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“In Any Case They’re All Very Bright-Coloured”: Disturbing Readerly Identity in Muriel Spark’s *The Driver’s Seat*

Abstract: The present essay approaches Muriel Spark’s 1970 novel, *The Driver’s Seat*, as an attempt to examine the interpretive processes through which readers experience both text and reality, with a view to disturbing readerly habits and facing us with the limitations of our own hospitality in relation to (fictional) others. I argue that Spark’s sketching of sparse “identikits” for the author’s, character’s and reader’s positions alike function as cautionary tales of the dictatorial potential inherent in any act of comprehension, or interpretive appropriation.

Keywords: Muriel Spark; Readerly Identity; Readerly Habit; Inventiveness; Ethics of Reading.

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DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2021.41.21

Muriel Spark (1918-2006), the Edinburgh-born writer who produced an international oeuvre, can be numbered among the authors whose success during their life time is outmatched by an ever-growing posthumous reputation. The critical and readerly fascination currently ignited by Spark’s work is justified by the eerie relevance her investigations of the narratives that inform our collective and personal histories have gained of late. Indeed, if there is such a thing as an overarching theme of her novels and short stories (with all the diffidence implied by such a totalizing argument when it comes to an author of Spark’s scope and complexity), it might be found in her thorough examination of the functions of storytelling and their ethical consequences, rooted in the need to face the challenges of the twentieth century’s particular historical circumstances with the greatest lucidity possible. What narrative does, what it can do and what it should not do can be said to constitute the main concerns of her revisionary project that self-consciously fuses the conventions of realism, modernism and postmodernism

to reach the hidden frameworks conditioning human experience.

Muriel Spark's twenty-two novels, many volumes of short stories and poetry, and her work in biography and literary criticism, among which we may include her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae*, which appeared in 1992, combine an interest in the realistic representation of a flawed world with strategies of fictional self-reflexiveness and formal inventiveness, drawing on multiple writing traditions, but emerging as an unmistakably idiosyncratic style. Her themes range from colonialism (*Robinson*) or feminism (*The Driver's Seat*) to the Holocaust (*The Mandelbaum Gate*), from soft forms of propaganda leading to the collapse of values (*The Prime of Miss Brodie*) to capitalism's dehumanizing effects (*The Ballad of Peckham Rye*), from the potentially despotic position of the author of discourses (*Loitering with Intent*) to the disintegration of every form of dictatorial authority (in virtually all the novels). Her modes of narrative may appear as misleadingly conservative due to the veneer of omniscience and objectivity her third-person narrators display, to the sole purpose of exploding it through a dramatization of the fallibilities and limitations of all knowledge. As Martin McQuillan has put it, Spark's writing epitomizes the "contretemps" inherent in the multiplicity her outsider position (as a Scottish woman of partly Jewish descent, converted to Catholicism living in London or abroad). McQuillan follows Derrida's notion of the anachronistic interruption of the present's stability through "thought that cannot be recognized in advance but which in the event arrives"¹ to describe Spark as an "untimely" novelist committed to a

radical reconsideration of how we make sense of the past, present and future. Her "untimeliness" addresses, at a time when fiction was supposed to be about anything but moral values, the ethical questions involved in character construction and the reader's (mis)interpretative appropriation of the text and the world alike. Through a discussion of the self-reflexive aspects of one of her most famous texts, *The Driver's Seat* (1970), this essay examines the radical destabilization of readerly identity and reading habits produced by Spark's rewriting of novelistic conventions, which act as ethical warnings about the totalitarian propensities presupposed by any attempt at comprehension.

In an important study dedicated to the ethics of literature, Derek Attridge uses the concept of "inventiveness" to refer to both the way in which a truly new work of art is able to effect changes in the worldview, and to the way in which the reader is open, or "hospitable" to the what the text puts forward and had been "hitherto unthinkable or unperceivable."² The hospitable, or inventive, reader is for Attridge equipped with

a readiness to welcome the other. If one imposes on the work a fixed set of norms, one can offer only conditional hospitality to the inventive achievement of the author. A reading that operates on the basis of unconditional hospitality, however, if there can be such a thing, approaches the work prepared to reassess and revise all the assumptions and habits brought to it.³

Of course, here Attridge draws on Derrida's concept of "unconditional

hospitality”⁴ – the absolute and impossible openness to an unforeseeable future, without thought of obligation or reciprocation, or without considering the consequences. While such a state remains perforce utopian, it may well describe the invitation proffered to the reader by Muriel Spark’s deeply unsettling and estranging story of a woman looking for her own murderer, bent on subverting gender positions, demystifying our claims at mastery over text and world, and exposing the prejudices inherent in all narratives. However, with its insistence on repetition and a possibly predetermined future, the novel also projects a bleak awareness of the reader’s incapacity to renounce his/her habitual modes of understanding and achieve “inventiveness.”

Spark thought of *The Driver’s Seat* as her best achievement – “the best written and constructed,” because it does not deviate from the necessity of form (“All the characters have something; there are no subsidiary nonentities,” she explains.)⁵ Although it consists only of about one hundred pages, *The Driver’s Seat* exhibits bewildering degrees of generic complexity and interpretative richness that have led to diverse, even contradictory readings (as, for instance, a Catholic parable, an indictment of modern alienation, a psychoanalytical case study, a parody of postmodernism, a demystification of authorship, a feminist reversion of male violence etc. etc.).⁶ The novel’s nonconventional plot trails Lise, an accountant, who travels from her unidentified urban residence “in the north” of Europe to an equally anonymous southern city. While supposed to be on holiday, the (anti)heroine is in fact engaged in a quest for an assassin/sexual predator, whom she identifies during the plane trip and lures

into a dramatic staging of her own slaying. Lise carefully prepares the traces of the murder to be soon discovered by the police and the media, premeditating details such as the buying and displaying of a brightly colored dress which she makes sure is not unstainable, noisy discussions with other tourists or various men she considers for the role of the killer, blatant exhibitions of her own person in unmistakable circumstances, car stealing etc. The plot borrows the conventions of the detective genre, which it then proceeds to subvert both by reversing the parameters of the mystery (the victim searching for a murderer), and by refusing to reveal Lise’s reasons, or what the effects of her death are to others.

The text also makes early use of prolepsis, letting the reader in on the denouement and thus eliminating the conventional suspense of detective fiction. As we follow Lise waiting at the airport to embark on her journey, we are summarily and prematurely informed that “[s]he will be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab-wounds, her wrists bound with a silk scarf and her ankles bound with a man’s necktie, in the grounds of an empty villa, in a park of the foreign city to which she is travelling on the flight now boarding at Gate 14.”⁷ The events are recounted cinematically, in the present tense, by a distanced, third-person entity who mimics the position of the omniscient narrator but is in fact almost as clueless as to what is really happening as the reader or other characters. Orchestrating her own demise, Lise usurps the role of the author of her own story to ask the question posed by the novel’s title (who occupies the driver’s seat?) and turns on its head the relationship between victimizer and victim (she thwarts Richard’s

hopes “to start a new life” by commanding him to return to his former position as a sexual aggressor). She has already chosen the location of the event and marked it on a map; she provides the necessary props (a paper-knife for the stabbing and a scarf for tying her hands) and she gives precise instructions about the method, considering the curved blade and the need to “twist it upwards or it may not penetrate far enough.” She even takes over the action as she “demonstrates the movement with the wrist.”⁸ Judith Roof has discussed the “specifically narrative drive dependent upon knowledge of the story”⁹ enacted by *The Driver's Seat* and Marguerite Duras's 1964 *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein* in terms of the text's “seductive” strategies of extending or withdrawing certainties through the use of prolepsis. Roof points out that narrative mastery and readerly assurance are both undermined by the ambivalence produced by the novel's anticipation of the fixed end and simultaneous foregrounding of the limitations of knowledge through its categorical refusal of closure. Another critic that approaches the novel in terms of narrative “seduction” is Bran Nicol, who identifies in Spark's writing a “deflationary conception of authorship” accompanied by a “complementary model of reading.”¹⁰ As the author's position is debunked to the status of a “suspicious figure” acting upon dubious, even criminal motivations to beget dark plots or hidden plans, so the reader is encouraged to become “suspecting”, or, in the case of *The Driver's Seat*, is turned into a “willing accomplice of the author's crime.”¹¹ More than that, I would add, by facing readers with Lise's disturbing and incomprehensible actions, the novel confronts us with our inability to renounce the

violence we perform on others and on the world by adhering to a priori modes of understanding (such as gender stereotypes or formulaic detective plots).

One of the first (and very late) critical attempts to consider Spark's work in the context of contemporary aesthetic and ideological positions, the collection edited by Martin McQuillan, *Theorizing Muriel Spark*, contains a fascinating interview granted to the editor in 1998. In reply to McQuillan's question on the kind of audience envisaged by Spark for her novels, the writer states: “I don't know who I'm writing for; probably I'm writing for the original Miss Brodie or somebody like that.”¹² This “original” reader was, of course, the author's own teacher and a formative influence; but she also inspired the character Spark is best known for – a charismatic, cultured, non-conformist educator who happens to think “she is the God of Calvin,”¹³ admires Mussolini and sends one of the girls in her “set” to die while joining Franco's army during the Spanish civil war. The reader Spark has in mind as she writes is therefore both intelligent and subtle enough to “get the [texts] subtleties and [...] ironies,”¹⁴ and potentially a dictator, liable to fall into the trap of his or her own aestheticization of the world. The cautionary dimensions of Spark's work addresses, therefore, not only the processes of producing narratives, but also their interpretations: just as authorial figures are constantly reminded that their texts will always exceed their own knowledge and control, readers should be made aware that the interpretative freedom afforded by such texts comes charged with perils.

In her address to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters

(delivered in the same year that saw the publication of *The Driver's Seat*), later issued under the title "The Desegregation of Art," Spark pleads for the need to face the "ridiculous oppressions of our time" (described as "a moment in history when we are surrounded on all sides and oppressed by the absurd") with "a mental environment of honesty and self-knowledge" that can counteract the public's self-satisfied confirmation of the world's order, or, worse, the reader's incapacity to enter an authentic relationship with the others:

We have in this century a marvellous tradition of socially conscious art. And especially now in the arts of drama and the novel we see and hear everywhere the representation of the victim against the oppressor, we have a literature and an artistic culture, one might almost say a civilisation, of depicted suffering, whether in social life or in family life. We have representations of the victim-oppressor complex, for instance, in the dramatic portrayal of the gross racial injustices of our world, or in the exposure of the tyrannies of family life on the individual. As art this can be badly done, it can be brilliantly done. But I am going to suggest that it isn't achieving its end or illuminating our lives any more, and that a more effective technique can and should be cultivated.¹⁵

Social realism is rejected because its simulated social justice either allow readers to feel they have fulfilled their moral responsibility simply by feeling indignation caused by vicarious experience, or to trigger identification with the victim. Art founded

on sentiment or sympathy¹⁶ becomes instrumentalized and gets enlisted in the service of totalitarian discourses, or "cults" of various orientations, as Spark explains: "I suggest that wherever there is a cult of the victim, such being human nature, there will be an obliging cult of twenty equivalent victimizers." More than anything, she fears the capacity of such stories to make the reader "more determined than ever to be the overdog"¹⁷ – to instill an illusion of mastery and dominance that would contradict the moral feelings meant to be created by socially involved art. For Spark, the effects are quite the opposite: "the art and literature of sentiment and emotion" hides its "segregated" status behind "a sense of involvement with life and society." In order to achieve desegregation, she advocates "the arts of satire and of ridicule,"¹⁸ the ones capable of initiating a dialogue and reciprocal understanding. The most appropriate reaction to the violence and absurdity of modern history consists not in "impulsive generosity" or "indignant representation of social injustice," but in laughter: what our particular circumstances require is "a more deliberate cunning, a more derisive undermining of what is wrong."¹⁹

If someone derides me, I don't like it. But at least I can begin to understand the mentality of the mocker. And I can mock back in such a way that he might understand mine. And so there may be room for a mutual understanding. But if he slides a knife between my ribs I'm unlikely to understand anything at all any more.²⁰

In other words, what Sparks has in mind is a hospitable reader, one that is

capable to transcend her own perspective and, positioning herself as the target of ridicule, be open to the disintegration of her own interpretive predeterminations and “inventive” towards forms of otherness (including textual). Willingness to be mocked at does not enter the set of attributes of a totalitarian cast of mind – but, as the grounds for a possible future dialogue, it might make for an ethical reader.

In *The Driver's Seat*, Lise knowingly exposes herself to the others' laughter, not only as a means to become conspicuous and easily traceable during the police investigation, but also as part of her own efforts at self-erasure, that also, given the novel's twisting of logic, become a way to assert herself and her goals. For instance, after leaving her apartment for the airport, she visits the porter's cabin, purportedly to entrust her with an envelope, but in reality to provoke her derision because of the scandalous colors she is wearing. She intentionally shocks shopgirls and airport guards with questionable comments, inappropriate confessions, or even spying on their reactions after she pretends to leave the store. Lise's self-exposure culminates in the deletion of her own life, disturbingly turned into an affirmation of her own agency in order to make the readers aware of the need to revise received notions of control over the stories that make up the world.

The text mimics an official “identikit” of Lise that proves unable to surpass the schematic depiction of personhood provided by any police file and that registers the distance between reality and representation (“Her 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.²¹”). Despite the grammatical present tense, even the narrator seems to resort to ulterior media and police reports as the source for information, turning Lise's story into an (often hesitant) reconstruction of the events. What we get is cursory, external details, fixing Lise in a kind of workplace and gendered hierarchy that will soon be subverted by her unexpected behavior:

She walks along the broad street, scanning the windows for the dress she needs, the necessary dress. Her lips are slightly parted; she, whose lips are usually pressed together with the daily disapprovals of the accountants' office where she has worked continually, except for the months of illness, since she was eighteen, that is to say, for sixteen years and some months. Her 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; she has five girls under her and two men. Over her are two women and five men.²²

Lise herself is at pains to exploit the ambivalent opportunities offered by the procedural identikit, expertly dosing her actions and appearance as if to confirm the patterns of sensationalist journalism, but always leaving readerly grasp one step behind. In this respect, she is both author and reader, creating her own story out of the forms already found at her disposal. Lise might well have planned everything

in detail, but the readers are denied an insight into the minutiae or the reasons for her plans, just as they are prevented from having a look at the flight chart that would have provided exact information of the plane's destination and therefore of the location of the murder: "They turn to see what is being offered. Bill grasps the paper. It is the log of the plane's flight, informing the passengers as to the altitude, speed and present geographical position, and requesting them to read it and pass it on."²³ This fragment stands out both because it highlights one of the most important lacks in the text (precise, realistic settings, whose absence signal the novel's adherence to nonconventional regimes of representation), and because it dramatizes the act of reading as simultaneously transference and refusal to transfer. In this particular instance, by interrupting the chain of transmission, Lise could be said to have become a bad reader – if only the meanings of Spark's novels could be so smoothly decided, and if only she had not been aware of the distorting noises involved in the passing on of messages, as her remark on "anything at all that is overheard" "tak[ing] on a serious note" proves. An overheard message, Lise notes, "always sounds far worse than [the speaker's] actual intentions are."²⁴ Authorial design over meaning and addressee of the message is therefore challenged, just as the receiver's abilities to come up with a correct interpretation.

Although the self-reflexive, metafictional dimensions of the novel have been often noticed, the extent to which Spark explicitly dramatizes the book as a physical object deserves further consideration. Early on, while still at the airport, Lise is involved in a strange dialogue with a South-African

woman who is trying to buy books whose colors fit the wall paint in her house. This instrumentalization of the text is met by Lise with the ironical remark "You want English books"²⁵ – perhaps a slam on the conformism of the English novel, all too compliant with the demands of the market and of its audience. She goes on to acquire a book she will be repeatedly display upon her person as a means of identification, due to the outrageous combination of colors on its cover ("bright green lettering on a white background with the author's name printed to look like blue lightning streaks.")²⁶ The "bright-colored" covers of the books Lise favors, complete with the outrageous image of "a brown boy and girl wearing only garlands of sunflowers," unsuitable for the obtuse buyer represented by the lady from Johannesburg, subverts racial stereotypes in a manner reminiscent to another crucial moment that occurs close to the very end of the narrative. As she leaves the hotel where she finally (re)locates her killer, preparing to be murdered with a paper-knife that she carries in her zipper shopping bag, Lise offers her paperback to the porter:

Lise, still holding her man, turns at the door and calls back, 'You can keep his luggage. You can have the book as well; it's a whydunnit in q-sharp major and it has a message: never talk to the sort of girls that you wouldn't leave lying about in your drawing-room for the servants to pick up.' She leads her man towards the door.²⁷

Redefining her story as a "whydunnit" (rather than a "whodunnit") composed in a deviant key ("q-sharp major), and conflating its "message" with the bodies of

girls whom the servants can “pick up” from the drawing room (pun intended, surely), Lise completes the overlapping of her own identity with a scandalous book which disturbs interpretative habits and demands an ethical, “inventive” reading. Her retort to the (non)reader who buys books based on

their cover colors matching her walls could serve as an apt conclusion to the present musings: “No. In any case they’re all very bright-coloured” – the attempt to subject the work of fiction to the constraints of readerly ways is thwarted by narrative’s unas-similable explosion of color and meanings.

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NOTES

1. Martin McQuillan, “I Don’t Know Anything about Freud’: Muriel Spark Meets Contemporary Criticism,” in Martin McQuillan (Ed.), *Theorizing Muriel Spark. Gender, Race, Deconstruction*, London, Palgrave, 2002, p. 8.
2. Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 304.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 305.
4. See Chapter 10, “Hospitality,” of *Ibidem*, p. 280-305.
5. Martin McQuillan, “The Same Informed Air’: An Interview with Muriel Spark,” in *Theorizing Muriel Spark. Gender, Race, Deconstruction*, edited by Martin McQuillan, London: Palgrave, 2002, p. 229.
6. See Michael Gardiner, Willey Maley, (Eds.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010.
7. Spark, Muriel, *The Driver’s Seat*, London, Penguin Books, 2006, p. 21.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
9. Judith Roof, “The Future Perfect’s Perfect Future: Spark’s and Duras’s Narrative Drive,” in Martin McQuillan (Ed.), *Theorizing Muriel Spark. Gender, Race, Deconstruction*, London, Palgrave, 2002, p. 51.
10. Bran Nicol, “Reading Spark in the Age of Suspicion,” in David Herman (Ed.), *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010, p. 124.
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13. Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, London, Viking, 2013, p. 120.
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15. Muriel Spark, "The Desegregation of Art," in *The Golden Fleece*, edited by Penelope Jardine, Edinburgh: Carcanet, 2014, p. 27-28.
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23. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
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27. *Ibid.*, p. 97.