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The Natural and the Supernatural in Muriel Spark's Fiction

Abstract

A striking feature of Muriel Spark's fiction is its insistence on the reality of the supernatural, which occasionally breaks into the naturalistic level, defying and challenging habitual modes of perception. The fact of Spark being a religious convert is well known, but her faith is manifested in ways different from what is normally assumed to be religious writing. Spark's novels are never overtly didactic or moralistic; the impact of her faith is manifest in the notion of reality as conveyed by her fiction. Spark's vision of reality, underlain by her Catholicism, is based on her conviction that empirical reality coexists with the supernatural world; therefore, interactions with the supernatural, however strange they may seem, are presented in her fiction as compellingly plausible. It is argued in the article that Spark's ontology of fiction is rooted in a tradition going back to Chesterton, who insisted on the paradoxical conjunction of nonsense and faith, both capable of invoking a sense of spiritual wonder at the world we normally take for granted. *Memento Mori, Reality and Dreams* as well as selected short stories are referenced to illustrate the peculiar combination of the empirical and the supernatural in Spark's fiction. The article asserts the paradox, central to Spark's vision of reality, that the supernatural should be accepted as a natural part of profane experience.

Keywords: Catholic novel, English short stories, Muriel Spark, natural and supernatural in literature, religion in literature

Although only a minority of Muriel Spark's novels overtly engage with Catholicism or faith in general, an "explicit or implicit expression of faith in a divine order" remains one of "the consistent factors" of her fiction (Whittaker 12). Spark's conversion, which by her own admission triggered her creativity by providing her with a comprehensive framework of beliefs, also determined her notion of reality. The protagonist of her first novel *The Comforters*, much like Spark at that stage of her life, is having a breakdown related to her conversion. During this time of turmoil in her personal life, Caroline is writing a book on the contemporary novel and experiences problems with the chapter on realism. Despite the fact that the protagonist keeps hearing a mysterious typewriter recording the story she herself is in, the setting and characterisation are too realistic for the novel to be relegated

to the sphere of fantasy. This peculiar interpenetration of the natural on the one hand and, on the other hand, the supernatural, the bizarre and the extraordinary was to be a hallmark of Spark's many subsequent novels and short stories. In the words of Norman Page, "Muriel Spark is less interested in 'pure' realism or 'pure' fantasy [...] than in the intersection of or blending of the two" (Page 31). Spark's implicit insistence in her fiction that however strange and incomprehensible certain occurrences may appear, they must be accepted as part of the phenomenal world stems from her conviction regarding the existence of a higher, divine order which occasionally makes itself felt by thwarting the plans and scenarios that human beings produce, and by challenging their limited perspectives.

In her book *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* Ruth Whittaker contrasts Spark's reservations about mimesis with the English realist tradition, epitomised by writers such as George Eliot or Mrs Gaskell, both committed to a faithful representation of the apprehensible world (Whittaker 4). George Eliot's type of realism stems from her deep-rooted confidence in the world's essential accessibility to knowledge and human understanding. Her novels, as T.R. Wright put it, "present Christianity through the reductive lenses of Strauss and Feuerbach," which entails "explain[ing] supernatural belief in purely human terms," while "the only mysteries allowed by the narrator are those of the human heart" (Wright 115–116).

George Eliot has been categorised as one of the touchstones of the greatness of the English novel, which is eulogised by Q.D. Leavis in "The Englishness of the English Novel." The critic underlines "truth to life and its scope" (Leavis 135) as the backbone of the English novel, while arguing that "it has traditionally been the product of an essentially Protestant culture" (Leavis 139). Leavis's emphasis on the moral responsibility of fiction does not prevent her from denigrating the two well-known English Catholic writers, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, for their "spiritual pedantry" (Leavis 140). Although written in 1980, Leavis's essay does not address Muriel Spark. But if it did, Spark would certainly be condemned for her failure to comply with Leavis's notion of realism, understood as a representation of the empirically knowable individual and social life.

C.S. Lewis once noted that the category of "truth to life," commonly used as a measure of realism in fiction, may be broken down into two types, each designating a different kind of realism. *Middlemarch* exemplifies novels which present what is typical and usual in human affairs. The other realism distinguished by Lewis denotes things which, despite being possible and conceivable, are exceptional and happen rarely, or perhaps could happen only once. *Great Expectations*, which, notwithstanding its realism of representation, tells a very unusual and almost improbable story, may serve as an example of the other type of realism (Lewis 60–65). Lewis comments on fiction of the latter type in the following words:

The strange events are not clothed with hypothetical probability in order to increase our knowledge of real life by showing how it would react to this improbable test. It is the other way round. The hypothetical probability is brought in to make the strange events more fully imaginable. Hamlet is not faced with a ghost in order that his reactions may tell us more about his nature and therefore about human nature in general; he is shown reacting naturally in order that we may accept the ghost. (Lewis 66)

The disturbing nature of Spark's fiction arises out of the contrast between its factual narrative mode and its bewildering content. Sudden deaths, the characters' erratic behaviour, twists in the stories are proffered without narratorial clarification. Such "interruptions," as Penelope Fitzgerald has called them, are "a reminder of the vast unseen presences on which our lives are dependent or contingent" (Fitzgerald 7). Yet even on occasions when happenings defy rationality, there is some room left for a highly unlikely and yet possible empirical explanation. Novels such as *Memento Mori* or *The Driver's Seat* play with the conventions of detective fiction – a genre in which the plot is propelled by a quest for truth. The truth that emerges from Spark's novels is stranger than fiction: the protagonist of *The Driver's Seat* is finally murdered, which appears to have been her goal throughout the story. It is she who pursues her future murderer, while the unwilling criminal is on the run from his potential victim. Page suggests that the aim of Spark's parodic engagement with the mimetic tradition is to expose "the falsity of fictions that make untenable claims to represent reality" (Page 26–27). In her essay "Catholicism, Character, and the Invention of the Liberal Novel Tradition" Marina MacKay uses the example of *The Driver's Seat* to argue that

At the end of the twentieth century, we see a coincidence of the metafictional and the metaphysical: the strategies of the "Catholic" novel, with its rejection of liberal, realist orthodoxies, become postmodern truisms. And, in a final irony, Catholicism's uncompromising belief in realities beyond the reach of human reason becomes indistinguishable from the radical skepticism of the postmodern. (MacKay 236)

The action in *Memento Mori* revolves around a series of telephone calls made to several elderly people. A voice invariably conveys the message "Remember that you must die." Speculations about the identity of the caller proliferate and complaints are made to the police. However, the culprit cannot be found, although the episodes when certain people receive the message are confirmed by witnesses, and presented by the omniscient narrator in a factual manner. An experienced policeman, when asked for help, immediately realises that this is one of those cases when the human ability to understand and explain reaches its limit: "[these people] think that the C.I.D. are God, understanding all mysteries and all knowledge. Whereas we are only policemen" (*MM* 153). Mortimer calmly announces that "considering the evidence [...] the offender is Death himself" (*MM* 142). In his eyes, the natural, if examined without the prejudice of narrow rationality, contains manifestations of the supernatural. The paradox is that "it is precisely the absence of a trace that leads Mortimer to this conclusion" (Pero 563). However, by refusing to give a full account of the explanation Mortimer radically challenges the role traditionally played by the detective in crime fiction (Pero 563). Another paradox in the novel is that the empirically-minded characters who completely deny the possibility that the caller is Death himself appear to be blinkered and unreasonable. Their dismissal of the most obvious solution to the mystery corresponds to their refusal to accept the prospect of death, although their mental and bodily decrepitude makes mortality arrantly imminent.

Characteristically, the Sparkian narrator refuses to analyse and explain; instead she confronts her characters (as Spark confronts her readers) with baffling

developments while implying that the events may constitute a part of some obscure, non-human pattern. As Whittaker notes, the purpose of the trivial and the commonplace in Spark's fiction is not only to set up a familiar world but also to establish a context for the revelation of the unfamiliar (Whittaker 5). One of the characters in *Memento Mori*, convinced that there is a criminal gang behind the pestering phone-calls, is indeed murdered. The crime seems to validate the naturalistic explanation of the calls, but only in the eyes of those characters who, not knowing all the facts, apply their mental clichés to the situation. But the narrative shows the surprising fact that the criminals had singled out Dame Lettie only *after* hearing the news about the mysterious caller and the old lady's self-imposed isolation, which obviously facilitated the crime. Without clarifying the identity of the caller, the narrator nevertheless confronts us with the stark fact that the reminder of death does come true after all. In the words of Allan Pero, "That the impossible has happened (Death on the phone for you, dear) remains just that: an impossible but necessary truth" (Pero 563).

Apart from the policeman, whose conclusion that Death himself makes the telephone calls is derived from his humbling experience of the limitations of human cognition, only two other characters treat the message seriously and, at the same time, stoically. It is probably no coincidence that these two – Charmian and Jean Taylor – happen to be Catholics. Yet, ironically, their sensible attitude to the intimation of mortality is interpreted by others as a symptom of insanity. Alec Warner, an amateur researcher of senility and arch representative of the empirical attitude in the novel, admits: "The more religious people are, the more perplexing I find them" (*MM* 171). But no sooner has Alec expressed satisfaction with his scientific methods than he finds his flat, together with his meticulous records, on fire. He receives a painful lesson in the fragility of all things material and the limits of human enquiry, and suffers a stroke that reduces him to a condition in which he is capable only of obsessively examining his own mind. As Chesterton once said, nothing "essentially reasonable has ever arisen out of the pure reason" (Chesterton 126).

Indeed, Spark's religiously motivated demand for the reader to accept the surprising nature of the world may be traced back to G.K. Chesterton, a staunch Catholic and a master of paradox. In his essay "A Defence of Nonsense" Chesterton argues that

Religion has for centuries been trying to make men exult in the "wonders" of creation, but it has forgotten that a thing cannot be completely wonderful as long as it remains sensible. So long as we regard a tree as an obvious thing, naturally and reasonably created for a giraffe to eat, we cannot properly wonder at it. It is when we consider it as a prodigious wave of the living soil sprawling up to the skies for no reason in particular that we take off our hats, to the astonishment of the park-keeper. Everything has in fact another side to it, like the moon, the patroness of nonsense. (Chesterton 126–127)

Very much in the Chestertonian fashion, Spark's fiction ostensibly blurs the boundary between nonsense and truth, between madness and faith. What appears absurd may, if viewed from another perspective, be perfectly congruous with the unpredictable nature of the world; seemingly insane behaviour may in fact be

based on wisdom and insight. While it could seem mad to believe that Death is capable of making telephone calls, it is perfectly reasonable to acknowledge that an aged person should expect to die. Of the “four last things” enumerated in the Penny Catechism (Death, Judgement, Hell, and Heaven) – quoted as one of the epigraphs to the novel – the existence of the first is beyond any doubt, quite irrespective of one’s attitude to religion.

In Spark’s short story entitled “Come along, Marjorie” the persistent juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane centres on the assessment of Marjorie, the one character who, according to the narrator, eludes classification. Despite generally being regarded as insane, she stands out among all the other neurotic patients since her kind of “mental aberration” (as the narrator puts it) resists categorisation, just as she herself resists treatment. The protagonist-narrator, also suffering from a mental breakdown, veers between the options that Marjorie is a clear mental case, or that she is perfectly sane and that she alone understands the purpose of the place. Marjorie, who reminds Gloria of an abbess, remains a disturbing presence in the community of Catholic convalescents at an old abbey-cum-modern health resort. The outline of the history of the place highlights a succession of pagan and Christian phases. Marjorie’s self-imposed solitude, religiously observed silence and constant prayer, ironically enough, alienate her from the other Catholics, and, even more ironically, from the resident monks; everyone except Marjorie follows an essentially secular lifestyle. A typically Sparkian clash between the natural and the supernatural, or the profane and the sacred, occurs on the single occasion when Marjorie talks to the narrator, Gloria. Gloria is anxiously awaiting a telephone call. At the moment when Marjorie approaches her with the news that she has a message for her, Gloria’s expectations are totally centered on the desired call.

“Excuse me,” she said, “I have a message for you.” [...]

“What’s the message?”

“The Lord is risen,” she said.

It was not until I had got over my disappointment that I felt the shock of her having spoken, and recalled an odd focus of her eyes that I had not seen before. “After all,” I thought, “she has a religious mania [...]”

“Gloria!” – this was the girl from the repository poking her head round the door. She beckoned to me... (CSS 311)

Because the narrator is awaiting a completely different, down-to-earth message, Marjorie’s announcement “The Lord is risen” disappoints her, although the secretary’s immediate calling of her first name “Gloria” constitutes a strangely appropriate response to the good news. Despite Gloria’s Catholicism, the nature of the message is interpreted by her as proof of Marjorie’s insanity, and, like the characters in *Memento Mori*, she does not consider the possibility that the extraordinary message may be true. Gloria’s narration remains characteristically poised between two perspectives, leaving both her and the other characters wondering at the strangeness of their otherworldly fellow Catholic. After Marjorie Pettigrew is forcibly taken away to a mental hospital, the whole community unites in “contemplating with fear and pity the calling of Miss Pettigrew Marjorie” (CSS 315)

– an ambiguous conclusion, signifying simultaneously their annoyance at the disrespectful treatment of Marjorie by the ambulance men, and their amazement at Marjorie's mysterious vocation.

Spark's early short story, "The Seraph and the Zambezi," is a paradigmatic example of both her juxtaposition of natural and supernatural plots and her peculiar intersection of realism and fantasy. The production of a Nativity play is interrupted by a Seraph who asserts his right to the story against the director of the play. A hilarious argument follows between the two:

"Once and for all –"

"That's correct," said the Seraph.

"– this is my show," continued Cramer.

"Since when?" the Seraph said.

"Right from the start," Cramer breathed at him.

"Well, it's been mine from the Beginning," said the Seraph, "and the Beginning began first." (CSS 100)

Members of the audience attempt to drive the strange creature away with fire, not knowing that a Seraph is a creature of fire. The fire that breaks out destroys the entire set of the play, and no one detects any irony in the fact that Cramer is insured against everything except "acts of God." However, the circumstances of the bizarre event preclude categorisation of the story as pure fantasy. The narrator stresses the unusual heat of December in Africa, where the play is rehearsed for the sake of the small European community. The heat is so intense that the protagonist doubts the evidence of her senses: "When an atmosphere maintains an excessive temperature for a long spell something seems to happen to the natural noises of life. Sound fails to carry in its usual quantity, but comes as if bound and gagged" (CSS 95). The protagonist seems to observe the Seraph departing along the river:

Then I noticed that along the whole mile of the waterfall's crest the spray was rising higher than usual. This I took to be steam from the Seraph's heat. I was right, for presently, by the mute flashes of summer lightning, we watched him ride the Zambezi away from us, among the rocks that look like crocodiles and the crocodiles that look like rocks. (CSS 103)

The phantasmagoric atmosphere of the African Christmas Eve invites both miracles and hallucinations. Spark's inspiration for this short story was characteristically twofold: "certainly I believe in angels, and I had been up the Zambesi on a boat" (qtd. in Whittaker 1).

Another short story, "The Black Madonna," also involves an event suspended between a natural and a supernatural mode. If it were the latter, then this would be another instance of an unexpected and ultimately unwelcome divine intervention. A childless Catholic couple pray to the miraculous Black Madonna in their parish, but when their request for a baby is granted, their amazement reveals how weak is their faith in miracles. Although it stands to reason that a baby given by a black Madonna might be black, the couple absolutely refuse to accept this explanation. The wife's infidelity seems unlikely, given the degree of her racial prejudice, but the biologically defensible possibility that the genes of her distant black ancestor have manifested themselves in her baby is also rejected. Although unable to deny

their paternity of the baby, the couple decide that giving it up for adoption is the most reasonable solution. Yet the child's mother admits that what they have done is right rather than good; "Apparently, there's a difference" (CSS 437).

Spark's fiction refuses to offer a naive version of poetic justice, perhaps in recognition of her conviction that the human sense of justice is hardly ever satisfied in real life. One of her books, *The Only Problem*, features a protagonist exploring *The Book of Job* with the intention of solving the problem of suffering. Predictably, his pursuit turns out to be futile. G.K. Chesterton once remarked on the biblical text's defiance of rational analysis: the God that speaks to Job "insists on the inexplicableness of everything" and "on the positive and palpable unreason of things" (qtd. in Christensen 139). Chesterton's comments correspond to the overall inscrutability of the divine order in Spark's fiction. Suffering and death may appear quite contingent: in *Reality and Dreams* Dave the taxi driver, a perfectly innocent minor character, receives the fatal shot aimed at his client who, despite his guilt, escapes unscathed. In *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* the devilish character Dougal Douglas is never punished for the disruption that he has caused in people's lives. Characters who effectively act as instruments of justice are not always likeable or morally straight. Marigold, the malicious daughter of the protagonist in *Reality and Dreams*, is a distinctly wicked character who nevertheless manages to undermine her father's equally wicked, manipulative plans. The wise Catholic Jean Taylor in *Memento Mori* brings about a reconciliation between a married couple by betraying the wife's secret to the husband. And Sandy in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, prior to becoming a Catholic nun, betrays her teacher in order to put a stop to her destructive influence on her students.

Whereas the distribution of rewards and punishments may appear arbitrary in Spark's novels, there is one sin which is invariably exposed: the sin of pride. Spark's fiction features a gallery of plot-makers, characters who usurp power to construct scenarios for their own and other people's lives. In this, of course, they encroach on the domain of the Creator. Sandy's resistance to Miss Brodie is formulated as: "She thinks she is Providence [...], she thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end" (*PMJB* 120).

There are numerous professional plotters in Spark's fiction, such as Tom Richards, the film director in *Reality and Dreams*. His arrogance and arbitrariness in assigning roles in his films reflects his overall arrogance and selfishness in his relations with others. The novel starts after his fall from a crane, an apt emblem of his tendency to self-elevation. As his lawyer comments,

There was no need, no need for you to go up that crane. An ordinary dolly is perfectly all right for directing a motion picture these days. But no, you have to be different, you have to be right up there beside the photographer, squeezed in, and without a seat-belt. You have to be God. (*RD* 13)

On reflection, Tom secretly admits,

Yes, I did feel like God up on that crane. It was wonderful to shout orders through the amplifier and like God watch the team down there group and re-group as bidden. [...] What do they think a film set is? A democracy, or something? I simply don't regret that crane for a moment. (*RD* 14)

The director's fall from his superior place is followed by a series of frustrating incidents:

As soon as I hear a bit of news these days [...] someone comes along to contradict it. My film was cancelled now it's going ahead. My son-in-law was looking for a job but now he's left my daughter and gone for a holiday in India. First I had to go back to hospital and now I don't. (RD 31)

Yet Tom refuses to learn his lesson – on recovering, he continues to make scenarios and finally again attempts to go up the crane. However, he will have to face the fact that there is another plotter, antagonistic to him – his own daughter Marigold, whose special, sinister objective is to challenge her father's arrogance: "I'd like him to go up in the crane and this time come down with a final thump. He doesn't need the crane. These days it's only a director's expensive toy. I'd like to fix it for him, and him with it" (RD 159). Yet what Marigold, the self-appointed judge, fails to take account of is the fact that above each plotter there may be another, more powerful one. Her plans to deal her father's pride a fatal blow misfire because the girl who, at Marigold's instigation, tampered with the crane has a fatal accident herself.

In all Spark's novels, certain characters weave their own plots, which are typically at some point thwarted by other characters, fate – or perhaps a superhuman agency. On one level, they are all certainly thwarted by the writer, who will not leave hubris unpunished. As Brooke Allen observed, "She clearly enjoys the God-role, sitting up in her particular crane and surveying her creatures with condescension" (n.p.). Bryce Christensen notes that in Spark's books "Narratives [...] born of merely human desires, vanity, or imaginings – threaten to ensnare us in destructive, if beguiling, falsehoods; such narratives fall beneath rather than transcend rational understanding" (Christensen 144). In an interview with Frank Kermode, Spark asserted: "I don't claim that my novels are truth – I claim that they are fiction, out of which a kind of truth emerges. [...] there is absolute truth, in which I believe things which are difficult to believe, but believe them because they are absolute" (Kermode 133).

Abbreviations

CCS – *The Complete Short Stories*
 MM – *Memento Mori*
 PMJB – *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*
 RD – *Reality and Dreams*

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