive structure.¹⁰² The narrator manipulates the presentation of the story by withholding and revealing plot information in a rejection of linearity, but at no point are the events of the plot shown to be inconsistent or contradictory. The content of the novel itself may reject the notion of a 'grand narrative' through its rendering of the mystery of Lise and of her motivation, and in the rejection of consequence as noted by Wickman, but having passed on the chance to employ formal *nouveau roman* techniques which would have entrenched this rejection in the structure of the novel (as is the case in *Jealousy*), Sawada's assertion of Lyotard becomes problematic.¹⁰³

In one sense, the problem lies with the term postmodern itself. Sawada calls postmodernism an 'almost indefinable notion', 'which is loyal to its own creed of multiplicity and indeterminacy and resists any single, final definition'.¹⁰⁴ Matthew Wickman also notes 'uncertainties about what postmodernism is', before stating that

¹⁰¹ Chikako Sawada, *Muriel Spark's Postmodernism* (Japan: Eihōsha, 2011), p.9. Sawada quotes from, Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.xxiv.

¹⁰² Sawada (2011), p.9.

¹⁰³ Sawada (2011), p.9.

¹⁰⁴ Sawada (2011), p.9, p.245.

‘scholars like McQuillan [...] assert a strong and even self-conscious rapport between Spark and literary theory. But Spark’s writing is less about its conformity to elegant paradigms than the havoc it wreaks on them’.¹⁰⁵

Wickman’s position is similar to Aidan Day’s at the outset of this chapter, in the sense that Spark’s dualistic relationship with the *nouveau roman* is perhaps indicative of her twofold or multifaceted position with regard to any single literary categorisation. Spark’s fiction is postmodern in the sense that her canon resists being identified within any single ‘metanarrative’, which paradoxically, and by its own definition, applies to postmodernism itself.¹⁰⁶ Yet her refusal to construct the narrative in the manner of the *nouveau roman*, whereby the reader is a participant or collaborator in the construction of the narrative, indicates an anxiety to cede narrative authority. This suggests that the narrator of *The Driver’s Seat* remains in control of just such a ‘metanarrative’, which – despite the rejection of causality in the novel, and her exclusion of interiority – places Spark on the margins or outwith the *nouveau roman*.¹⁰⁷

The Driver’s Seat suggests that Spark’s position with regards to Romanticism is less equivocal. Lise resembles Jean Brodie in her attempt to manipulate the lives of those around her to suit her own ends. Her incapacity to countenance the individual subjectivity of the other is evidence for F.R. Hart that ‘she is a doomed romantic’, one of Spark’s characters who illustrate that ‘[r]omantic personality is essentially a fraud, a heresy of self-assertion’.¹⁰⁸ This exaggerated ego is witnessed in Lise’s attempts to attain sublimity through her performances and in her death; a sublime that remains out of reach. The damaging influence of Romanticism therefore appears to lie at the root of Lise’s nightmarish desire to be murdered, yet it also suggests a counter to such solipsism in Keats’ concept of ‘*Negative Capability*’ and Shelley’s assertion that the poet ‘must put

¹⁰⁵ Wickman (2010), p.63, p.66.

¹⁰⁶ Lyotard (1984), p.xxiv in Sawada (2011), p.9.

¹⁰⁷ Lyotard (1984), p.xxiv in Sawada (2011), p.9.

¹⁰⁸ Hart (1978), p.302, p.308.

himself in the place of another'.¹⁰⁹ Lise, however, makes no such attempt, and the consequence is the most disturbing vision Spark commits to the page in her entire output.

¹⁰⁹ Keats (2001) [1817], p.370, Shelley (2003) [1821], p.682.

Chapter 5: Absurd Egotism: Parodying the Romantic Artist in *The Finishing School* (2004)

It was in the dramatic light that they saw Emily, for that was how she presented herself.¹

In her 1960 book *Emily Brontë: Her Life and Work*, Spark depicts a version of Emily gleaned from notes and observations contained primarily in the letters and correspondences between Emily and her sister Charlotte. The above quotation refers to the period following the publication of Emily's 1847 novel *Wuthering Heights*, when – according to Spark – Emily's persona ostensibly evolved from that of 'a shy, quiet country girl', into 'the passionate lonely genius who, it seems, was revealed to her family in the last three years of her life'.² Explicit in the comment 'for that was how she presented herself', is Emily's own role in this evolution; her awareness of herself as a writer and dramatic persona and the performative element involved in this.³ That she became 'the passionate lonely genius', reveals that the artistic persona Emily constructed for herself was distinctly Romantic in form.⁴

Spark's novels are populated with creative and artistic types of numerous varieties and disciplines. Musicians, visual artists, writers, actors, film directors and dancers populate the pages of her work, and their depiction leads us to question Spark's own take on the persona of the artist in general and specifically, the writer, as well as her understanding of creativity and the artistic impulse to create. Having written fiction, biography, criticism and autobiography, Spark's writing provides the opportunity to investigate her portrayal of writers within the broader context of the influence and place of those aspects of Romanticism prevalent in her fiction and with reference to the apparently

¹ Spark (1985), p.84.

² Spark (1985), p.14, p.13.

³ Spark (1985), p.84.

⁴ Spark (1985), p.13.

self-constructed, performative and Romantic evocation of the writer as evidenced (above) in Spark's *Emily Brontë: Her Life and Work*.

The Finishing School is Spark's final novel, published in 2004 when she was eighty-six. The action takes place at College Sunrise, a peripatetic establishment founded by Rowland Mahler and his wife Nina Parker. It is, according to the narrator, distinctly romantic sounding, being 'an advanced sort of school, bohemian, artistic, tolerant' (*FS*, 7). They provide a range of classes, from Photography, Modern Art, Social History, to 'Comme il faut' (*FS*, p.5) (lessons in etiquette). Here Nina tells her pupils, with typical Sparkian ironic humour: "[w]hen you finish at College Sunrise you should be really and truly finished [...] Your jumped-up parents (may God preserve their bank accounts) will want to see something for their money" (*FS*, p.5). The pun on "finished" (*FS*, p.5) is threefold: the first meaning is that the students will literally have ended their stay when they finish, secondly, the reference is to the College as a finishing school where etiquette is taught alongside standard education, and thirdly – where the humour of the pun functions – is that they will be finished as in they will be ruined. The pun suggests to the reader that the education being provided at College Sunrise may bear more than a passing resemblance to that taught in the class of Miss Jean Brodie.

The Creative Writing class is where the novel is focused, in particular on the relationship between Rowland and his student Chris Wiley. The novel opens with Rowland advising his creative writing students on literary introductions:

'[y]ou begin,' he said, 'by setting your scene. You have to *see* your scene, either in reality or imagination. For instance, from here you can see across the lake. But on a day like this you can't see across the lake, it's too misty. You can't see the other side'. (*FS*, p.1)

Chikako Sawada accurately notes that '[n]o sooner has Rowland heaped more gibberish on the theme of "setting the scene" than Spark has the narrative voice display how to set the

scene, how it can be done, by adding simple three lines [*sic*]:⁵ ‘It was early July, but not summery. The sky bulged, pregnant with water. The lake had been invisible under the mist for some days’ (*FS*, p.3). What Spark achieves in the opening scene is to subtly reveal how little Rowland knows about creative writing, his supposed subject of expertise. In revealing nothing of substance to his class, Spark has Rowland reveal a substantial amount about himself to the reader. Spark closes his pointless opening ramble with his unwittingly comic instruction to his students that “[y]ou don’t want to make a point as yet” (*FS*, p.1). The point is reinforced when Chris, budding novelist, star pupil, and soon to be object of Rowland’s jealousy, says in reply to Rowland’s statement that:

‘[y]ou find our creative writing classes a help, of course...’
 ‘They’re beside the point, in fact, but quite useful in many other respects’. (*FS*, p.9)

Rowland’s limited abilities – and perhaps more importantly, limited understanding of what writing creatively actually involves – are in direct contrast to his pontifical and empty exclamations on how to write.

Chris Wiley, aged 17, is also outspoken about his ideas on writing, and is in the process of writing a historical novel based loosely – or, perhaps, inaccurately – upon the story of the murder of Rizzio by Darnley, husband of Mary Queen of Scots.⁶ When Rowland reads the first two chapters of Chris’s novel, he is forced to remark “[b]ut this is quite good” (*FS*, p.9). However, the opening passage of the book has served to undermine our faith that Rowland is able to discern between good writing and otherwise. In the face of the evidence of Chris’s novel, it becomes further apparent that Rowland has no actual understanding of how to construct such a work:

‘[t]he dialogue,’ he said, ‘how did you know about dialogue?’
 ‘Oh, I’ve always read a lot.’

⁵ Chikako Sawada, ‘Muriel Spark’s *The Finishing School* and Postmodern Endings’, in *Studies in English Literature*, No.48, (Tokyo: The English Literary Society of Japan, 2007), pp.1-20, (p.6).

⁶ We are told near the end that ‘Chris’s first novel [was] highly praised for its fine, youthful disregard of dry historical facts’ (*FS*, p.154).

‘Oh, you read a lot, I see. For an historical novel you have to... And what, how ... Do you intend to finish it?’
 ‘Oh, fully.’
 ‘What is the story? How does it develop? Historical novels – they have to develop. How...?’ (*FS*, p.9)

The spaces at the end of Rowland’s sentences are filled by Chris’s precocious self-belief and dedication: ‘[h]e knew himself. He felt his talent. It was all a question of time and exercise’ (*FS*, p.8). This is in stark contrast to Rowland, who, ‘[t]o conserve his literary strength, as he put it [...] left nearly all the office work to Nina’ (*FS*, p.2). The consequences of witnessing Chris’s purported talent and self-assurance raises in Rowland – who, we are told, is suffering from writer’s block, and is unable to make progress with his own novel – ‘[a] faint twinge of that jealousy which was to mastermind Rowland’s coming months, growing in intensity small hour by hour’ (*FS*, p.4).

Spark’s interrogation of jealousy is evident in both the relationship between Rowland and Chris, and in the parallel narratives of the construction of Chris’s historical novel, and Rowland’s (currently) non-existent one. The relationship between the two is, however, far more convoluted than Chris simply being the object of Rowland’s jealousy. When we are told that ‘[t]his year’s literary seminar pulls no punches investigating ideas of power and literature’ (*FS*, p.8), we learn that Chris has heard this before, and realises that Rowland has stolen the phrase. However, in a reversal of the typical power dynamic of pupil and teacher (ironically in a seminar series on ‘power and literature’ (*FS*, p.8)), Chris feels ‘affectionate towards Rowland, almost protective’ (*FS*, p.8). This inversion of authority can be read as analogous to a rejection on the part of the young writer of his elder’s ideas on literature, which is perhaps not surprising given what Rowland is teaching. This again illustrates Rowland’s lack of original thought, and it soon becomes evident that Spark is intent on investigating the difference between those who simply observe, and those who have the vision to transform observation into art.

The force of Rowland's jealousy is such that he attempts to dissuade Chris from writing, saying, "I don't think you're on the right lines. You might scrap it and start again" (*FS*, p.4). Chris, however, is undeterred, displaying determination and discipline, saying "I could scrap it and start again. Not before I've finished the novel, though" (*FS*, p.4). Chris is aware of Rowland's jealousy, and the jealousy that his own novel interrogates approximates to that he experiences at College Sunrise: 'Chris pondered on the nature of jealousy. He was thinking of Darnley's fierce and primitive jealousy of Rizzio, his wife's favourite, her musician, her confidential friend' (*FS*, p.56). There are hints here that point to the triadic relationship between Rizzio, Darnley and Mary Queen of Scots in the characters of Chris, Rowland and Nina. Indeed we are told that 'Chris, like any of us, would have been astonished if he had known that Rowland, through jealousy, had thought with some tormented satisfaction of Chris dying in his sleep' (*FS*, p.57).

However, Spark does not overstretch the possible parallels. The relationship evolves into something altogether stranger, as a form of symbiotic reliance emerges in Chris. When Rowland leaves the school to spend the summer in isolation at a nearby monastery, evoking the Romantic cliché of the 'the passionate lonely genius',⁷ Chris follows him, saying "I can't work without you, Rowland. I need whatever it is you radiate. I have to finish my novel in peace" (*FS*, p.93). Shortly after, Chris defines exactly what it is that Rowland radiates, saying: "I need his jealousy. His intense jealousy. I can't work without it" (*FS*, p.101). In an attempt to overcome his writer's block, and at Nina's behest, Rowland has begun to jot down his observations of Chris. She suggests: "[w]hy don't you write about Chris and get him off your chest?... Just make notes about him – anything that comes into your mind. No-one will know about it. Put down anything you observe" (*FS*, p.66). Rowland, who has been voyeuristically observing Chris throughout, subsequently begins his 'Book of Observations' (*FS*, p.137), which replaces his novel and becomes his new literary focus.

⁷ Spark (1985), p.13.

Rowland's jealousy therefore becomes the energy which sustains both writers. Events subsequently spiral almost beyond control as Rowland becomes more obsessed by Chris, who in turn becomes more reliant on Rowland's jealousy. Following Chris's possible murder attempt on Rowland (was it just a threat; just a performance, or was it real?), the novel closes as Chris and Rowland become published writers, and have 'engaged themselves in a Same-sex Affirmation Ceremony' (*FS*, p.155). This may seem incongruous given what has just occurred, yet as Ali Smith notes, 'it makes it possible to dismiss the malevolent; how *The Finishing School* finishes with such a revelation of reassuring cohesion is itself a joyful mystery'.⁸ Nonetheless, the attraction / repulsion dynamic has been increasingly evident throughout the novel in the symbiotic relationship between the two characters. Here we see another of Spark's concerns that recurs throughout her work; the theme of unity and cohesion, and its corollary, disarray and opposition.

Both Rowland and Chris manifest another trait often identified as part of the writers' makeup. This becomes clear when Nina reads an excerpt from Rowland's 'Book of Observations' (*FS*, p.137): '[t]he dedication of an artist involves willing oblivion to everything else while the art is being practised' (*FS*, p.138). Bearing in mind Rowland's decision to isolate himself at the monastery in order to write, we now begin to question whether Rowland actually requires the solitude, or whether he is pandering to his understanding of, and performing the role of, the suffering, isolated artist.⁹ A pattern emerges in the novel – held together by the sardonic tone of the narrator – where a number of the myths surrounding writers and the nature of writing, and which have grown out of Romanticism, are gently but satirically mocked. Indeed the novel comically undermines the whole reading community: as will be seen, writers, publishers, critics and readers are all subject to withering observations.

⁸ Ali Smith, 'Wave Your Hankie', Review of Muriel Spark's *The Finishing School*, in *The Guardian*, 20th March 2004 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/mar/20/fiction.murielspark>> [accessed 23rd December 2014], (paragraph 6).

⁹ It should be noted that a monastery may not be lonely or isolated.

Frank Kermode highlights the sense that these Romantic myths are open to manipulation, noting that while artists may feel ‘a sense of powerful forces extruding them from the life of their society’, there is an undoubted ‘ambiguity concerning the degree of responsibility for the poet’s estrangement’.¹⁰ In Rowland’s case this responsibility is entirely his own. Kermode sees isolation as a necessary requirement of the poet searching for the ‘Image’, noting that ‘[t]he ‘difference’ of some of the English Romantic poets is almost too well known; they were outcast because they had to pay for their joy and their vision’.¹¹ Yet Rowland’s isolation is, as will be seen, self-made, and smacks of posturing and performance – although both of these traits are undoubtedly a part of the construct of some versions of the Romantic artist; Byron springs readily to mind – but without the creative work to justify these behaviours, Rowland is rendered a charlatan; a ‘pseudo-artist’.¹²

For Rowland then, the notion of artistic isolation and suffering is still prevalent, and perhaps understandably so. However, unlike his teacher, Chris’s commitment to writing is deeper than posturing – although he too is guilty of this in other respects – and is clear in the following exchange between the two:

‘Sit down,’ [Rowland] said.
 ‘No, I’ve got to get on with my novel.’
 ‘Oh, God, you’ll wear yourself out. Take a night off’. (*FS*, p.14)

When Rowland next tries to dissuade Chris in his writing, the result is the same:

[t]he choking sensation attacked Rowland again. ‘I think you’re working too hard and too long hours on that novel’
 [...]
 Chris laughed. Then he said, ‘Rowland, you don’t like my novel, but I’m going to write it’. (*FS*, p.17)

¹⁰ Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons and Co Ltd, 1976), p.18. First published in 1957 by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

¹¹ Kermode (1976), p.19.

¹² Sawada (2011), p.146.

The image of the writer that Spark evokes in *The Finishing School* is one which adheres to the idea of the artist dedicated to art alone, and to the cliché – or myth – of the creative persona who is self-absorbed and puts their art before all else. Yet Spark can hardly be blamed for perpetuating a version of the artist which has been around since – at least – Romantic times. In *Emily Brontë: Her Life and Work*, Spark notes that:

[w]hat is so striking about Emily in comparison with her sisters is her single-mindedness in connection with her writing. All her “peculiarities” and prejudices and domestic considerations are explicable only if her work is placed in the centre of her existence [...] she loved the moors, her dog, her sisters, her home; but she loved her work most.¹³

In *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, Martin Stannard identifies the same characteristics in Spark herself, prompting Chikako Sawada to note that:

[o]n the whole, Stannard tries to relate the dark side of Spark’s life frankly. Still, when his account undeniably evokes her image as a ruthless, egotistic woman, he lapses into an old cliché about an artist’s image: like a good conventional biographer, he ultimately defends her as an artist who sacrifices everything for her vocation.¹⁴

It is worth considering the points that these two passages highlight. Firstly, Spark affords a leniency towards notions of the Romantic artist in Emily Brontë, evident in her depiction of Brontë where her ‘work is placed in the centre of her existence [...] she loved her work most’.¹⁵ This is paralleled through what Sawada describes as Stannard’s evocation of Spark ‘as an artist who sacrifices everything for her vocation’.¹⁶ Yet the two passages differ tonally in terms of the appraisal of the writers being discussed. While Stannard has Spark as – at times – ruthless and egotistical, he excuses these traits, something Sawada criticises him for, whereas Spark registers Brontë’s love for her family and home before noting that in the latter years of her life, these were secondary to her writing. The difference in tone is perhaps understandable as a matter of perspective; for Spark the dedication to one’s art can

¹³ Spark (1985), p.92.

¹⁴ Sawada (2011), p.143.

¹⁵ Spark (1985), p.92.

¹⁶ Sawada (2011), p.143.

be understood as an essential requirement for the artist or writer. However, for a critic such as Sawada, the perspective desired from a biography such as Stannard's is one of unbiased objectivity, something in which she believes Stannard has failed, evidenced in her rather scathing comment that 'he lapses into an old cliché [...] like a good conventional biographer'.¹⁷ Her comment also indicts Spark, as Spark's version of Brontë makes the same case that she criticises in Stannard's book.

Stannard is not alone when coming to this conclusion on Spark. In a 2004 interview in *The Daily Telegraph*, Emily Bearn raises the question of Spark's troubled relationship with her son Robin, and her supposed 'lack of sentiment'.¹⁸ Bearn says, '[i]n fact I suspect Muriel isn't heartless at all. She has simply plunged her soul into her writing and allowed it to remain there for seven decades at the expense of nigh on everything else'.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Charles McGrath in *The New York Times* notes that:

[r]eading between the lines of Stannard's book, one concludes that like a lot of great writers, Spark was actually a bit of a monster – a charming, appealing monster but a monster all the same, willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of her work [...] She behaved, in short, like any number of male writers, including ones much less talented than she, but as a woman so ruthlessly and coldheartedly in pursuit of her art she was a little ahead of her time.²⁰

None of this should come as a total surprise, given that Spark admits to being a dedicated writer – if not a 'heartless monster' that allegedly abandons her friends, her child and behaves like 'a bully to agents, editors and publishers'.²¹ And if we allow a biographic reading, it also goes some way to explaining the negative depiction of these literary types in *The Finishing School*. It also somewhat supports Sawada's assertion of Stannard as 'a

¹⁷ Sawada (2011), p.143.

¹⁸ Emily Bearn, 'The Mistress of Mischief', in *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 March 2004
<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3613439/The-mistress-of-mischief.html>> [accessed 24th December 2014].

¹⁹ Bearn (2004), [2014].

²⁰ Charles McGrath, 'Muriel Spark: Playing God', in *The New York Times*, 22 April 2010
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/25/books/review/McGrath-t.html?pagewanted=all>> [accessed 24th December 2014].

²¹ McGrath (2010), [2014].

good conventional biographer'; not, as noted, a positive contention.²² What is additionally noteworthy is that McGrath's analysis requires that he read 'between the lines', and that the 'real' Spark filters through from beneath the surface of Stannard's prose (which makes one wonder what an unconventional biographer – or one not considered 'good' – would have made of Dame Muriel).²³ Indeed Spark sounds very much like the isolated, suffering Romantic artist when she says to Bearn, 'I never went to a film or saw a movie star. There was a whole life lost to me because all I was doing was writing. Maybe I should have had more life but it's too late now'.²⁴ Spark's tone here is distinctly self-pitying; lamenting what she has missed due to a lifetime of writing, mournful of the cost of her vocation.

It would be prudent, however, when considering Spark's depiction of the two writers in *The Finishing School*, to avoid placing too great an emphasis on Spark's own words to enlighten her characters' motivations and intentions. It is a trap that Chikako Sawada warns against, and one which she accuses Martin Stannard of having fallen into. Stannard says of *The Finishing School* that 'from the biographer's point of view, it offers an intriguing summation of her life. Wiley [...] ventriloquises her views on art'.²⁵ He continues, saying of Chris, that '[i]f as a flesh-and-blood teenager he seems somewhat anaemic, just a voice, that is because he is possibly Muriel Spark in drag'.²⁶ Stannard's evidence for this claim is contained in the following passage, where Chris states to Rowland the extent of the control he exerts over his characters:

'[y]our characters don't live their own lives?'
 'No, they live the lives I give them.'
 'They don't take over? With me, the characters take over.'
 'I'm in full control,' Chris said. 'I never thought they could have another life but what I provide on the typed page [...] Nobody in my book so far could cross the road unless I make them do it.' (*FS*, p.48-9)

²² Sawada (2011), p.143.

²³ McGrath (2010), [2014].

²⁴ Bearn (2004), [2014].

²⁵ Stannard (2009), p.527.

²⁶ Stannard (2009), p.528.

So Chris rejects Rowland's idea that characters begin to manifest their own characteristics, however, we should be cautious of taking Stannard's interpretation of the ventriloquism evidenced here as (possible) proof that we can read Chris as a version of Spark. Stannard's justification for positing that Chris may be 'Spark in drag' arises from the similarity between the conversation above, and remarks made by Spark in an interview.²⁷ She says

I don't understand about writers who tell you that the characters take over, develop a will of their own. I know the whole time that I'm making them up and I have to go on making up what they do, and this is very hard work.²⁸

So Wiley is a version of Spark because he echoes her words (according to Stannard).

Sawada, however, warns against such a reading:

[t]o illuminate Spark's life through her fiction, Stannard focuses on her works he can read as *romans à clef* in some way [...] he tends to simply identify the author with any of her characters who share her words and ideas, as well as her experience, without distinguishing voices and tones in which those words are spoken [...] in her fiction, Spark sometimes lets pseudo-artists or even con-men appropriate her words and ideas.²⁹

This is a crucial point and reveals that Sawada has an understanding of Spark's fictional methodology. While Rowland may seem the most likely candidate in *The Finishing School* to belong to the category of 'pseudo-artists or even con-men' that Sawada identifies, there is also a strong case for Chris to be included in this group.³⁰ While Chris certainly ventriloquises some of Spark's ideas, he is no more a version of Spark than any of the rest of the characters in the novel, and this is despite some – Nina in particular – having characteristics and attributes (perhaps) similar to those of Spark herself.³¹

Indeed, Nina is one in a long line of strong, somewhat eccentric, female characters in Spark's fiction. She is pragmatic, intelligent, dedicated, perceptive (at times) and

²⁷ Stannard (2009), p.528.

²⁸ Patricia Stubbs, 'Two Contemporary Views on Fiction: Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark', *English*, 23 (Autumn 1974), pp.102-10 (pp.108-9).

²⁹ Sawada (2011), p.146.

³⁰ Sawada (2011), p.146.

³¹ Any biographic evidence provided now seems to fall into the very practice against which Sawada warns.

talented, and unlike her husband Rowland, she develops and adapts to her surroundings. Like Spark and Jean Brodie, Nina has an interest in pictorial art, and like Spark, Nina is resourceful and determined. However, we should again heed the words of Chikako Sawada that warn against any overly simplistic biographic reading. Nina is no more a version of Spark than Rowland or Chris, but she is rendered in sharp relief to both, as she neither postures nor acts (she simply *is*), and is devoid of their egotism and self-centredness. Her unconventional *comme il faut* classes provide a stark contrast to Rowland's creative writing classes; her unaffected meandering lessons in life, comically irrelevant and utterly fanciful, are the antithesis of Rowland's joyless exhortations on how (not) to write.³²

Nina's selflessness is evident from early in the novel, where we learn that '[b]oth Nina and Rowland aimed principally at affording Rowland the time and space and other opportunities to complete his novel, while passing their lives pleasantly' (*FS*, p.7). She is, at the outset, fully supportive of Rowland; indeed 'the whole point of the enterprise was decidedly Rowland's novel. Nina believed in it, and in Rowland as a novelist, as much as he did himself' (*FS*, p.8). This is partly due to Nina's esteem of academics; for her they resemble modern versions of the elevated Romantic poets who captured the sacred and the sublime in verse. Spark subsequently employs a spiritual vocabulary in Nina's appreciation of intellectuals, stating that

[s]he regarded scholars with awe, as if they were so many orders of angels, thrones, Dominations, Powers, Cherubim, Seraphim [...] The subjects were innumerable, the sacred lecturers were equally numerous, but not equally affordable. To Nina it was of course impossible that scholars could have ideas of their value above their actual worth, which was anyway priceless. (*FS*, p.37)

As a consequence of these beliefs, we are told that Nina 'had married Rowland largely because of her esteem for scholarship' (*FS*, p.42). However, Nina exhibits no other

³² Perhaps the most entertaining of Nina's *comme il faut* lessons involves advice for those students who "are thinking of getting a job at the United Nations [...] if you, as a UN employee, are chased by an elephant stand still and wave a white handkerchief. This confuses the elephant's legs" (*FS*, p.60). Rowland's lessons are not without their unwitting humour: "[g]et at the Freudian reality, the inner kernel. Everything means something other than it seems. The cat means the mother" (*FS*, p.67).

religious tendencies, and despite the effusive praise above, her pragmatism tempers her ‘esteem for scholarship’ (*FS*, p.42) within the context of her marriage to Rowland. This is evident when we are told that

[a]s an act of will, she gave Rowland her full sympathy, but she knew it contained a built-in time limit. There is a way out, she would tell herself at times. At the end of some school year I could comfortably leave him. In the meantime let him write his novel; it might even be good. (*FS*, p.43)

This is exactly what will occur later in the novel, and the phrase ‘it might even be good’ (*FS*, p.43) introduces Nina’s doubt about Rowland’s abilities for the first time. It turns out that Nina has reason to doubt Rowland, who ‘before he had graduated from Oxford, had already written a play for the National Theatre’ (*FS*, p.54). The narrator leaves us in no doubt as to how this achievement should be regarded; it was, we are told, ‘a young-person success’ (*FS*, p.54), a delightfully Sparkian example of damning with faint praise. The narrative continues to undermine Rowland, noting that ‘according to his agents, “you couldn’t give away”’ Rowland’s subsequent efforts (*FS*, p.54). It is worth noting the distinction in tone between the narrator’s slight and that of Rowland’s agents, with Spark wielding inverted commas to infer that her narrator would never employ quite so blunt and unimaginative a pejoration.

This narrative undermining of Rowland is paralleled in Nina’s subsequently deteriorating opinion of her husband. We are informed that ‘[s]he longed for Rowland to become a Master of an Oxford or Cambridge college. She wanted to be married to a scholar. She had thought he was a playwright when she had married him; that didn’t last’ (*FS*, p.55). Lest the reader consider Nina’s esteem for scholarship naïve, and her remark that “‘I should have married a scholar”’ (*FS*, p.56) somewhat presumptuous, the narrator reveals that ‘[e]ventually Nina, herself, was to become an art-historian, but that was after great effort, and after time ahead’ (*FS*, p.56). So Nina, through dedication and perseverance, succeeds in becoming that which she holds in esteem.

This revelatory flash-forward is not unusual in Spark's fiction. In *The Finishing School* and throughout her oeuvre, Spark's employment of prolepsis reveals elements of her characters' futures. For many, this omniscient narrative perspective has been cited as evidence of the similarity between author and God in the act of artistic creation, and subsequently as an expression of Spark's Catholic beliefs as embodied within the structure and technique of her fiction.³³ This critical orthodoxy has, however, been challenged.

Chikako Sawada cites Lorna Sage's review of *Symposium* (1990), 'Seeing Things from the End', and she states that

Sage's emphasis on 'the geometrical and end-directed nature' [...] of her novel points to something totally different from 'mainstream' criticism, which has often linked the 'end-directed nature' of Spark's fiction to an authorial knowledge of the end in terms of religious transcendence.³⁴

For Paddy Lyons, the association in criticism between the 'end-directed nature',³⁵ and 'religious transcendence' is a result of the lingering influence of Romanticism.³⁶ Such an association conflates 'the elevation of authorship as the lynchpin of writing',³⁷ with 'Romanticism's liking for endowing art with the aura of the sacred and the tones of religiosity'.³⁸ Or, as Alain Badiou states: '[j]ust as the work is sacred, so too is the artist sublime'.³⁹ For these critics the idea that Spark would endorse Romanticism's comparison between author and God is absurd. Spark's use of flash-forward is not then, evidence of an author/God parallel; indeed Patricia Stubbs notes that fiction is 'in a sense dabbling in the

³³ See Sawada (2011), 'The 'Spark Myth' since the 1960s', pp.4-7, for an overview of what she categorises as the 'Kermodean timeless divine pattern', where Spark's fiction is understood as predominantly an expression of her Catholicism which conflates 'the forms of her fiction with the configuration of destiny' (p.7, p.5).

³⁴ Sawada (2007), p.2. Sawada quotes from Lorna Sage, 'Seeing Things from the End [Review of *Symposium*]', in *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*, ed. by Joseph Hynes (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1992), pp.275-278 (p.278).

³⁵ Sage (1992), p.278.

³⁶ Sawada (2007), p.2.

³⁷ Flannery O'Connor notes that '[t]he major difference between the novel as written in the eighteenth century and the novel as we usually find it today is the disappearance from it of the author' (Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose, selected & edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970), p.74).

³⁸ Lyons (2010), p.85, p.87.

³⁹ Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Polity, 2007), p.153. Originally published in French in 2005. Quoted in Lyons (2010), p.86.

devil's work, since Satan is the father of all lies, the patron saint of fiction'.⁴⁰ Similarly, Chikako Sawada states that 'Spark was not one who tried to or wished to assume the role of the prophet'.⁴¹ It is the case that the parallel of the author with God, and the notion of the poet as prophet are satirised throughout *The Finishing School* in the characters of Rowland and Chris, and it is Nina's connection to the real, non-sublime world of the every-day which illuminates the absurdity of the Romantic self-elevation of the two writers.

So Nina's pragmatic selflessness is portrayed against what Rowland – ironically, given his own self-absorption – identifies in Chris as “[t]oo much individualism” (*FS*, p.55), and if we understand the Romantic epoch as the flowering of a new individualism, we begin to see Spark's reaction against this in the terms outlined by Lyons above. On returning to the novel, we see Nina's pragmatism tempered with a down-to-earth reality brought on by Rowland's continued inability to write his novel, and his on-going obsession with Chris:

Nina said nothing. He had hardly started the novel, and was apt to make a new start every now and again. Nina had a much longer-term prospect in mind, which she kept to herself, for she was convinced that sooner or later she would separate from Rowland, marry again, have children, study. But in the meantime, shrewd woman that she was, she knew there was a life to be lived as comfortably and pleasantly as possible. (*FS*, p.69)

We have already learned that Nina will become an art-historian, and here we see the contrast between Rowland's inability to persevere or sustain focus, with Nina's ability to plan for a future which she will attain only 'after great effort' (*FS*, p.56).⁴² It is noteworthy that this passage shows the narrator openly espousing Nina's qualities, unlike the previous narratorial interjection where Rowland's achievement is deemed 'a young-person success' (*FS*, p.54).

⁴⁰ Stubbs (1974), p.108.

⁴¹ Sawada (2007), p.4.

⁴² Nina's practicality is evident in that she runs 'a 'business' class' (*FS*, p.134), although her classes in meteorology and *comme il faut* somewhat undermine this claim to pragmatism.

Indeed, it is worth pausing to consider the narrator's role and voice in *The Finishing School*. Throughout the novel the narrator interjects with occasional observations, witticisms and judgements on the characters, and it is worth again recalling Spark's own words on this, where 'the narrative part – first or third person – belongs to a character as well. I have to decide what the author of the narrative is like. It's not me, it's a character'.⁴³ The character of the narrator in *The Finishing School* is witty and – usually indirectly – sardonic, and occasionally self-referential in way which nudges the reader into a consideration of the metafictional nature of the narrative. This is evident when the narrator quotes herself:

Nina and Rowland had immediately offered to keep Opal on at the school without paying any fees for her lessons or her keep, a gesture which was greatly approved by the school at large.

'At large...' It was not in any sense a large school. (*FS*, p.6)

This self-referentiality draws our attention to the fictionality of the text, to the presence of the narrator who is considering her own work, therefore emphasising their presence as a character and as distinct from the novelist, and subsequently to the constructed (un)reality of the novel. Another example occurs later, and follows a similar design. Speaking of "Envy of Another's Spiritual Good" (*FS*, p.80), the narrator informs us that this

[...] was the sin from which Rowland suffered.

Suffered is the right word, as it often is in cases where the perpetrators are in the clutches of their own distortions. (*FS*, p.80)

This remark on the use of 'the right word' (*FS*, p.80) again emphasises the metafictional elements present, although unlike some of Spark's other novels – such as *The Comforters* and *Loitering with Intent* – it is used subtly throughout.

We have already discussed the narrator's distancing themselves from the words of Rowland's agents, and for the most part their mocking of him avoids direct comment and

⁴³ Spark (1992)b, p.27.

relies on presenting the action and allowing this to speak for itself. Similarly, when we are told of Rowland that ‘[t]o conserve his literary strength, as he put it, he left nearly all the office work to Nina’ (*FS*, p.2), we notice that the phrase ‘as he put it’ is a narratorial intrusion, a short phrase of gentle sarcasm that casts doubt and manoeuvres the reader towards a judgement of Rowland as lazy and bereft of ‘literary strength’ (or literary *anything*). Here the narrator is again at pains to distinguish between their own words and those of Rowland. However, as the passage praising Nina above shows, the narrator will occasionally make an explicit judgement of the characters in their own words. We are told that ‘Rowland’s interest in Chris was developed, mature, complex. In realising this, Chris was flattered, and thought better of himself than was warranted’ (*FS*, p.62). Here we are privy to the internal thought processes of Chris via the narrator, who then undermines him directly as opposed to reporting external speech, as was the case with Rowland’s agents, and as will be the case when Chris’s novel is finally read by the agent Monty Fergusson, who states that “[t]he book itself [...] is actually a lot of shit” (*FS*, p.124).

This direct commentary on the characters demonstrates that the narrator is a character with an opinion, and is not afraid to wield it. The tone of the narrator in *The Finishing School* is similar to that of the narrators of a number of her other works, and is perhaps even illustrative of her style. This is in large part due to her subject matter, the commonalities of which Drew Milne identifies here:

[a]mid her gallery of criminals, from rogues and fraudsters to thieves, blackmailers and murderers, there is usually a special circle of hell reserved for liars, artists and makers of fiction alike. Novelists, too, are con artists. While her narrative genres overlap with those of crime fiction, her characteristic narrative voice is that of an omniscient narrator who is not so much unreliable as criminally witty.⁴⁴

What Milne accurately notes is that when the business at hand is that of fiction-making, Spark’s recourse to ‘satire and [...] ridicule’ will be given over to a narrator with a

⁴⁴ Milne (2010), p.120.

character as described above, and as witnessed in *The Finishing School*.⁴⁵ Milne's observation is particularly accurate regarding the acute contempt Spark has for posturing novelists, or rather, would-be fictionalisers.

We have been witness to two such characters in the novel, and they are placed in sharp(er) ironic relief given the evidence throughout that Nina manifests the attributes of a narrator, editor or writer more-so than either of the two self-fashioned novelists. In addition to her previously noted qualities such as dedication to hard work, pragmatism and the ability to plan ahead over a prolonged time, Nina also notices; she *sees*. This is evident early in the novel, when Nina suggests sending Chris home on account of his negative effect on her husband and his (Rowland's) writing. Rowland balks at the suggestion, saying,

'I don't want to part with Chris.'
 'Neither do I. Not at all. But he bothers you, I've noticed.'
 'You notice too much.' (*FS*, p19)

Noticing becomes a recurring theme throughout the novel, and Nina in particular has a particular aptitude for seeing and noticing in the novelistic sense; she has vision. Flannery O'Connor writes about the need for the writer to perceive their surroundings in a manner which goes beyond that of simply observing, but to look and analyse in order to understand, in order to perceive:

[a]ny discipline can help your writing: logic, mathematics, theology, and of course and particularly drawing. Anything that helps you to see, anything that makes you look. The writer should never be ashamed of staring. There is nothing that doesn't require his attention.⁴⁶

What is striking about O'Connor's remarks is the focus on academic disciplines as an aid to the writer, and their similarity to Nina's esteem of academic learning (and 'sacred

⁴⁵ Spark (1992)c, p.35.

⁴⁶ O'Connor (1970), p.84.

lecturers' (*FS*, p.37)). Of all of these subjects, visual art is highlighted as the most beneficial to the writer. O'Connor elaborates on this point, stating that

learning to see is the basis for learning all the arts except music. I know a good many fiction writers who paint, not because they're any good at painting, but because it helps their writing. It forces them to look at things. Fiction writing is very seldom a matter of saying things; it is a matter of showing things.⁴⁷

As we are already aware, Nina will become an art historian, which we can infer is a vocation which Spark holds in high esteem given that she states "I have a special interest in portrait-painting as touching almost on the novelist's activity"⁴⁸. At this point in the novel, what is becoming more evident is Nina's ability to perceive is much greater than that of her husband Rowland's. Unlike O'Connor's friends who paint to help their writing, and unlike Nina who understands the ability of visual art to illuminate, Rowland observes but does not look in the sense that O'Connor uses the word; he does not see.⁴⁹ Indeed, as noted above, Nina's ability annoys him: "[y]ou notice too much" (*FS*, p.19), he exclaims. The implication from Spark – that no artist can notice too much – corresponds with O'Connor's dictum that '[t]he writer should never be ashamed of staring. There is nothing that doesn't require his attention'.⁵⁰

Nina notices not only Rowland's reaction to Chris, but she perceives the manner in which the relationship between the two men is imbalanced. When Chris says that he will wait until he is finished writing before showing any more of his novel, the narrator notes Nina's reaction: '[h]e thinks it is a game he is playing with Rowland, Nina reflected. He doesn't realise how seriously Rowland is affected' (*FS*, p.47). Nina notices all the emotions, while Rowland sees and feels only his own jealousy.

Nina again remarks to Rowland about Chris's effect on him. She says "[h]e's in your way. His novel-writing bothers yours" (*FS*, p.66), and she is correct, despite

⁴⁷ O'Connor (1970), p.93.

⁴⁸ Spark in Stannard (2009), p.494.

⁴⁹ His 'Book of Observations' (*FS*, p.137), later to become *The School Observed* (*FS*, p.154) underlines this inability.

⁵⁰ O'Connor (1970), p.84.

Rowland's claims to the contrary. Having noticed Rowland's struggles, she praises his teaching in the hope that the flattery will inspire him to write, but her praise is comic in its bathos. Having extolled Rowland's literary "sensitivity and imagination" (*FS*, p.66), she credits his influence on a former pupil who has written an article in *Tatler* magazine which she describes as

'[v]ery professional and good, really good. That's thanks to your teaching.'
 'What was the article about?'
 'How to make a goldfish pond'. (*FS*, p.66)

One gets the impression that Nina is at this point aware that fawning of this sort might appeal to a character like Rowland and is further evidence of her pragmatic nature.

The combination of praise with ironic undermining is Spark (or her narrator) at her most cutting, and the subject of the goldfish pond hints in a reductionist manner back to Rowland's scene-setting at the opening of the novel, where "the other side of the lake was hidden in mist" (*FS*, p.1). Perhaps, Spark implies, Rowland did teach his creative writing class something after all; how to write like a journalist about goldfish ponds.

As noted above, it is at this point that Rowland remembers 'that Nina had recently suggested: "Why don't you write about Chris and get him off your chest?... Just makes notes about him – anything that comes into your mind. No-one will know about it. Put down anything you observe"' (*FS*, p.66). Nina's suggestion is yet again pragmatic as it encourages Rowland to combine the focus of his obsession with the ideal opportunity to get him writing again. Rowland, however, entirely misses the point that this is primarily to stop him obsessing about Chris, and that his observations are not intended to ever become public, or to be disseminated – barely disguised – as fiction. Indeed Rowland can only see Nina's advice in relation to his own teaching, as becomes clear in the following passage:

[i]t was the creative writing course swerving back on him. Yes, it was exactly his own advice to students stuck for what to write about. 'Watch for details' Rowland had often said. 'Observe. Think about your observations. Think hard. They do not need to be literally true'. (*FS*, p.67)

Unfortunately for Rowland, he does no such hard thinking, and mistakes what are preparatory observational exercises intended only as the catalyst to creative writing, for creative writing itself.

Nina's noticing skills are rendered contrastingly in the following passage, which contains a number of the prevalent themes of the novel:

Rowland proceeded fiercely, now, with his Book of Observations. Nina read his latest handwritten entry:

A perfect marriage, one partner of which is a great and successful artist, probably can exist, but very, very rarely. The difficulty lies in conflicting dedications. Most marriages, where both or one is an artist, are rickety. – Most marriages of this kind comprise one failed artist.

The dedication of an artist involves willing oblivion to everything else while the art is being practised, and for the hours antiguous to it.

Nina looked up 'antiguous' in the dictionary but couldn't find it. She changed it to 'contiguous'. (*FS*, pp.137-8)

The first question which arises is whether or not Nina has tacit permission to read Rowland's notes. We have been made aware of her noticing skills, but this passage moves beyond noticing and into something slightly more intrusive. This signals the on-going consideration in the novel of looking, seeing and watching, and of the subsequent relationship between noticing in a positive sense as a skill required by the artist or writer, and at its most negative as an invasion of privacy, voyeurism, and finally to spying and the betrayal of trust. This forms a stratification of viewing, and opens up the novel to a debate on the lengths the writer can legitimately go to in order to create fiction.

Rowland's evocation of the artist within marriage does, perhaps, contain some validity; it is perhaps realistic in its outline of the dedication required, although his definition of the 'great and successful artist' (*FS*, p.137) evokes Romanticism's elevation of the poet. However, Rowland is again made to unwittingly encapsulate his own lack of noticing, and is the comically inadvertent subject of his own observation that '[m]ost

marriages of this kind comprise one failed artist' (*FS*, p.138). He is the failed artist in his marriage to Nina, and will be the failed artist in his relationship with Chris. This is not to say that Nina and Chris become successful artists as Rowland would understand the term. We hear of 'the eventual flamboyant literary success of Chris himself, if not entirely his book' (*FS*, p.137), and we note here that Chris's ability to perform the role of the writer is the basis of his success, and not the actual fiction itself. Nina, meanwhile, becomes an art-historian, where her vision – "literally as concerning optics [and] figuratively, as it might be with regard to an enlargement of the total perceptive capacity" (*BPR*, p.72) – will be a central requirement.

Nina's reaction to Rowland's latest entry is noteworthy for two reasons. Her correction of Rowland's misuse of 'contiguous' is further evidence of her noticing skills, and shows her to be an astute editor with a fine attention to detail (a prerequisite for an art historian, one would assume). Secondly, she remains concerned with the 'what-is'.⁵¹ She has already embarked on an affair with Israel Brown – who she finds 'attractive, learned, charming, scholarly, sexy' (*FS*, p.82); the artistic, physical and intellectual alternative to her neurotic, uncreative, posturing husband – thus rendering Rowland's observations on the difficulty of (their) marriage irrelevant.⁵² Her matter-of-fact actions in correcting his writing are in sharp contrast to his opaque ruminations, and her focus remains on the here-and-now, not on any ethereal, numinous, abstract theorising about art. This is compounded when we are told: '[t]hen she wrote on the next line: "Tilly is pregnant by Albert"' (*FS*, p.138). Her clarity of expression here – in contrast to Rowland's prevaricating – makes us realise that along with her noticing and editing skills, her vision, her understanding of how to defeat writer's block, and her delightfully comic and eccentric etiquette lessons, she

⁵¹ O'Connor (1970), p.146.

⁵² She is much more suited to Israel, whose opinion of her shows *his* noticing skills: '[s]he seemed to say exactly what he hoped she would say. She handled her plainly psychotic husband with admirable tact and helpfulness, she was a beautiful girl and aware of it' (*FS*, pp.102-3). Also, his predictions for the future prove to be uncannily accurate, see *FS*, p.137.

could have been a much finer creative writing tutor and novelist than either her husband or Chris.

For writers such as Spark and Flannery O'Connor, noticing with a painterly eye, combined with a determination to remain grounded in the everyday, are ideal traits for a fiction writer, and they in large define Nina's character. However, seeing is not enough; in order to enable creative vision, the viewing act has to be combined with the imagination, and without due care, the positive requirements of noticing can decay into its murky antitheses of voyeurism and spying. In this respect, *The Finishing School* presents a vision of creativity that has remained largely unaltered since Coleridge identified the importance of 'that synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of the imagination'.⁵³ Without it, vision is nothing more than vacant staring, a reality Spark encapsulates in the title of Rowland's book '*The School Observed*' (*FS*, p.154).

This imaginative vision of the artistic persona is one of a number of the Romantic-related themes that Spark returns to in *The Finishing School*. The familiar refrain of unity also re-emerges, indeed, given the jealousy that Rowland exhibits, and Chris's ability to feed on the energy this generates, their relationship is an almost perfect encapsulation of Newman's 'dialectic of opposites'.⁵⁴ Rather than attain unity through harmony, it seems that Rowland's envy and Chris' hubris are the antithetical elements that cancel each other out in a balancing of opposites. If we consider Spark's first and last novels together, this dialectic seems to reflect the antithetical depiction of writers in the two texts. While Caroline Rose is battling madness, Rowland and Chris represent a different strain of psychosis. For all that Caroline is struggling to differentiate between reality and fiction, her form of madness is less problematic for Spark than the solipsistic self-awareness that embodies the posturing artists of *College Sunrise*. All of which brings the theme of 'the

⁵³ Coleridge in Hill (1983), p.39.

⁵⁴ Prickett (1976), p.183.

‘insanity’ of visionary perception’ and the Romantic ideal back into view, and these will now be considered alongside Spark’s novels discussed thus far.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Stannard (2009), p.446.

Conclusion

In *The Comforters*, Spark wrestles with a number of the thematic concerns which recur throughout her canon, many of which can be considered with reference to their prominence within the traditions and contexts of the Romantic Movement. By considering *The Comforters* with respect to Coleridge's notion of the Romantic imagination as 'the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities', a number of these concerns are illuminated.¹ Caroline's transition from the writing of criticism to fiction corresponds with her regained mental health. In this respect Coleridge's scheme, whereby the poet coalesces disparities, appears to work in an inward motion, unifying the fractured psyche of the poet herself. This can therefore be understood as the Romantic ideal in action. However, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that this decision to write fiction is alone responsible for Caroline's recovery. Indeed, the contradictory nature of numerous so-called Romantic tenets is a problem which will occur throughout Spark's work. Coleridge's configuration places emphasis on the unifying qualities that the imagination of the poet provides, yet for Martin Stannard, 'the 'insanity' of visionary perception locates a higher truth than the sanity of rationalism'.² As Stannard notes, '[t]he ultimate paradox [...] is the Romantic one', and the imagination is at the root of both Coleridge's and Stannard's conception of Romanticism.³ The result is that we cannot rule out that the spectral author that torments Caroline is in fact a manifestation of her imagination, whilst her decision to write fiction involves the utilisation of this same imagination. How, then, can that which unifies simultaneously be that which fractures? The answer lies in matters of degree. Sanity and insanity may not be clearly distinguishable. Caroline's 'Typing Ghost' (*TC*, p.161) makes her question her sanity, but her awareness that what she is experiencing is perceived as insanity to others, suggests that she has not entirely lost her faculties. Likewise, the imagination of the Romantic artist may border into areas resembling madness, but may in

¹ Coleridge in Hill (1983), p.39.

² Stannard (2009), p.446.

³ Stannard (2009), p.446.

fact be the product of the sanity – not the insanity – ‘of visionary perception’.⁴ *The Comforters* suggests as much, in that the seventy-eight year old Louisa Jepp’s activities as the head of diamond-smuggling gang suggest to some that she is also suffering from psychosis of a kind. Yet Louisa displays the most complete and comprehensive vision of all of the characters, and she applies this vision not to the creative arts as such, but to the creative matter of international contraband.

The novel is also ruthless in its depiction of artistic types. Caroline is the only creative character who is spared mockery; the pub poets, Mervyn Hogarth and Baron Stock are all portrayed as artists – of a sort – without vision. In *The Comforters*, Spark aligns the true creative temperament with sanity, not the fraudulent posturing of self-proclaimed artists, and this stance will re-appear throughout her work. On this evidence, Jean Brodie’s dictum that “[w]here there is no vision [...] the people perish”, is rendered true.⁵ As with the paradoxical nature of Romanticism as outlined in *The Comforters*, Caroline’s experiences during her conversion to Catholicism suggest a similar duality. While she is joining a large spiritual body in the Church, she retains a strong sense of her individuality in the face of pressure to conform from Catholics such as Mrs Hogg.

This striving to retain her individuality is also true of Barbara Vaughan in *The Mandelbaum Gate*, another of Spark’s protagonists who bears more than a passing resemblance to the author herself. The struggle to maintain a sense of her distinct personality in the face of challenges presented by her faith, and the danger her Jewish heritage presents during her pilgrimage, situate Barbara Vaughan in similarly liminal terrain to Caroline Rose. On the evidence of *The Mandelbaum Gate*, the Romantic ideal encapsulated in the poetic configuration identified by Stephen Prickett as an ‘organically unified sensibility’, requires the influence of John Henry Newman to succeed.⁶ As a result of asserting her individuality, and of her acceptance of the co-existing disparities in her

⁴ Stannard (2009), p.446.

⁵ Spark (1971), p.7.

⁶ Prickett (1976), p.4.

life, Barbara achieves what can be considered as something resembling Newman's 'dialectic of opposites'.⁷ By drawing upon the biographic details of Newman's experiences, and by resolving to act – like Newman in Sicily – according to her 'self-will', Barbara resembles the facets of Newman's personality that can be considered in terms of Romanticism and individuality.⁸ In *The Mandelbaum Gate*, the coalescing of the legacies of Romanticism with Barbara's Catholicism come to resemble those other seemingly dialectic positions that Barbara manages to balance: 'Gentile and Jewess, Vaughan and Aaronson [...] a private-judging Catholic, a shy adventuress' (*MG*, p.164).

By drawing heavily on oral tradition, mythology, and folklore, Spark appropriates the materials and concerns of Romanticism and supplants them into her contemporary fictional world. As a result, any accusation that Spark outright rejects Romanticism must therefore take into account the extent to which a novel such as *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* relies upon these elements. Much of the intertextual material that Spark alludes to is Romantic in origin; authors such as Burns and Hogg can be categorised as such. However, even Spark's allusive correspondences with a twentieth century writer such as T.S. Eliot illuminate the extent to which the Romantic imagination is present in her work. Eliot's reliance on writers such as Weston and Frazer, and their work on eastern mythology, ritualistic societies, and the influence of oral narrative tradition, is channelled into Spark's novel. In addition to this, the influence of the Scottish border ballads is another signifier of Spark's appropriation of what Ian Duncan identifies as the 'modern antiquarian romance revival: the recovery of "remains"'.⁹ By delving into the oral histories of the ballads, Spark reanimates marginalised and overlooked elements of the Scottish literary tradition.

In addition to her appropriation of Eliot's use of mythology, her uncovering of the influence of the ballads, and her intertextual correspondences with Hogg and Burns, Spark's use of the materials of Romanticism is magnified when Dougal is read as solely a

⁷ Prickett (1976), p.183.

⁸ Faber (1974), p.324.

⁹ Duncan (2003), p.110.

trickster. This widens the allusive possibilities in the novel to include Chaucer, Henryson, Masefield, the French *Roman de Renart*, and the global tradition of the trickster narrative. As with Eliot's Fisher King, Dougal introduces the possibility of a new creative fertility to Peckham. This is brought about by his chaotic but invigorating amorality, where his capacity to ignore boundaries and transcend class, gender, and stultifying decorum allow him to access and challenge all levels of society.

He sets about reanimating – and inventing – a mythology for Peckham, becoming the writer of the creatively fictional biography of Maria Cheeseman. In doing so he draws inevitable parallels with his creator, and again brings the figure of the Romantic artist into view. His behaviour is ritualistic, involving and evoking ceremonial hair-combing and episodes of interpretive and narrative impersonation. He utilises the folkloric traditions of Scottish dancing, and imitates and presents a range of cultural alternatives through his singular brand of mayhem. The result is that Peckham becomes renewed for those with the vision to apprehend the 'problematic alternatives' he (re)presents.¹⁰ Jerome J. McGann states that Romantic poems 'locate areas of contradiction, conflict, and [...] these subjects occupy areas of critical uncertainty'.¹¹ Dougal is the embodiment of such 'areas of critical uncertainty'.¹² His amorality baffles just as his ambivalence creates uncertainty, even amongst critics who struggle to decipher the nature of Spark's 'cockeyed' Dougal (*BPR*, p.142). Perhaps this mysterious trickster is not to be understood, but to remain liminal, a relic of mythology and oral cultures not to be defined but to evolve with each telling, as all myths should.

The folklore and legend of Peckham is left behind for Scandinavian atheism and an Italian murder-mystery of the absurdist kind in *The Driver's Seat*. Lise's journey to her death inverts narrative expectation as well as the hunter/hunted and culprit/victim dynamics. In so doing, Spark's novel ruthlessly dissects the remaining influences of

¹⁰ McGann (1985), p.73.

¹¹ McGann (1985), pp.72-3.

¹² McGann (1985), pp.72-3.

Romanticism on contemporary culture. Lise's exaggerated ego and inability to comprehend the other are ridiculed as part of a sustained rejection of Romantic conceptions of the sublime, vision, and the solipsistic nature of the transfiguration of the self.

The novel's lack of interiority renders the narrative as a performance, and Lise's attempt at self-assertion through self-negation is illustrative of the contradiction at the core of the novel. Nonetheless, Spark's own words, alongside the writings of Keats and Shelley, suggest that the ways in which Lise may have come to terms with her predicament are themselves to be found in Romanticism. Spark emphasises the importance of getting 'under the skin' of others' in the attempt to empathise, to understand, to connect.¹³ Lise, however, does not attempt any such Keatsian '*Negative Capability*' either in her life or her art, which are now indistinguishable.¹⁴ Instead she turns inward, and reminiscent of Emily Brontë, she 'expend[s] passion, adoration, worship, contemplation, on herself'.¹⁵ Consequently, Lise's failure to attain the sublime and become herself an embodiment of the Romantic ideal, affirms Spark's rejection of the Romantic ideal as it is manifested in *The Driver's Seat*.

In many ways Spark's final novel returns to the same territory upon which her debut was constructed. The attempt to understand the nature of creativity and the role of vision are central to both *The Finishing School* and *The Comforters*. However, where Caroline Rose manages to alleviate her suffering through the act of writing fiction, it is the writing of fiction that causes Rowland Mahler to suffer. Or rather, it is the absence of vision and the subsequent inability to create that torments Rowland, especially when it appears that the 17 year old Chris Wiley has talent beyond his years. What is immediately

¹³ Spark in McQuillan (2002), p.218.

¹⁴ Keats (2001) [1817], p.370. Lise's life and art remain indistinguishable until the moment of her death scream, when her perception of 'how final is finality' (*DS*, p.107), reinstates the chasm between what will momentarily be death, and art.

¹⁵ Spark (1985), p.95.

apparent is that Rowland is performing the role of artist and novelist; what is more surprising is that by the close of the novel it is clear that Chris has been doing likewise.

Spark's final novel is a satire not only of creative writing classes, but of the performative tendencies of artists and novelists, a propensity she identifies even before she writes her first novel. As noted at the outset of the chapter 5, Spark identifies the manner in which Emily Brontë was fully aware of her artistic persona. Where Brontë had the talent to accompany – and perhaps even justify – the performance, Spark's fiction writers rarely do. The narrator of *The Finishing School* makes this abundantly clear when they note 'the eventual flamboyant literary success of Chris himself, if not entirely his book' (*FS*, p.137).

The Finishing School also represents a return to the treatment of creative and visionary madness as witnessed in *The Comforters*. Spark's career seems then to be bookended by texts which are metafictional in their treatment of the act of writing fiction, but also fascinated by the artistic personas of those who write. In this respect Spark never stops mining the figure of the artist for fictional materials. The manner in which her final book satirises posturing novelists indicates that while she may reject the 'the Romantic posture of sublimity, the stance of high priest', she can never bring herself to fully discard the subject matter.¹⁶ On this evidence, even at the close of her long writing career, Spark is still fascinated by the Romantic ideal, and the influence it continues to exert.

¹⁶ Lyons (2010), p.86.

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