

METAFICTIONAL PREDESTINATION IN MURIEL SPARK'S *THE DRIVER'S SEAT*

LA PREDESTINACIÓN METAFICTICIA EN *THE DRIVER'S SEAT*, DE MURIEL SPARK

CARLOS VILLAR FLOR

Universidad de La Rioja
carlos.villar@unirioja.es

ANA ALTEMIR GIRAL

CULM – Universidad de Zaragoza
anyepa@unizar.es

191

Abstract

Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* is a radical metafictional experiment, suggesting the inexorable connections between contingency and a predetermined plot which are so common to many Sparkian novels. Following Marina MacKay's perception that Spark's experimental narrative operates "in the conceptual space where the more abstract preoccupations of Roman Catholic theology overlap with the metafictional and fabulist concerns of postmodernism" (2008: 506), this essay will discuss how the notion of predestination reverberates in *The Driver's Seat*, not only as a remnant of Spark's Presbyterian education but also as a postmodern re-visitation of classical tragedy in a metafictional key. Spark's preference for predetermined plots may echo a long philosophical and theological discussion spanning many centuries about free will and predestination, particularly intense in the times of the Protestant Reformation, but it also reflects the sense of predestination as a necessary ingredient of classical tragedy. In *The Driver's Seat* Spark deliberately brought to the fore some conventions of Aristotelian tragedy, although she approached them through an experimental subversion ultimately resorting to comedy and ridicule, on Spark's own admission her weapons for the only possible art form. Our contention is that the metafictional implications of *The Driver's Seat*'s prolepses undermine a Calvinist-like certainty concerning predestined salvation or damnation. By using a partial narrator only capable of

producing limited accounts, Spark may be playing with an experimental and essentially postmodern interpretive openness which is in tune with the ultimate uncertainty about each individual's eternal salvation that is commonly accepted in Catholic thought.

Keywords: Muriel Spark, *The Driver's Seat*, metafiction, predestination.

Resumen

The Driver's Seat, de Muriel Spark, es un experimento radical de metaficción que plantea las inexorables conexiones entre lo contingente y una trama predeterminada, tan comunes en muchas novelas de Spark. Siguiendo la percepción de Marina MacKay de que la narrativa experimental de Spark opera en un espacio conceptual donde las preocupaciones abstractas de la teología católica se solapan con los desarrollos metaficticios y fabulistas del posmodernismo, este ensayo plantea cómo la noción de predestinación resuena en *The Driver's Seat*, no sólo como retazo de la educación presbiteriana de Spark, sino también como una revisión posmoderna de la tragedia clásica en clave de metaficción. La preferencia de Spark por tramas predeterminadas se hace eco del amplio debate filosófico y teológico multiseccular acerca del libre albedrío y la predestinación, particularmente intenso en los tiempos de la Reforma Protestante, si bien el concepto de predestinación también es un ingrediente necesario de la tragedia clásica. En *The Driver's Seat*, Spark recurre deliberadamente a ciertas convenciones de la tragedia aristotélica, aunque las aborda mediante la subversión experimental que en último término recurre a la comedia y al ridículo, sin duda las armas de Spark para la única forma posible de arte. Mantenemos que las implicaciones metaficticias de las prolepsis de *The Driver's Seat* socavan la certeza calvinista respecto a la salvación o condenación predestinadas. Al utilizar un narrador parcial que solo puede generar relatos limitados, Spark podría estar jugando con cierta apertura interpretativa, experimental y esencialmente posmoderna, en consonancia con la incertidumbre acerca de la salvación eterna de cada individuo comúnmente aceptada por el pensamiento católico.

Palabras clave: Muriel Spark, *The Driver's Seat*, metaficción, predestinación.

1. Introduction: Spark's Favourite Novel

Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* (1970) is a radical metafictional experiment which admits multiple layers of interpretation. Kolocotroni opens her discussion of this novel by compiling the manifold definitions that previous critics have provided,

some of them contradictory: “an ‘absurdist’ or ‘Christian’ parable; a ‘macabre melodrama’; a ‘vision of evil’; a ‘study on the art of fiction itself’; a ‘compendium’ of modernist techniques; a parody of postmodernism; ‘a presentation of the unpresentable’; a study of ‘urban psychosis’, or ‘alienation’; a hysterical text” (Kolocotroni 2018: 1545). Spark’s favourite novel (Massie 1987: 18; Hosmer 2005: 135), it succeeds as an inversion of the traditional detective story and as an allegory of the trauma of human contingency in a world without attachments or stable relationships. Combining elements reminiscent of the *nouveau roman*¹ —“reflexiveness, use of the present tense, minutely detailed description given in a neutral tone, and narrative discontinuity involving the sacrifice of suspense” (Whittaker 1982: 8)—, this short novel tells the story of Lise, a single woman in her mid-thirties from a Northern European country, an employee in an accountant’s office, who arranges a holiday trip to Southern Europe for the sole purpose of bringing about her own murder. While creating a “postmodern hyper-real world [...] a decade before Jean-François Lyotard” (Sawada 2007: 3), it features the tragedy of a person devoid of emotional bonds, seemingly invisible and vulnerable in a hostile world, who dies a violent death. Lise is one of those Sparkian heroines who seem to have lost touch with a reality with which they are not satisfied, so they make up their own (Estévez-Saá 2007: 105). According to Meyers, she “lacks a ‘fixed-point’ and thus cannot find meaning in life. Hence she chooses death” (2001: 80).

Frank Kermode, one of the first critics to highlight Spark’s godlike authorial stance and “the control of the writer’s presumptuous providence” (1992: 180), saw “nothing to remind one of the writer’s religious plots” in an early review of *The Driver’s Seat* (1970: 426). However, Whittaker believes that Spark provokes “our perception of a divine or a moral plot behind the obvious one, and the interest is heightened by the tension between the two, and how it is resolved” (1982: 91). Hynes defines Spark as a writer who “has faith and believes that there is a reason for what happens, whether we know the reason or not”, and who fictionalizes her understanding of the scope of freedom a Catholic has once she is aware of being simply one character in God’s plot (1993: 178). Regarding Lise’s desperate attempt to write her own destiny, Page observes that to be in the driver’s seat is to be “whether literally or metaphorically, in charge. But the very ending of the novel shows that Lise’s belief in her capacity for self-determination is no more than a delusion: it is after all God, not man or woman who writes the plot of our lives” (1990: 79). Such religious readings of *The Driver’s Seat* have been recently questioned by James Bailey, who confronts those earlier commentators reading Spark “as an author merrily playing God, whose narratives are seen to revel in a capricious cruelty derived from the relative inconsequentiality of human life” (2021: 11). The former approaches, which Bailey regards as “the myth of Spark”,

rely on the understanding of Spark (or her narrator) as “God’s spy” (Nye 1970: 14; Drabble 2018), or on concerns with “literary theology” (Sage 1992: 142), and may easily lead to a sort of “doctrinal criticism” (McQuillan 2002: 2).

Even though a few recent commentators meritoriously strive to find new directions in Sparkian criticism, such as her works’ “formal and generic liminality, self-reflexivity and stylistic experimentation” (Bailey 2021: 26), we are persuaded that a new analysis of *The Driver’s Seat* should not preemptively disregard the underlying presence of Christian motifs and aesthetics in a novel that negotiates issues of free will and eschatology in a world which is losing its spiritual sense, and exposes a society devoid of spiritual values in which reality appears contingent and provisional. Furthermore, Haddox believes that through her use of experimental and postmodernist techniques, Spark “is concerned with making religious belief credible to an intellectual audience presumed not to be predisposed to it”, and hints that she may be one of those for whom “the pluralistic postmodernity has become ‘a supreme opportunity’ [...] to assert the Christian narrative anew” (Haddox 2009: 46, 60).

194

Spark’s religious upbringing was considerably hybrid (Cheyette 2000: 10). Brought up in Scotland as the daughter of a Jewish father and an Anglican mother, she was educated at a Presbyterian school, the model for the one appearing in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961). In 1954, however, she was received into the Catholic Church (Spark 1992: 202), a spiritual experience that would shape most of her subsequent fiction, as her writing career and her inherent interest in metafiction developed on a par with her religious conversion. As she later admitted, Spark had an enhanced awareness that her actions were being judged by an omnipotent and omnipresent God, and this ultimately caused her to suffer a physical and psychological collapse: “I decided at last to become a Catholic, by which time I really became very ill. I was going about, but I was ready for a breakdown [...] I had a feeling while I was undergoing this real emotional suffering that it was all part of the conversion” (Spark 1992: 25). She may have felt the “wound in the mind” that Caruth places at the heart of trauma, “not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance— returns to haunt the survivor later on” (1996: 3).

The uneasy coexistence of Calvinistic and Catholic ethos in Spark’s work has already been noted by critics such as David Lodge, who saw in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* a contest between “the Catholic God who allows free will and the Calvinist one who doesn’t” (1992: 76). Our contention is that *The Driver’s Seat* also displays echoes of Spark’s early Presbyterian schooling and its focus on the notion of predestination, which implies belief in an eternal decree or ruling, out of

which God determines what should befall every human being regardless of their worldly actions (Asante 2014: 67). McQuillan, though refractory to “doctrinal” readings, complains that Sparkian criticism “takes little account of [her] Scottish Presbyterian upbringing” (2002: 2). This essay will, therefore, discuss how the notion of predestination reverberates in *The Driver’s Seat*, not only as a remnant of Spark’s Calvinist education but also as a postmodern re-visitation of classical tragedy in a metafictional key, that is, as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh 1984: 2). Certainly, Lise’s presence in *The Driver’s Seat* negotiates the complex ambivalences of the acts of telling and reading, and as protagonist-creator she dramatizes the making of a narrative from the inside out. Roof sees in this novel “a consciousness of telling a story and a consciousness of the story’s shape [that] makes telling itself the subject of the novel [...] an uncertainty that lies not in Lise, but in the character of the narration itself” (2002: 53). Again, in the words of Patricia Waugh, “[i]n providing a critique of their own methods of construction, [metafictional] writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (1984: 2).

2. End-directed: A Victim Looking for a Murderer

Spark’s peculiar treatment of metafictional predestination may echo a long philosophical and theological discussion spanning many centuries about free will and predestination, particularly intense in the times of the Protestant Reformation. In his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas built upon Augustine’s theodicy and Aristotle’s metaphysics to elaborate his notion that our inherent nature inclines towards goodness and what we believe is good, “forasmuch as man is rational is it necessary that man have a free-will” (Aquinas 2007: 418). Jean Calvin, though influenced by Augustine, went a step further in his discourse on predestination, and his doctrine on this matter left little or no room for free will. Accordingly, God has right from the outset chosen some elected ones to bring into eternal communion with himself, but those who are not “caught by the ‘net’ of God’s grace for salvation are ordained for eternal damnation” (Addai-Mensah 2020: 25). Therefore, all events have been willed by God and no human intentions or behavior may alter his design.

This immovable concept of fate may be reflected in Spark’s characteristically predetermined plots. In an early analysis probably influenced by Kermode, Malcolm Bradbury defined Spark’s novels as eminently ‘end-directed’: “no author could be surer about where things are going. From her novels the beginning, which creates

expectation and freedom, and the middle, which substantiates and qualifies it, seem absent” (1973: 248). *The Driver’s Seat* employs the present tense to describe Lise’s pursuit of a man to murder her, counterpointed by the use of a shocking prolepsis revealing the ending to the reader in the third chapter of the book:

She will be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab-wounds, her wrists 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 (Spark 1970: 25).²

If the ‘myth of Spark’ scholars have often understood this ‘end-directedness’ by a godlike authorial figure as an allegory of providence or of religious transcendence, for Sawada, however, Spark’s worldliness is behind such a choice of narrative structure, and she observes that her attitude to human failing basically amounts to “a lack of expectancy” (2007: 3). In turn, Carruthers perceives that *The Driver’s Seat* “presents a story that is almost entirely predetermined [...] and so devoid of life, devoid of possibility” (2010: 83). This is consistent with Bradbury’s early perception that Spark’s “people arise at the last, from the last; what has withered is a world of motive, purpose, aspiration” (1973: 248). Perhaps the horror of *The Driver’s Seat* lies not only in Lise’s violent murder but also in the drab world from which she wishes to escape, a world deprived of affection and love and ultimately of a sense of caring providence. The “empty villa” in a “foreign country” of the above quotation provides a metonymy for Lise herself: her thoughts and actions are attached to the accomplishment of a narrative that tends to portray her as a victimized, foreign body, and gloomy desolate landscapes reinforce the plight of a doomed character by hinting at her impossible salvation. From the beginning, Lise is introduced as a tortured character attached to a fatalistic plot: “I wish my mother and father had practiced birth-control”, she declares (Spark 1970: 82). Sinclair points out that, “[i]nstead of the search for self-knowledge, or for something greater than the self, Lise wants to eliminate herself. Instead of the new life proclaimed by the gospels, Lise seeks her salvation in annihilation” (2000: 223). According to Jean Calvin, “all are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death” (1960: 3.21.5). Lise is thus viewed as one of the damned, one of those whose name is not written in the Book of Life (Revelation 20:15). When asked where her home is, Lise just replies, “[n]owhere special. It’s written on the passport” (Spark 1970: 57). Her rootlessness and apparent soullessness are reinforced by the narrative strategies emphasizing a lack of identity; the reader is not informed of her background or family, not even of her surname. Such anonymity and insubstantiality also tie in with the

postmodernist understanding of characters as “verbal constructions, words not beings” (Waugh 1984: 26), no longer unified psychological representations with an individual identity.

Page affirms that “unnaturalness is a central theme in this novel, taking many forms from references to synthetic materials such as plastics to unpredictable and violent language and behaviour” (1990: 69). The novel opens in a dress shop where Lise is searching for a suitable dress fitting her demands. The salesgirl offers a dress in a stain-resistant material, but Lise soon rejects it: “Get this thing off me. Off me, at once. [...] I won’t be insulted!” (Spark 1970: 5). This recreates an inversion of the famous Shakespearean scene when the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth is determined to remove an imaginary bloodstain from her hands. In contrast, Lise is choosing her “final dress” and wants to get it stained with her own blood, with no possibility of its ever being cleaned. Once she is bent on her predetermined fate, there is no possibility of repentance, no openness to a higher redemptive power. Her determination is also reinforced by a macabre practice of collecting evidence for the postmortem investigations. Throughout the novel “she is laying a trail for the police” (Stannard 2009: 366); she argues with her flat’s doorkeeper, picks up strangers, buys a book at the airport with a striking cover and holds it up before her wherever she goes, etc. Lise’s bizarre behavior and extravagant appearance do not go unnoticed by the rest of the characters, whose disapproval contributes to her isolation. A kind of misrule seems to preside over her actions through her deliberate adoption of the abnormal, while her unnatural behavior questions conventions of free-will and self-understanding.

Lise’s affective state is commonly absent from the narrative, though a rare hint of feeling for her father occurs in a particular scene when she has bought several presents for some acquaintances and relatives:

[Lise] takes a comfortable chair in the soft-lit rest-room and considers, one by one, the contents of her zipper-bag which she lays on a small table beside her. [...] She also leaves unopened a soft package containing the neckties, but, having rummaged in her hand-bag for something which apparently is not there, she brings forth the lipstick and with it she writes on the outside of the soft package, “Papa”. (Spark 1970: 92)

Although no information on Lise’s family has been provided previously, this scene suggests a glimpse of humanity. The neckties she buys for her father are both black, which implies that she may be making arrangements for her funeral: “give me two black ties, they are always useful” (72). This makes sense later in the plot when we are informed that Lise is strangled with a black tie, highlighting the connection between her parental figure and her murderer, who also acts as liberator by freeing her from a miserable existence. But this image may alternatively be connecting two instances of patriarchal oppression through the black neckties. Lise’s quest for love is ultimately a longing for death, in which meeting a man

entails finding her own murderer, a masculine figure that will deprive her of any involvement in her final moments and contribute to her further victimization. Such antagonistic identification is consistent with the Sparkian notion of duality, which is reinforced by the presentation of narrative elements following a twofold pattern: two men flank Lise in the plane, two men try to sexually assault her, she buys two neckties and two scarves at the mall, and checks two knives. She also enters two clothes shops and tries two dresses before buying the one she was looking for. A characteristic Sparkian duality also features in the double-sided role of two functional characters in this story, Mrs Fiedke and her nephew Richard.

3. Comforter/Helper and Victim/Perpetrator

198 “An elderly woman, small, neat and agile in a yellow cotton dress, whose extremely wrinkled face is the only indication of her advanced age, follows Lise to the pavement. She, too, wants a taxi, she says in a gentle voice, and she suggests to Lise that they might share” (Spark 1970: 54). Mrs Fiedke —significantly “a [Jehovah’s] Witness” (56)— appears on the stage as a *deus ex machina* to assist Lise in her drab fate, providing a few significant scenes blending metafiction and predestination. She soon adapts herself to Lise’s arrangements and they end up spending the day together; while shopping, Mrs Fiedke buys a pair of slippers for her nephew and a paper-knife (72). In Freudian terms, “the slippers and knife are obvious symbols for, respectively, the female and male genitalia, hinting at the final rape” (Page 1990: 75), a foreshadowing which reinforces the sense of doom. According to Whittaker, in this novel “sexual and spiritual fulfilment are made incompatible. The enjoyment of one entails the destruction of the other” (1982: 71). Before finding the ‘right man’, Lise goes through a sort of training process during which she meets two other men who fail in their attempts to sexually approach her: “I’m not interested in sex”, she says to one of them, “I’ve got other interests and as a matter of fact I’ve got something on my mind that’s got to be done” (Spark 1970: 87). Here the human body is no source of personal pleasure but instead meant for sacrifice and victimisation. For Meyers, “Lise will use the mutilated remains of her body to gain posthumous attention. In short, Lise will create an identity by becoming a victim” (2001: 80). Since her body is presented as commodified and oppressed by others, it could be argued that by engineering her own death she may be reclaiming control over it.

At the end of the former scene, Lise becomes threatening and intimidating for the first time. Indeed, her increasing empowerment in the plot is triggered by her brief encounter with Mrs Fiedke. The description of a scene where both women share a snack at the bar could be felt to have sacramental connotations,³ and to

reenact a sort of allegorical communion in which Lise and Mrs Fiedke display some warmth and friendliness in the midst of a cold and impersonal atmosphere, after which Lise confesses her terrors to Mrs Fiedke (“I’m terrified of traffic”) and makes an ambiguous revelation which is far from comforting. While they have this ‘sacramental’ snack, perhaps a sign of women’s solidarity, Lise makes the relevant declaration that “one should always be kind in case it might be the last chance” (Spark 1970: 58). The idea of an imminent death is insinuated here but is given a metafictional resonance, since death in the novel —the end of fictional existence— is precisely what gives complete sense to Lise’s narrative. Just after pronouncing those words, Lise “cuts her sandwich daintily and puts a piece in her mouth” (59). Afterwards, Lise “orders a rainbow ice while Mrs Fiedke considers one way or another whether she really wants anything more, and eventually declines” (59). The rainbow symbol again gives the scene a transcendental undertone, as in the Bible it may represent God’s omnipotence and mercy as found in *Genesis*, *Ezekiel* or *Revelation*.⁴ However, as Meyers puts it, “[a]lthough Mrs Fiedke contributes to the success of Lise’s plan [...] Lise’s relationship with Mrs Fiedke demonstrates that human contact does not ensure communication, continuity, or connection” (2001: 78-79). Mrs Fiedke’s main contribution to the denouement of the plot is introducing her nephew Richard, Lise’s would-be murderer: “It is in my mind and I can’t think of anything else but that you and my nephew are meant for each other. As sure as anything, my dear, you are the person for my nephew [...] poor Richard may be the very man that you are looking for” (Spark 1970: 76). He will soon be given a prominent position in the narrative and will play a major role in the last passages of the novel. As soon as she has done her task, Mrs Fiedke disappears from the plot as mysteriously as she had appeared: “I ought to take a nap’, says Mrs Fiedke, ‘so that I won’t feel too tired when my nephew arrives” (79). Curiously enough, Lise will make no further mention of her.

199

When Lise arrives at her hotel late at night, she finds a mysterious man in the hall and suddenly a sharp revelation is brought to the fore: the man in the dark suit happens to be Mrs Fiedke’s nephew, and in this inexorable story where a predestined ending seems to have been agreed in advance, he is going to be both executioner and victim. Initially, Richard seems to be reluctant to acquiesce to the imposed pattern, as he tries to leave the hall, but he ultimately agrees to get into Lise’s car, in whose driver’s seat she sits:

“I’ve been looking for you all day. [...] As soon as I saw you this morning I knew that you were the one. You’re my type”.

He is trembling. She says, “You were in a clinic. You’re Richard. I know your name because your aunt told me”.

He says, “I’ve had six years’ treatment. I want to start afresh”. (Spark 1970: 112)

Richard, as well as Lise, seems to have been suffering from some sort of nervous breakdown or mental derangement, the cause of which is insinuated when Lise asked Mrs Fiedke about her nephew's name: "Richard. We never called him Dick. Only his mother, but not us" (Spark 1970: 73). The slang meaning of his nickname, and the fact that only his mother calls him so, may suggest some failure in his personal development related to his inability to overcome the Oedipus complex. We soon know that Richard is a tormented man who gets aroused when assaulting and murdering women. However, at this point in the novel, Lise appears more frightening than him; her plan is more terrible than suicide itself because she is looking for assistance in her own murder and, in so doing, she is not only putting an end to her existence but also to Richard's possibility of rehabilitation. Once Lise has recognized the man she was looking for, she forces him to fit in with the predestined pattern. She gets into the driver's seat, taking control, and leads the action of the plot which will precipitate her fatal ending. Richard sits on the passenger seat as if obliged by an inner force, and shows himself vulnerable and weak as he complies with the dictates of the narrative.⁵ At this point it may look as if some secret alliance had been forged between Lise and the implied author, who informs her of some of the intricacies of the narrative, but in this end-directed story all the roles have been prearranged and the deceitful narrative's inverted pattern shifts the focus onto Richard. Significantly, Lise acts as the plotter only to discover at her very end that she was "being plotted". Richard would later claim, as a sort of justification, that "[s]he told me to kill her and I killed her. She spoke in many languages, but she was telling me to kill her all the time. She told me precisely what to do. I was hoping to start a new life" (117). Conversely, Richard is "being plotted" by Lise only to discover at the very end that he can plot himself by changing Lise's plan:

"Tie my hands first", she says, crossing her wrists. "Tie them with the scarf".
He ties her hands, and she tells him in a sharp, quick voice to take off his necktie and bind her ankles.
"No", he says, kneeling over her, "not your ankles".
"I don't want any sex", she shouts. "You can have it afterwards. Tie my feet and kill, that's all. They will come and sweep it up in the morning".
All the same, he plunges into her, with the knife poised high.
"Kill me", she says, and repeats it in four languages.
As the knife descends to her throat she screams, evidently perceiving how final is finality. (117)

In this disturbing scene Lise realizes that, if everything must comply with the author's will, she is not, and has never been, the real plotter. Her screaming in four languages as her murderer plunges in the knife "is the voice of the outcast, the scapegoat, those shut out of the house but who refuse to be resolved into the convenient harmony and habitus of the one, the group" (Waugh 2018: 1652).

The final authorial intrusion appears as a showy display of power; through a brutal scene of violence, adding rape to murder, the author modifies the end that Lise had scrupulously planned for herself. In a final macabre twist, Richard ironically tries to leave everything as Lise had told him and ties her ankles together as if hiding the rape. After the murder, he “stands staring for a while and then, having started to turn away, he hesitates as if he had forgotten something of her bidding. Suddenly he wrenches off his necktie and bends to tie her ankles together with it” (Spark 1970: 117). This last authorial self-effacement echoes Lise’s comment when she recognized the man she was looking for: “‘Not really a presence’, Lise says. ‘The lack of an absence’” (76). Lise experiences the inevitable manifestation of the godlike author and realizes the impossibility of writing her own story within someone else’s fictional pattern. She becomes an outcast in her intended plot, one ordained for eternal (metafictional) predestination.

4. Subversion of Classical Tragedy

Even though Calvinism brought the notion into the theological foreground during the 16th-century Reformation, predestination was an integral ingredient of artistic creation from the origins of classical tragedy. Spark once declared of *The Driver’s Seat*, “I did the whole thing like a Greek play” (in Massie 1987: 18), and Hosmer claims that this classical inspiration makes it “a deliberately metafictional exercise just as some scenes in Greek tragedies” (2017: 89). In her recent study of death in Greek tragedy, Sorana-Cristina Man (2020) discusses the diffuse edges of violence as evidenced in the fact that external conflicts are a representation of inner ones in a process of mirroring each other, and observes that the border between reality and fiction can also become diffuse. Man discusses how spectators of classical tragedy projected themselves onto the action in a process of identification and self-discovery and projected their own image onto the particular instances of death. She connects this process with the Greek and Latin sense of predestination (Man 2020: 93-100). Significantly, when Richard envisions his imminent arrest and interrogation by the police in the last paragraph of *The Driver’s Seat*, Spark’s narrator plays with an explicit reference to the classical notion of catharsis:

He sees already the gleaming buttons of the policemen’s uniforms, hears the cold and the confiding, the hot and the barking voices, sees already the holsters and epaulets and all those trappings devised to protect them from the indecent exposure of fear and pity, pity and fear. (Spark 1970: 114-115)

The final phrase resounds like an echo at the ending of the story, aiming to transcend fictional limitations and inviting readers to stand in the place of the protagonist and purge their emotions. Hosmer sees in these lines an Aristotelian

allusion, “an insistent reminder of the cathartic effect of having peered into the abyss without having fallen in ourselves” (2017: 87). Through the “excess of tragic suffering”, Gadamer explains in his discussion of Aristotelian tragedy, “the spectator recognizes himself and his finiteness in the face of the power of fate. What happens to the great ones of the earth has exemplary significance” (1995: 132). Accordingly, Lise’s tragic death invites readers to become further concerned with the social and ethical purpose of literature; Spark once observed that art “contains that element of pleasure that restores the proportions of the human spirit, opens windows in the mind” (1971: 25).

202

But, even if Spark’s intention was to imitate the devices of a Greek play, the experimental and metafictional nature of this work eludes a classical patterning and rather suggests its subversion. “The art and literature of sentiment and emotion, however beautiful in itself, however striking in its depiction of actuality, has to go”, Spark wrote in 1971; “It cheats us into a sense of involvement with life and society, but in reality it is a segregated activity. In its place I advocate the arts of satire and ridicule. And I see no other living art form in the future” (Spark 1971: 24). In a later interview she insisted that “ridicule is the only respectable weapon we have. In a way, I think it’s probably the most deadly” (in McQuillan 2002: 222). In *The Driver’s Seat*, a novel “written as if to be filmed” (Rankin 1985: 147), the author presents a distant, detached narrative, which describes Lise’s actions as if they were at the same time familiar and alien. When Lise’s coat gets stained with a long, black, oily mark, she, exhausted and absurdly overwhelmed, exclaims: “My new clothes. It’s best never to be born. [...] I feel sick. I feel terrible” (Spark 1970: 82). For a character that is bent on bringing about her own murder, having a stain on her coat seems a disproportionate reason for such a display of despair. It seems that the satirist’s detachment precludes a vision of Lise as the classical heroine of this tragedy because the “cult of the victim is the cult of pathos, not tragedy” and “the art of pathos is pathetic [...] and it has reached a point of exhaustion” (Spark 1971: 25-26). Similarly, this detached attitude rules out any search for absolute certainties, even an “immutable decree of reprobation” that lies behind the Calvinist notion of predestination (Fergusson 1993: 461). When once asked about the lack of narratorial information about Lise’s states of mind, Spark replied: “Yes, God knows. In that book it wasn’t for the author to say” (in Frankel 1987: 454).

If the apparently tragical fatality may seem subverted by Sparkian detachment, a similar contrast is suggested between the Calvinist assurance of predestination and the Catholic incertitude of each individual’s eternal fate, based on both human free-will and divine mercy. If procuring one’s voluntary death may be a well-deserved cause for Calvinist damnation, Carruthers suggests that “one way to read [Lisa’s tragic death], theologically, is that God is attempting, in the final instance, to shake

Lise out of her complacency, to rouse her perhaps to fight for her life rather than, as she originally intends, surrendering it” (2010: 83). After her conversion Spark became strongly aware of a new order of experience which posed relevant questions on personal identity. Even though she experienced a nervous breakdown as a consequence of her decision, Spark often admitted that her conversion had triggered her literary creativity: “I think there is a connection between my writing and my conversion [...]. Certainly all my best work has come since then” (Spark 1961: 60). In Catholicism Spark saw this connection with the form of fiction—perhaps a sort of permanent appeal to metafictional allegories—, but also an invitation to discern certain anxieties and contradictions of real life, and to negotiate her traumatic experience through her experimental fiction, porous and numinous, to project a sense of the spiritual. Furthermore, *The Driver’s Seat* exemplifies that kind of double-telling that Caruth observes at the core of trauma narratives: “the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (1996: 7, emphasis in original). Connecting trauma and religious experience, Rambo argues that “this oscillation between life and death opens up a distinctive middle in which neither can be read apart from each other. Instead, the experience of survival is a death-life experience” (2010: 34).

5. Conclusion

Despite some praiseworthy attempts in recent Sparkian criticism to move away from religious interpretations of her novels and find new directions connected with experimentalism and liminality, it may still be possible to link the latter to the former without engaging in excessive “doctrinal criticism” (McQuillan 2002: 2). Marina Mackay finds no incompatibility when she admits that Spark’s experimental narrative operates “in the conceptual space where the more abstract preoccupations of Roman Catholic theology overlap with the metafictional and fabulist concerns of postmodernism” (2008: 506). In particular, in *The Driver’s Seat* we find a peculiarly experimental blending of metafictional self-reflection with echoes of the theological implications of the Calvinist notion of predestination. This focus in turn revisits the notion of Aristotelian tragedy, whose sense of predestination is a necessary ingredient for the much-needed catharsis, so the denouement of *The Driver’s Seat* can be seen as “an implicit metafictional gesture, [...] invoking the purgative effects of tragic catharsis” (Bailey 2021: 142).

Under traditional Calvinist doctrine, Lise’s attempts to usurp the authorial role must be punished with the prospect of a world with no sense or transcendence, and the state of sin—meant as a state of separation from God—“provokes an

obfuscation of the human faculties that makes the individual unable to recognize the real Good and leads him to selfishly want his own good, that is Evil” (Paparoni 2016: 420-421). Lise therefore should be denied salvation and must face the hopeless idea that there is no divine consolation beyond the tragic end. Quoting from Georg Lukács’s famous assertion that the novel is the epic of a world abandoned by God, Susana Lee posits that “the departure of God becomes the formal substance and undertone of the novel, and the novel in turn informs our understanding of secularism and its crises, uncertainties, and potentials” (2006: 11). However, nothing is that clear-cut in Muriel Spark’s elusive fiction, always so keen on providing “a pack of lies [... containing] a kind of truth” (Kermode 1963: 78). Lise’s plot seems to have been walking in circles to baffle the reader, while the clearing-up scene is never fulfilled since the victim is also the plotter, and the murderer is also the victim. If the way Spark constructs the final twist of the plot is shocking and even cruel for a reader too immersed in Lise’s plot to realize that there is an author in control, the disturbing ending proves necessary for a potential interpretation of this “whydunnit in q-sharp major” (Spark 1970: 111), blending ethics and aesthetics under the metafictional subversion of an Aristotelian tragedy.

204

In his firm rejection of doctrinal readings, Bailey seems to make no distinction between the “Catholic God and the Calvinist one” (Lodge’s expression) when he associates “the novel’s well-documented use of prolepsis” with “Catholic practice” (2021: 143). But our contention is that the theological implications of prolepsis in *The Driver’s Seat*, even within Spark’s characteristic practice of “the arts of pretence and counterfeit” (Bailey 2021: 6), undermine the Calvinist certainty of salvation or (as in Lise’s case) of predestined condemnation. Instead, Catholic doctrine tends to emphasize God’s unfathomable grace and redemptive power, which on the part of external observers implies an unavoidable “incertitude of salvation”, a concept that was asserted in Catholic teaching as early as the beginning of the Counter-Reformation at the Council of Trent (Grosse 2011: 66). If we accept that the mysterious, Robbe-Grilletian narrator of the novel is, as Bailey contends, “an anxious and eminently fallible entity [...] capable only of producing limited, subjective recordings” (2021: 158), his/her many expressions of lack of knowledge throughout the narrative (“Who knows [Lise’s] thoughts? Who can tell?” etc.) are evocative of the ultimate uncertainty of eternal salvation that is accepted in Catholic thought. Urs von Balthasar, a very influential Catholic theologian in Spark’s lifetime, argued that “because we can’t be certain which way things will turn out [...], we shouldn’t write off anybody as inevitably damned” (in Brumley 2020).⁶ Furthermore, Loddegaard contends that “the Catholic novel emerging after the First World War constructs an absent and silent God” and, as in the works of Spark’s fellow-Catholic novelist Graham Greene, “the characters are left in a state of uncertainty with regard to their salvation” (2008: 4).

If *The Driver's Seat* echoes the religious controversy over predestination *versus* choice, it also approaches classical tragedy through its subversion by comedy and ridicule, the weapons advocated by Spark for the only possible “art form in the future” (Spark 1971: 24). As the grim notion of Calvinist predestination can be checked by the Catholic incertitude of salvation, so tragical pre-determined fate can be subverted by the deconstructive effect of satire. Thus, Lise is probably never meant to be taken seriously as a classical heroine of Aristotelian tragedy, much like her delusional attempts to become the author of her own destiny are thwarted by the intrusion of the author or her helpers—notably Mrs Fiedke and Richard. The novel's metafictional experimentation, openness and self-reflexiveness are compatible with its being read as an allegory of a world deprived of transcendence, a quest for answers that may not be readily apparent in the drab world depicted in the story. The crudity of inevitable tragedy is, then, subverted by the “weapon of ridicule” that questions the obvious narrative layers and negotiates the limits of free will and humans' capacity to manage their lives in the face of the prospect of an apparently inescapable fate. And if the only certain fact of Everyman's life-long quest is death, from this sure finale *The Driver's Seat* invites the reader to go back again looking for clues—as if it were a traditional detective story—or for those sparks of grace which may offer its readers a glimpse of hope and transcendence within their earthly (fictional?) limitations.

Notes

1. As several critics—most recently Guy (2019) and Bailey (2021)—have observed, Spark's works are strongly influenced by elements from the *nouveau roman*, an interest that can be traced back to *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960).

2. The focus on Gate 14 (7+7) intentionally marks a door to the 'author's dimension'. The novel is full of sevens: it is divided into seven chapters, the action takes place in July, at the office we are told that Lise has seven colleagues above her, another seven below her, Bill's diet is Regime 7, and they meet at seven. In the *Bible*, 7 is the number of completeness and achievement and its meaning is connected to God's creation.

3. According to Patrick Query, sacramentality can be described as “the belief that incorporeal content is capable of transmission through corporeal forms. Such, also, is the imagination of a writer whose style is capable of collapsing the space between form and content and between subject and object such that the surfaces *become* the truth” (2005: 42, emphasis in original).

4. In the *Genesis* account, a rainbow appears right after the great flood, symbolizing God's mercy and the covenant made with Noah to spare the world and the human race from destruction (Genesis 9:13).

5. In an interview with James Brooker and Margarita Estévez-Saá, Spark admitted that she felt more comfortable

writing about women than about men because she was not able to “give men quite the individual identity. [...] But at the same time, a writer also wants to write about what other people feel like. So I’m always trying to deal with a man but somehow I get a weak man. I don’t get it quite right” (in Brooker and Estévez-Saá 2004: 1040).

6. Potter observes that in some of her novels Spark manifests “a religious understanding in the form of a Balthasarian Catholic philosophy based on the idea of essence as movement out of the self” (2008: 42).

Works Cited

206

- ADDAI-MENSAH, Peter. 2020. “A Discussion on Augustine’s Notion of Predestination and its Later Interpretation in Salvation History.” *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 3: 21-27. DOI: 10.47604/jpcr.1109
- AQUINAS, Thomas. 2007. *Summa Theologica. Volume I – Part I*. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Cosimo Classics.
- ASANTE, Emmanuel. 2014. *Soteriology: A Discourse on Salvation*. Accra: Pinpoint Media.
- BAILEY, James. 2021. *Muriel Spark’s Early Fiction: Literary Subversion and Experiments with Form*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P.
- BRADBURY, Malcolm. 1973. *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel*. London: Oxford U.P.
- BROOKER, James and Margarita ESTÉVEZ-SAA. 2004. “Interview with Dame Muriel Spark.” *Women’s Studies. An Interdisciplinary Journal* 33 (8): 1035-1046.
- BRUMLEY, Mark. 2020. “Did Hans Urs von Balthasar Teach that Everyone Will Certainly Be Saved?” *The Catholic World Report* (March 27). <<https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2020/03/27/did-hans-urs-von-balthasar-teach-that-everyone-will-certainly-be-saved>>. Accessed 20 November, 2021.
- CALVIN, Jean. 1960. *Institutes of Christian Religion*. Ed. John T. McNeil. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- CARRUTHERS, Gerard. 2010. “Muriel Spark as Catholic Novelist”. In Gardiner, Michael and Willy Maley (eds.) *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P.: 74-84.
- CARUTH, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins U.P.
- CHEYETTE, Bryan. 2000. *Muriel Spark*. Devon: Northcote House.
- DRABBLE, Margaret. 2018. “Snapshots on Muriel Spark.” *Times Literary Supplement* (June 29). <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/muriel-spark-margaret-drabble>>. Accessed 20 November, 2021.
- ESTÉVEZ-SAA, Margarita. 2007. “Caracterización e identidad femenina en la obra de Muriel Spark.” *Garzoa: Revista de la Sociedad Española de Estudios Literarios de Cultura Popular* 7: 99-110.
- FERGUSON, David A. S. 1993. “Predestination: A Scottish Perspective”. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46: 457-478.
- FRANKEL, Sara. 1987. “An Interview with Muriel Spark.” *Partisan Review* 54 (3): 443-457.
- GADAMER, Hans-Georg. 1995. *Truth and Method*. Trans. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall. New York: Continuum.
- GROSSE, Sven. 2011. “Salvation and the Certitude of Faith: Luther on Assurance.” *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 20 (1): 64-85. DOI: 10.1177/106385121102000104
- GUY, Adam. 2019. *The Nouveau Roman and Writing in Britain after Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford U.P.

Metafictional Predestination in Muriel Spark

- HADDOX, Thomas F. 2009. "Religion for 'Really Intelligent People': The Rhetoric of Muriel Spark's *Reality and Dreams*." *Religion and Literature* 41: 43-66.
- HOSMER, Robert E., Jr. 2005. "An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark." *Salmagundi* 145/147: 127-158.
- HOSMER, Robert E., Jr. 2017. "The Chandeliers of the Metropole: A Vivid Glow upon the Just and the Unjust in Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*." *Scottish Literary Review* 9: 83-93.
- HYNES, Joseph. 1993. "Muriel Spark and the Oxymoronic Vision." In Hosmer, Robert E. Jr. (ed.) *Contemporary British Women Writers*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 161-187.
- KERMODE, Frank. 1963. "The House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists." *Partisan Review* 30: 61-82.
- KERMODE, Frank. 1970. "Sheerer Spark." *Listener* (24 September): 426.
- KERMODE, Frank. (1965) 1992. "The Novel as Jerusalem: Muriel Spark's *Mandelbaum Gate*." In Hynes, Joseph (ed.) *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*. New York: G.K. Hall: 179-186.
- KOLOCOTRONI, Vassiliki. 2018. "The Driver's Seat: Undoing Character, Becoming Legend." *Textual Practice* 32 (9): 1545-1562. DOI: 10.1080/0950236X.2018.1533180
- LEE, Susana. 2006. *A World Abandoned by God: Narrative and Secularism*. Lewisburg: Bucknell U.P.
- LODDEGAARD, Anne. 2008. "The Silence of God in the Modern Catholic Novel: Graham Greene and French Catholic Novelists Adopting a Pascalian Deix Absconditus Perspective on Faith, Truth, and Reason." *Forum on Public Policy*: 1-10.
- LODGE, David. 1992. *The Art of Fiction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- MACKEY, Marina. 2008. "Muriel Spark and the Meaning of Treason." *Modern Fiction Studies* 54 (3): 505-522. DOI: 10.1353/mfs.0.1540
- MAN, Sorana-Cristina. 2020. *Instances of Death in Greek Tragedy*. Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- MASSIE, Allan. 1987. "Spark of Inspiration." *The Times* (August 1): 18.
- MCQUILLAN, Martin. (ed.) 2002. *Theorizing Muriel Spark. Gender, Race and Deconstruction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- MEYERS, Helen. 2001. *Femicidal Fears: Narratives of the Female Gothic Experience*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- NYE, Robert. 1970. "Another Suicide." *The Observer* (September 24): 14.
- PAGE, Norman. 1990. *Muriel Spark*. London: Macmillan.
- PAPARONI, Genevra. 2016. "Nature and Predestination in William Faulkner's 'Dry September'." *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie Occidentale* 50: 419-432. DOI: 10.14277/2499-1562/AnnOc-50-16-22
- POTTER, Martin. 2008. "Reconciling the Divided Self in Muriel Spark's *The Mandelbaum Gate*." *University of Bucharest Review* 10 (1): 39-45.
- QUERY, Patrick. 2005. "Catholicism and Form from Hopkins to Waugh." In Villar Flor, Carlos and Robert M. Davis (eds.) *World Without End: New Trends in Evelyn Waugh Studies*. Bern: Peter Lang: 37-44.
- RAMBO, Shelly. 2010. *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- RANKIN, Ian. 1985. "Surface and Structure: Reading Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*." *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 15 (2): 146-155.
- ROOF, Judith. 2002. "The Future Perfect's Perfect Future: Spark's and Duras's Narrative Drive." In McQuillan, Martin (ed.): 49-66.
- SAGE, Lorna. 1992. *Women in the House of Fiction*. London: Macmillan.
- SAWADA, Chikako. 2007. "Muriel Spark's *The Finishing School* and Postmodern Endings." *Studies in English Literature* 48: 1-20.
- SINCLAIR, Peter M. 2010. "Narrative and Eschatology: Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Muriel Spark and Theology of Narrative". PhD Dissertation. University of Connecticut.
- SPARK, Muriel. 1961. "My Conversion." *Twentieth Century* 170: 58-63.
- SPARK, Muriel. 1970. *The Driver's Seat*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

- SPARK, Muriel. 1971. "The Desegregation of Art" In *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters* (The Annual Blashfield Foundation Address). New York: Spiral Press: 21-27.
- SPARK, Muriel. 1992. *Curriculum Vitae: A Volume of Autobiography*. Manchester: Carcanet Press.
- SPARK, Muriel. (1961) 2009. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
- STANNARD, Martin. 2009. *Muriel Spark: The Biography*. London: Orion Books.
- WAUGH, Patricia. 1984. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London: Methuen.
- WAUGH, Patricia. 2018. "Muriel Spark's 'Informed Air': The Auditory Imagination and the Voices of Fiction" *Textual Practice* 32 (9): 1633-1658. DOI: 10.1080/0950236X.2018.1533171
- WHITTAKER, Ruth. 1982. *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark*. London: Macmillan.

Received: 23/02/2021
Accepted: 12/01/2022