

The Victim and Her Plots:
The Function of the Overpowering Victim in Muriel
Spark's *The Driver's Seat*

Maria Vara

...Thus, in emulation of god, the detective aspires to invent that which already exists, in order to see what is there before his (and our) eyes. He is the very emblem of our souls, a sort of mortal saviour...

Joyce Carol Oates, *The Mysteries of Winterthurn*

The various elements collected by the detectives ... would all seem at first sight to call for an explanation, to exist only as a function of their role in an affair which is beyond them ... But the plot starts to thicken alarmingly ... And you have to keep coming back to the recorded evidence ... The impression grows on you that nothing else is true. Whether they conceal or reveal a mystery, these elements that defy all systems have only one serious obvious quality – that of being there.

Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Towards a New Novel*

Detective fiction, since Poe, has remained a popular genre with both passionate adherents and sly adversaries. Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* has found little breathing space in it, despite the versatility of the genre (which ranges from ratiocinative to meta-detective novels). No general theoretical approaches that examine the mutations of detective novels during the twentieth century – be they formal, thematic, cultural or philosophical – include this text (to my knowledge) as a possible 'perverse' ally; all the same, Spark, in this novella, approaches the genre with complicitous eyes akin to those of Robbe-Grillet, Nabokov, Borges, Pynchon, and Eco.

The Driver's Seat has been read by critics only on a first level as a tribute to

Robbe-Grillet's ludic, deliberately superficial handling of the detective form. Contrary to Robbe-Grillet's oeuvre, Spark's novella has, on a second level, been characterized as a reverse detective novel¹ of the ratiocinative sort that "subverts the original function" (Whittaker 8-10) of the techniques employed by the *nouveau roman*. It has also been read (by Norman Page, 71, 77-79) as a modern tragedy: Everything that seems arbitrary on a first reading, all the apparently trivial details, appear in retrospect to fit perfectly in a well-crafted, coherent pattern of "fear and pity, pity and fear" (the very last words of the novella).

The text itself, though, seems to render the above linear approach hollow. Spark takes a sophisticated flight from the "retrospective patterning"² of the traditional detective novel; a careful reading conveys that the novella upsets both the formal limitations of the genre and its undercurrent philosophical and social layers by cunningly defying the hermeneutic code as defined by Barthes in *S/Z*. This code consists of "the various (formal) terms by which an enigma can be distinguished, held in suspense and finally disclosed" (19). In classic detective fiction, that is, there is "no tear, no edges: a gradual unveiling".³ It is a kind of fiction, as David Lodge points out, that invites a "closed" ending, "in which the detective solves the mystery, reduces to meaningful order the apparently meaningless confusion of clues" (Lodge 226). In the traditional detective story the cause of death must be 'solved' and the victim is usually absent, whereas in the *Driver's Seat* the mystery of death is emphatically eliminated, together with the figure of the detective as the weaver of coherence. The protagonist, Lise, is a victim-detective, an active participant in her own death, who pulls the strings of her own murder/er. Yet, the most striking thing is that this victim pulls also the strings of the text.⁴ She is the narrative agent of the novella, the one that upsets all expectations of closure and cohesion. Although teleological function is alluded to from time to time,⁵ this is mainly to impel us to perceive that linearity is artificially constructed to point to a sense of the arbitrariness of order. The classical detective pattern is and is not there, cunningly haunting the text.

The traditional detective form is a story of an *absence*. Todorov claims that at the base of the whodunit we find a duality: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. The first ends before the second begins. In his words, "[t]he first, that of the crime, is a story of an absence; its most accurate characteristic is that it cannot be immediately present in the book" (160).⁶ The story of the victim is absent but real, that of the detective present but insignificant (since the detective does not make things happen), Todorov notices. In Spark's novella, however, there is "*lack of an absence*" (71), the victim being present to expose the genre's sly ideological undercurrents. The formulaic nature of the classical detective novel usually works as a shelter for the already-established social order and morality; it rarely questions the status quo. By upsetting the code, Spark unveils the ideological mechanisms that lurk behind it. What we are given is a distorted image of "a given social order and the implied value systems that help sustain it".⁷

The reader does not immediately associate this novella with detective fiction. Not until very late are we in a position to realise that we are actually reading a de-

tective novel in the guise of a romantic quest. The clues that we gather together with the minor characters – who give their own portion of the plot to the police⁸ – when read in retrospect do give us some sense of (illusory, in my view) adherence to traditional detective form. The story opens with Lise in search of a “necessary dress” while preparing for a holiday somewhere unspecified in the South, and follows Lise’s adventures during no more than forty-eight hours. This first encounter with Lise proves inadequate to shed light on the reason behind her anger against the saleswoman who suggests a dress with material that “doesn’t stain”. A stainless fabric will not help to commit a public sensation over one’s death, which is Lise’s ultimate plan – but this is a point which is only understood in retrospect. The whole novella moves along similar lines: Lise’s incomprehensible behaviour fits into her plan to make her appearance *register*. “An array of plots and microplots” as Kermode puts it (425), relate together to reveal her quest not for a lover but for a murderer, in a parody of the cliché romance plot. Her ‘type’ of man is her murderer. This can be connected to how embedded we are in set frames of thinking and is surely the first trick played on us, an ingenious one. Spark manages to outwit us twice over. At the point where we think we finally ‘got it’ another trap is revealed: two kinds of detective logic function in the text. *The Driver’s Seat* is not a ‘whodunit’ but a ‘whydunit’⁹ twice over, a ‘proper’ and a ‘perverse’ one. If we follow the text backwards so as to grasp the teleology of the plot, we realise that Aristotelian¹⁰ ‘logic’ proves inadequate, since the ratiocinative code is deliberately touched upon, not to be validated as at first appears, but to be ‘disturbed’. The text is a kind of puzzle, with some pieces missing. Even when we become aware of the plot’s backward nature, we still cannot grasp the whole range of the scattered details. The perverse ‘whydunit’ comes to demand its due. It is there in the present tense, proleptically emptying the narrative future (“she will be found tomorrow morning dead...”) of all kinds of meaning. It comprises the over-supply of scattered, redundant evidence that haunts the text on its surface level. This is a trick of the classic detective novel, of course (all the red herrings mingled with clues to distract us from solving the mystery too early), but Spark takes it up for a different reason: to shrewdly ‘disturb’¹¹ the illusion of linearity.

Lise seems to play the role of the absent detective by guiding us towards meaningful clues (like when she tries to avoid the red herrings while searching for her murderer). She works with hypotheses (we assume) while trying to find a ‘proper’ man to kill her. We are never allowed to participate in her thought processes behind this search for a murderer, nor are we ever told of the nature of the clues she seeks. We could perhaps say that she performs abductive¹² reasoning: “You’re not my type after all [...] I thought you were, but I was away out”, says Lise to a ‘suspect’ man, disqualifying him as a murderer. If she formulates hypotheses by picking up clues, then the trail he leaves of being a hunter (“So he wasn’t my type anyway. Shooting animals,” Lise says) urges her to dismiss him. As time passes alarmingly, Lise collects more and more clues to match her type of a murderer. The narrator cannot penetrate her mind, nor can the reader; we only externally perceive a series of actions through the prism of the detached narration

that denies us any interpretation of the odd happenings. In other words, in looking for her murderer, Lise tests and discards possibilities in a manner similar to our own as readers of detective fiction: We gather all the dispersed evidence – her weird facial expressions, her vivid clothes, her misplaced passport and keys – and strive to form conjectures for the reason behind her absurd line of action. All we get are external details, such as the following:

Her lips are slightly parted and her nostrils and eyes, too, are a fragment more open than usual; she is a stag scenting the breeze, moving step by step, inhibiting her stride to accommodate Mrs Fiedke's pace, she seems at the same time to search for a certain air current, a glimpse and an intimation (*DS* 72-73).

We are never able to formulate a fixed theory out of the data we or she gathers. Our 'prospective eye' (to borrow two terms from Dennis Porter, 87) is not much different from our 'retrospective' one. "We often derive from observation strong intimations of truth," Peirce argues (18), but here we only get a glimpse of an intimation. There are many potential interpretations for the reason why her lips are sometimes slightly parted, other times sealed, but no clue offers itself as an actualised one; every attempt to reach signification is perversely blocked by the uninvolved narration.

Together with the heretic treatment of abductive reasoning, the code of *vraisemblance* (an attempt to bring something within the modes of order which culture makes available, a form of 'naturalization' of the text, in Culler's words¹³) is emphatically refused. All that is offered in detective fiction is usually either a potential clue (an organic one or a red herring) or is there for the purposes of verisimilitude – that is, disclosure of information vital to give the reassurance of 'reality'. Being trained to perform such reasoning, we are led to suspect that the following scene – where Lise's car is held outside the Hilton hotel while a group of Arabs descend the stairs – exists for the purpose of verisimilitude (there seems to be no justification for it as a clue):

There emerge down the steps of the hotel *two* women who seem to be identical *twins*, wearing black dresses and high-styled black hair, followed by an important looking Arabian figure, sheikh-like, in his head dress and robes ... he is flanked by *two* smaller bespectacled, brown-faced men in business-like suits. The *two* black-dressed women stand back with a respectful housekeeperly bearing while the robed figure approaches the first limousine; and the *two* men draw back too, as he enters the recesses of the car. *Two* black-robed women with the lower parts of their faces veiled and their heads shrouded in drapery then make their descent, and behind them another *pair* appear, men-servants with arms raised, bearing aloft numerous plastic-enveloped garments on coat hangers. Still in *pairs*, further components of the retinue appear, each *two* moving in such

unison that they seem to share a single soul or else *two* well-rehearsed parts in the chorus of the opera by Verdi. *Two* men wearing western clothes but for their red fezes are duly admitted to one of the waiting limousines and, as Lise gets out of her car to join the watchers, *two* ramshackle young Arabs with rumpled grey trousers and whitish shirts end the procession, bearing *two* large baskets, each one packed with oranges and a jumbo-sized vacuum flask which stands slightly askew among the fruit, like champagne in an ice-basket. [DS 83-84, my italics]

This is an extraordinary extract;¹⁴ it is as if two perfectly parallel lines mirror each other and a plurality of possible interpretations emerges. We cannot see any functional connection to verisimilitude, as this scene has little to do with the reflection of 'reality'; it is grotesque, funny and loftily geometrical, resembling the dyadic nature of the novella. This passage seems to exist as a mirroring of the text, a self-reflexive *mise-en-abyme* of its dual dimension, the 'whydunit' proper and the perverse one.

With similar throwaway gestures Spark transforms the passive reading that detective novels require into an active reading of the fictional (and the social) norms that make up our reality. The novella is a textual gesture of alliance with the *nouveau roman* which, according to Stephen Heath, proposes an *active* reading as opposed to the assumptions of the so-called 'Balzacian' novel – whose readers painlessly create their 'mental' narrative out of the clues that the bourgeois novel generously indulges them with. Heath suggests that the detective novel is in a sense the summary of the process of naturalization of the Balzacian novel, since its purpose is to end, to achieve closure. Thus, the reading of detective novels cannot be seen as active. Despite the fact that the reader 'spots the clues', it is wrong to see in this movement

anything more, finally, than a fundamental passivity. The reading depends on the assurance of the ending (an assurance guaranteed by the expectations of the genre which is carefully defined according to strict rules) that will fix the reading in a final full truth, thus defining the text as without plurality.... This is the *comfort* of the detective story: it offers a deep confirmation of the non-problematic nature of reality in absenting writing before an ultimate untroubled truth..... Hence the extent to which examples of the *nouveau roman* have worked through an 'undoing' of the detective novel – instances would include, in their different ways, Butor's *L'Emploi du temps* ... and of course Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommages*. (34)

The detective form has attracted these experimental writers because of its very clean, enticing surface, or, as Robbe-Grillet says, its surface that is "smooth, clear, intact, without glamour, without transparency" (53). Such a geometrical plateau, when one is taking flight from the trodden path of signification, can generate an extremely 'uncomfortable' reading practice.

The Driver's Seat rehearses the *nouveau roman's* appropriation of detective fiction; the reading process is messy, with more mutabilities and adventures than these clean surfaces would have you believe. Everything is focused through a point of view of loftiness resulting in a reduced, minimal text that is deprived of the emotional content provided by realist fiction. Geometry, external appearance, dispassionate description of objects become the final authoritative point of the narrative. It is a perverse 'whydunit', if we read the term 'perversion' in its Augustinian sense.¹⁵

Perverse stems from the Latin term *perversus*, which means *turned the wrong way*. St. Augustine is supposed to have coined the term 'pervertere', that is, to turn away from God. Augustine claims that "when the will leaves the higher and turns to the lower, it becomes bad, not because the thing to which it turns is bad but because the turning is itself perverse" (*City of God* xii.6, 478, qtd. in Dollimore 136). So it is not the objective of sin which is evil, but the deviation from good. This *turning away from* is the first meaning of the word 'perverse'. Evil is not an entity on its own, but is an action, a deviance, a wrong turn. Within this Christian / Catholic context, this novella can be read as an act of turning towards an "increasingly secular statement" (Whitaker 81), since it transfers attention from God's patterning in the world to people's designs for each other. Death is always present within Spark's world. For her, God is immanent and mysterious, the ultimate plotter. God holds death's strings, but all the same, small human plottings in our lives bring out death in its human (almost bathetic) dimension, not as a divine or heroic act of grand tragedy or as a means to confirm order (as in detective fiction) – but as a commodity, a *means* to a more secular end. This novella constitutes a *turning away from* all mythic elements that are 'naturalized' in our lives. Its "central mystery" as John Irwin puts it "is the self-conscious description of its own workings".¹⁶

Spark borrows the form of detective fiction in order to upset its *telos*, its drive for closure. From the ancient Greek meaning *goal, purpose*, in Modern Greek *telos* has come to denote the *end*. A parallel shift has occurred in fiction as regards its own *telos*, its purpose: since Aristotle, to make or enjoy fiction used to be connected with the pleasure of the progressive striptease of the plot – if we appropriate Barthes's metaphor in *The Pleasure of the Text*. Modernism refuted the teleological predetermination of plot by bringing forward open-ended narratives, free, fluid, floating. Later on, the novel turned inwards, to examine its own structure and presuppositions, to expose the backbone of its making. It is at this point that the ending came back, but not as finality. Since the early sixties, the *telos* is no longer to reach *telos*, the purpose is not to see what happens at the end, not to read for the plot. Instead, fiction is much concerned with different versions of ending;¹⁷ in order, perhaps, to ward off the much-endorsed human sense of an ending.

We still like reading detective novels that comply with the code, despite the retreat that fiction has taken from such narrative structures; we are well trained to. We have learned to work out abductive assumptions in our lives, to look for

'intimations of truth'. Every moment we gather clues and try to build small coherent fictions that constitute our teleological, one-dimensional, linear universe. A present misfortune can be alleviated by the illusion of a future vantage point of omniscience when everything 'will make sense'. The building of such a coherent universe around us is one of the most comforting fictions in our lives. Frank Kermode puts it elegantly in *The Sense of an Ending*: "Men, like poets, rush 'into the midst', in medias res when they are born; they die in mediis rebus, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends" (6). In order to make sense of the random quality of life, we keep creating small narratives that function as comforting mechanisms against chaos. These are the formulaic ones, narratives that travel through centuries in many forms to reassure us of order in our bewildering universe. They exist on a parallel with our horizontal axis, and assuage our craving for teleology. Through detective fiction – the modern mutation of the formula – we somehow enter a narrative dimension parallel with our own, one that serves as a magnifying glass, both reflecting and enhancing our urge for things to make sense *at the end*. The ending is the point where detective fiction myths merge with the myths of tragedy. Both genres are highly teleological, they "depend heavily on delayed truth which is only revealed at the end" (18), according to Ann Jefferson, when resolution brings catharsis.¹⁸ It also happens that the one genre wipes the other out in a sense. P. D. James, on a visit to Greece in 1993, quoted critics who argue that the "detective story is fundamentally without compassion, dealing perfunctorily with human tragedy and the problem of suffering". The tragic genre is deprived of its glory in detective fiction, since death is trivialized into a clue-generating device, something that proves handy for Spark's purpose to expose the backbone of all fictions of ending.

Kermode argues that of all the great religions Christianity has laid the most emphasis on fictions of ending, such as the Apocalypse, as well as on the terrors of death. When, early in the previous century, the prognostications of Christian preaching for an imminent ending of the world were never realised, the end became immanent; at the same time the tragic genre retained the terrors of the Apocalypse. So for Christianity the end loses its *final* finality and becomes inherent, everywhere carried inside. This is in contrast to what happens in tragedy, where *the end* still lies ahead, imminent. We know it is there, we expect it.¹⁹ Despite our expectation of their irrevocable doom, we still indulge in seeing with the innocent eyes of the tragic heroes. The secret recipe of the cathartic emotions of pity and fear in tragedy lies in this very fact: we know more than the protagonists (in the Ancient Greek tragedy, not in Elizabethan one), we share the author-god's omniscience of the plots and the subplots that pull the strings of the protagonists' fate, at the same time as they retain all their tragic dignity since they perceive themselves as free adventurers. A similar pattern works in detective fiction where the detective plays god as the agent of human freedom and intellect, the grand riddle-solver. Despite our awareness of the plot-structure (the detective's super-rationalisation will definitely bring solution) we still

indulge in the 'progressive striptease' of the mystery. We reach catharsis through the detective's eyes when everything matches into a hermeneutic pattern; the murderer is identified and punished, order is re-established. The detective is (in Oates's words) "the very emblem of our souls, a sort of mortal saviour" (354).

Spark comes to erase all cathartic emotions of both detective fiction and tragedy by approaching things *from the end*. Lise, while on the verge of dying, shatters the grandeur of tragic heroes/heroines. Death's immanence has been proclaimed earlier by her, as a "lack of an absence". At the very moment of her deliberate death, as the knife plunges into her throat she "screams, evidently perceiving how final is finality". This sounds like tautological nonsense, a macabre joke of the authorial narrator against our preconceptions about grand scenes of death, glorious endings in tragedy. In detective-code terms the final scene of the murder is upsetting too. This scene should have been 'over with' at the beginning; the victim is not supposed to make it till the end, threatening and active, in and out of the 'driver's seat'.

We, the readers, are and are not in charge of the text, sharing a similar fate with the author / narrator and the authorial surrogate, Lise. All in all, we are caught behind the mirror, in the paraxial realm, where we can see the paranoid, perverse reflection of the power in plot-making. We see Spark as a metafictionalist, 'laying bare' the power relations that were always 'there' in more traditional fictions (detective and tragic ones), but discreetly hidden, like God moving in mysterious ways. This has an oxymoronic effect on her plots. They are deeply, mockingly conventional from one angle – nothing has changed, this is how it always happens – and yet utterly different, since we are forced to see things from the end, which deprives us of the opportunity to treat the protagonists as ethical adventurers, emissaries of human freedom. That is, Lise is not in the process of finding out the limits of her powers, neither she nor we are in the dark, so that the tragic dignity of the traditional hero/ine and the glory of the detective are denied her. This is closely connected to the sense of stasis, the brevity of the text. There is a pervasive feeling of unfreedom, and a sort of euphoria, because we are in a way 'enlightened', we now see it all – which makes all the difference, and none.

Pity and fear give their place to cool meditation and sarcasm. Despite Lise's death, the narrative voice still goes on, proleptically describing the arrest of her murderer:

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. (*DS* 107)

Here there is a blending of the metafictional with the metaphysic. The sly allusions to God Almighty, and to theology (as opposed to literary theory) suggest that this self-conscious fiction merely mimics the actual shape of life (as-

suming that we see life from a religious point of view, with the world as god's book), so on that level too nothing has changed, we're still realists. Our enlightenment is precarious. We are all more or less caught in others' invisible plots, just as in detective novels. Women in particular are entangled in subtle power relations with the invisible strings of patriarchy pulling their fate. Men in Lise's world are sex-freaks, either Bill-like:

I haven't had my daily orgasm. It's an essential part of this particular variation of the diet, didn't I tell you? Many other macrobiotic variations have it as an essential part. (DS 94)

or Carlo-like:

He embraces her and kisses her mightily while she kicks him and tries to push him off, gurgling her protests. (DS 81)

Lise takes over the driver's seat three times, twice in order to escape a sexual attack and the last time in order to drive her unwilling murderer to the spot she has chosen:

She takes him to the car, lets go of his arm, gets into the driver's seat and waits while he walks round the front of the car and gets in beside her. Then she drives off with him at her side. (DS 102)

The victim takes over. In a world where lonely women are thought to be legitimate targets for assault, Lise takes over her own death, as an ultimate attempt to take hold of the strings that pull her fate. There are points where she sounds as if she had too little sense of the situation, as if she had lost control, such as when she seems to misinterpret the salesgirl's comment that the material of the dress doesn't stain:

'Do you think that I spill things on my clothes?' the customer shrieks. Do I look as if I don't eat properly? (DS 8)

In fact she has too much sense of the norm; she occupies the space for outcasts in society on purpose. The 'garish' effect of Lise's vivid clothes is the first step towards exposing society's stereotypes. Her way of dressing is incompatible with cultural standards:

Just as in former times, when prostitutes could be discerned by the brevity of their skirts, compared with the normal standard, so Lise in her knee-covering clothes at this moment looks curiously of the street-prostitute class beside the mini-skirted girls and their mothers whose knees at least can be seen. (DS 51)

She is outside the detective and social law in an attempt to subvert the codes that pervade our normalized lives. She is a *mise-en-abyme* of our imprisonment in the invisible workings of 'set' ideology.

Denis Porter, in *The Pursuit of Crime*, discusses the workings of the ideological apparatus of detective fiction, its 'silences and limits':

Whether consciously or not, the detective genre effectively remained silent about important aspects of crime by establishing narrow boundaries for its actions from the beginning ... a detective story always effectively begins after a crime has been committed. (122)

In *The Driver's Seat* the 'silences and limits' of the nature and the role of the detective, the criminal and the victim are brought into the spotlight. The mechanics of power and control in detective novels, that usually reflect those of society, are here grotesquely denaturalised. The investigation process, that in the detective formula "represents in its way the exercise of lucid power over an identified enemy of society" (Porter 125), is here turned on its head: the detective as agent of surveillance is replaced by an overpowering, active, criminal victim. Lise has dressed so vividly, we may adduce, in order to stage her victimization on purpose. The whole novella in a sense mocks the studies of victimology,²⁰ flourishing in the seventies, which focused on the role of the victims in their own victimization: victim precipitation. In other words, to put the blame on the victim when a criminal act occurs.

Victimology has been seen by analysts as an attempt of law to defend itself against the diffusion of crime. As a branch of criminology, it studies the criminal-victim relationships. In order for crime to be properly monitored, the victim has also to be clearly defined. Although there is a certain disagreement on the origins of the discipline,²¹ almost all literature on the subject acknowledges Hans von Hentig's work: *The Criminal and his Victim: Studies in the Sociobiology of Crime*, as the most well-organised study of the field in terms of subject matter and terminology. The field of victimology includes many subdivisions: victim compensation, support, restitution, precipitation. What we are interested in is the last category, which is the most closely connected to Lise's absurd comportment.

The precipitating victim was invented by von Hentig. Hentig was the first to clearly speak about "the contribution of the victim to the genesis of crime". He would reduce to an individual pathology any deviant behaviour towards crime:

In a sense the victim shapes and moulds the criminal.... Although it looks one-sided as far as the final outcome goes, it is not a totally unilateral form of relationships. They work upon each other profoundly and continually, even before the moment of disaster.... Often victims seem to be born. Often they are society made. (384-385)

Hentig represents the first generation victimology. The discursive and institutional apparatuses for such an approach started to emerge in the mid-40s, but the hermeneutic frame of victimology sprang from nineteenth-century biological determinism²² and reached its peak in the 1970s. In the late 1960s there is the emergence of second-generation victimology with Schafer who, paying tribute to Hentig, names his own study on the field *Victimology: The Victim and his Criminal*. He frequently quotes Hentig with awe²³ and re-enforces his predecessor's arguments as regards precipitation: "Doer and sufferer often appear in crime in a close interpersonal relationship where the victim maybe one of the determinants of the criminal action" (3). At the same time there is the emergence of a series of feminist counter-arguments against the above frame of thinking. Such arguments mainly come from the field of law and sociology. Feminism has challenged the victim-precipitation view of crime particularly with respect to rape.²⁴

For a novel to be considered 'feminist' in 1970, when *The Driver's Seat* was published, women characters needed to be presented as 'active' and be granted traditionally male roles.²⁵ When Spark's novella emerged within this atmosphere, it was treated as an anti-feminist text because of its heretic subject matter. As Patric Parrinder in his study *The Failure of Theory* suggests, "*The Driver's Seat*, with its 'liberated' heroine contriving her own sexual murder, seems like a slap in the face to feminist and anti-rape campaigners" (165). Today there are many critics (among them Ruth Whittaker and Judy Little) that have discerned subtle feminist insinuations behind Spark's manoeuvres and would disagree with such an approach, since Parrinder reads the novella as an exhibition of Spark's hostility against liberalism, a kind of "human weakness on her part". But if his comment is read in a different light, then the novella can be still seen as "a slap in the face to feminist campaigners", not because it contests their feminist presuppositions but because it proves to be much ahead of its time. It is fascinating to perceive how this novella undermines the social stereotypes that prevailed back then in a manner more innovative and inspired than the polemical, proto-feminist legal and social discourse of the 70s.

Lise is guilty three times over, if we follow the fictions of law, Spark seems to imply. Lise is a *deranged, excessive female* that rehearses with precision and devotion all the stigmatised behaviours (culminating with the overt provocation of her murderer). She is deliberately, consciously guilty. She seems to mock the fact that women are granted agency only as victims. Lise takes up this idea of victim precipitation and expands it to grotesque proportions. At that moment in history, then, when the author is proclaimed dead by Barthes and the precipitative victim is adopted by the law, Spark slyly enters the debate. In my view this novella can be seen to herald a different approach to agency. Spark sees in the detective genre a means by which an entangled woman may take flight, a means to re-establish agency that women have been denied. It is an ingenious attack on the version of women as either blameless victims (fairy tales, romantic fiction) or complicitous victims that participate in their own victimization.

The core idea in victimology is that victims are to blame for the rise of crime; they serve as a mechanism to disguise any malfunction of the 'innocent' social establishments. To find the victim guilty can be seen as an additional mechanism of control over the female body. Victimology stems from criminology, which is cited by Foucault as one of the guises of the new kinds of intricate supervision and surveillance.²⁶ It is an additional way to normalize and control sexuality.

Lise initiates her own murder in order to disturb the hermeneutic code of criminology. Her conduct is constantly misinterpreted by both the reader and the characters in the novel, a conduct that scorns our static way of perceiving the world, our comfortable complicity with all kinds of disciplinary processes. She disturbs normality in the visual and textual field and adopts the stance of excess as a means of self-defence. Her garish effect, her grotesque appearance poses a threat to society. In a way it can be said to carnivalise the notion of 'normalization' in society. As Foucault has argued, normalization requires 'individualization': "Within the homogeneity that is the rule, the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shadings of individual differences" (184). Disciplinary mechanisms measure individual behaviours in order to distinguish between the normal and the abnormal ones, the law-abiding or the deviant.

Lise registers her own individualisation *on purpose*, in order to expose the social tendency to constant labelling and categorisation. She inflates the code of individualisation with her garish dress. Her body is hence treated as deviant. That is how power is exercised. Society needs a deviant body maintained in a marginal space where it can be constantly visible. Caught in the panoptic machine of power, Lise's body is treated by others as abnormal, or even grotesque. But *she* is actually in control of the social inscriptions imposed on it. Toril Moi's most recent theoretical position (in *What is a Woman?*) that gives us back agency is anticipated by Lise. She stands for Moi's "doer behind the deed' an agent who actually makes choices" (6). Moi comes to discern agency, not mere social inscriptions, behind Butler's "gender performativity". A parallel argument derives from this novella as regards both social and textual dynamics. The 'doer behind the deed' in fictional terms denotes a distinct stance towards authorial power. Spark seems to disseminate narrative authority, only two years after the Author has been proclaimed Dead. The fictional underclass, the victimised take over in one way or another. They too have a share in the stock market of power. For Spark God is not dead, neither is the author. The author is still there in the text; so is the victim, so is patriarchy, so is death and tragedy. But their staging is perverse, their glory a disappearance.

Spark seems to imply that it has become impossible to spot the fictions that rule our lives because they have become our lives. In our age, all kinds of plots and plotters are thriving, making more and more fictions, which are not confined to any book. The greatest threat lies in the degeneration of our fictions into myths, dangerous myths. The fictions imposed on us make of us victims of a global anaesthetic: mass media, mass entertainment, mass innocence, mass vi-

ctimization, massacre of individual agency...

The novella ‘simulates’ mimicry of detective fiction. It simulates the rectilinear game of making out the world around us through the abductive reading of clues; it simulates our mode of understanding the world and at the same time it unpacks the game’s fictionality. It is, in its black-comic way, through its linguistic perversity, very amusing. It talks about victims and yet is stylish to a criminal extent. I hazard the parallelism that it serves as an antiheroic version of where writing comes from. To disturb ‘the driver’s seat’ is to undermine the mechanisms of power that rule our lives. To make the victim the agent of the narrative is to mock our stubborn attachment to the teleological fictions of “fear and pity, pity and fear”.

Notes

1. By Peter Kemp, in *Muriel Spark* (129), Norman Page, in *Muriel Spark*, (69), Ruth Whittaker, in *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (96-97) among others.
2. The term is Menakhem Perry’s. For Perry all readers advance through a text constructing and reconstructing hypotheses for the meaning of the work, but nowhere does this occur with such formulaic regularity as in a detective story.
3. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure Of the Text* (10).
4. We can spot similarities with Lise’s taking up of the authorial position as early as *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) and down to the abbess in *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974), Lister in *Not To Disturb* (1971), and Margaret in *Symposium* (1990). In Spark’s world the fictional underclass is granted – in greater or lesser proportions – ‘the driver’s seat’ of these narratives.
5. “And it is almost as if, satisfied that she has successfully registered the fact of her presence at the airport among the July thousands there, she has fulfilled a small item of a greater purpose” (*DS* 20). And further on in the novella: “She seems to display it [the book] deliberately, as if she is one of those spies one reads about who effect recognition by prearranged signals and who verify their contact with another agent by holding a certain paper in a special way” (*DS* 39).
6. Eisenzweig in his introduction takes this point further by saying that the only real person in detective fiction is dead, that is, the victim.
7. Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime* (121). Porter does not discuss Spark’s work, but he does make some interesting comments on the formulaic nature of detective fiction.
8. “[The waiter] too will give his small piece of evidence to the police on the following day, as will also the toilet attendant, trembling at the event which has touched upon her life without the asking.” (*DS* 87).
9. At some point Lise buys a paperback with a bright cover, which she carries with her. When she has finally got hold of her murderer, she addresses the porter of the hotel where the scene takes place: “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 whydunit 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.’” (*DS* 101). This book that Lise holds is a *mise-en-abyme* of the whole novella, something “embedded in the spatiotemporal world of the text, existing both as an object within and as a representation or mirror of it” (Jefferson 195).

10. Aristotle, in the *Metaphysics*, discusses the antithesis between 'potential' (that which can move or be moved) and 'actuality' (the existence of the thing which cannot move or be dislodged). In effect, Aristotle argues that at any given moment in history, there are a number of 'possibilities' for the next moment but only one of the possibilities can become actual, eliminating all the others. For him nothing in nature is purposeless. Everything moves towards a *telos*, a goal (teleology). Every kind of movement has its own entelechy towards the form it wishes to actualise. God is motionless but is himself the cause of motion and the purpose of the movement of the whole world.
11. Code 'disturbance' is different from code 'variation'. Possible mutations might occur within the genre, but the limits between the unconventional and the meta- (or anti-) detective fiction are clearly distinguished. Ruth Rendel's *The Judgement in Stone* is an instance of variation. It does hold an affinity with the *Driver's Seat* (it is a 'whydunit' of Eunice's crime, the murder appears at the end, time is manipulated [prolepsis], and we do not rely on the detective's reasoning [since he is the last to find out]). But there is teleology. The hermeneutic code is safe: order is re-established, the motives are clarified and the murderer is finally caught and will be punished. Nothing remains unresolved. Everything fits back into the good old jigsaw.
12. The term (coined by Peirce) accepts a conclusion on the grounds that it explains the available evidence by formulation of the best explanation possible: "Abduction makes its start from the facts without, at the outset, having any particular theory in view, though it is motivated by the feeling that a theory is needed to explain the surprising facts.... Abduction seeks a theory.... In abduction the consideration of facts suggests the hypothesis" (Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, qtd. from "You Know My Method: A Juxtaposition of Charles S. Peirce and Sherlock Holmes" by Thomas and Jean Sebeok (in Eco and Sebeok 25).
13. "'Naturalization' emphasizes the fact that the strange or deviant is brought within a discursive order and thus made to seem natural" (Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 137). Culler quotes Todorov (in *Communications 11*, 1968, 1-4), who claims that the *vraisemblable* is the mask which conceals the text's own laws and which we are supposed to take for a relation with reality.
14. Nina Auerbach claims that "The deposed Sheik who crosses her path in the Hilton seems a fleeting ghost of the evaporated masculine power of Gaskell and Brontë's grand Turk" (180). This is a witty remark but it does not encompass the range of the potential of the extract.
15. "So far as most critics are concerned, the crucial part played by perversion in literature is either unperceived, ignored, or disavowed (seen to be not seen), or recognised just sufficiently to make its overcoming one criterion of great literature" (Dollimore 103). The pre-sexological pervert, Dollimore argues, is either the religious heretic or the wayward woman.
16. John Irwin, *The Mystery to Solution: Poe, Borges and the Analytic Detective Story* (423). Here Irwin discusses Poe, but the comment seems more than fitting for Spark.
17. Metafiction has encompassed numerous versions of ending – the multiple ending, the false ending, the mock ending, the ending revealed at the beginning – in contrast to the open-ended novels flourishing in high modernism. Vladimir Nabokov, J. L. Borges, J. Fowles, J. Barth and of course Spark are some of the fiction-writers fascinated by and experimenting with different versions of an ending.
18. Many readers have spotted the affinity between detective fiction and the tragic genre. W. H. Auden in "The Guilty Vicarage" makes an explicit comparison between the detective

- story and Greek tragedy. He claims that in detective novels “as in the Aristotelian description of tragedy, there is Concealment (the innocent seems guilty and the guilty seems innocent) and Manifestation (the real guilt is brought to consciousness). There is also peripeteia, in this case not a reversal of fortune but a double reversal from apparent guilt to innocence and from apparent innocence to guilt” (147).
19. Barthes puts it elegantly: “Of all readings, that of tragedy is the most perverse. I take pleasure in hearing myself tell a story *whose end I know*: I know and I don’t know, I act toward myself as though I did not know: I know perfectly well Oedipus will be unmasked, that Danton will be guillotined but *all the same...*” (Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*).
 20. I owe the idea to connect Spark with victimology to Lorna Sage.
 21. Stephen Schafer informs us that Benjamin Mendelson claims he originated the idea in an article published a decade before Hentig’s study under the title “Method To Be Used by Counsel for the Defense in the Researches Made into the Personality of the Criminal,” *Revue de droit penal et de criminologie* (August-October 1937).
 22. For Hentig, the general classes of victims are: the young, the female, the old, the mentally defective and deranged (idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded, immigrants, minorities, dull normals). Physical traits and peculiarities of victims include excess and physical vigour, red hair, left-handedness, ugliness, deafness, blindness, strabism and stuttering.
 23. Schafer writes of Hentig: “His highly logical and vigorous speculations aided the revival of the victim’s importance in the understanding of criminal problems ... his pioneering role and its great impact cannot be denied” (34).
 24. There are many studies of the field. Carol Smart, for instance, in *Women, Crime and Criminology*, discusses the persistence of law in the 1970s in treating women as biologically determined to be victimised, especially in cases of rape.
 25. Such an example in detective fiction is P. D. James’s *An Unsuitable Job For A Woman*, where the reader meets Cordelia, the first orphaned, active, fearless, intelligent woman investigator.
 26. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault unravels the new agencies for observing the “delinquent bodies” of the sick, the insane, the criminal. The disciplinary spectacle of the scaffold has been replaced by the “analytical distribution” of power on deviant bodies, and the imposition of individualising disciplines. With the rise of a mode of binary division and branding (“mad / sane, dangerous / harmless, normal / abnormal”, 199) the deviant body is measured, supervised, and corrected.

Works Cited

Primary sources

- Spark, Muriel. *The Driver’s Seat*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974. First published 1970.
- James, P. D. *An Unsuitable Job For a Woman*. New York: Warner Books, 1972.
- Rendel, Ruth. *The Judgement in Stone*, London: Arrow Books, 1977.

Secondary sources

- Auden, W. H. “The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story, by an Addict.” *The Dyer’s Hand*. New York: Random House, 1962.
- Auerbach, Nina. *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.

- Augustine, St. *City of God*. Trans. Henry Betterson. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- _____. *S/Z*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1975.
- Bradbury, Malcolm. *Possibilities: Essays on the Stage of the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Bold, Alan. *Muriel Spark*. London and New York: Methuen, 1986.
- Cameron, Deborah, and Elizabeth Frazer. *The Lust to Kill: A Feminist Investigation of Sexual Murder*. Cambridge: Polity in association with Basil Blackwell, 1987.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975.
- Dollimore, Jonathan. *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.
- Eco, Umberto and Thomas Sebeok, eds. *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Eisenzweig, Uri, ed. *Autopsies du roman policier*. Here cited from the Greek translation, Athens: Agra Publications, 1986.
- Elias, Robert. *The Politics of Victimization: Victims, Victimology and Human Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Fatah, Ezzat, ed. *Towards a Critical Victimology*. London: St. Martin's Press, 1992.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991.
- Heath, Stephen. *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing*. London: Elek, 1972.
- Hentig, Hans von. *The Criminal and His Victim: Studies in the Sociobiology of Crime*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1948.
- Irwin, John. *The Mystery to Solution: Poe, Borges and the Analytic Detective Story*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.
- Jefferson, Ann. *The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- Kemp, Peter. *Muriel Spark*. London: Paul Elek, 1974.
- Kermode, Frank. "Sheerer Spark." *The Listener*, September 24, 1970.
- _____. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Lodge, David. *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature*. London: Edward Arnold, 1977.
- Moi, Toril. *What is a Woman? and other essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. *The Mysteries of Winterthurn*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1984.
- Page, Norman. *Muriel Spark*. London: St. Martin's Press, 1990.
- Parrinder, Patric. *The Failure of Theory: Essays on Criticism*. Sussex: Harvester Press, 1987.
- Perry, Menakhem. "Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates its Meaning." *Poetics Today* 1: 1-2, 1979.
- Philips, Deborah and Ian Haywood. *Brave New Causes: Women in British Postwar Fiction*. London: Leicester University Press, 1998.
- Porter, Dennis. *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981.
- Robbe-Grillet, Alain. *Towards a New Novel*. John Calder, 1970.
- Schafer, Stephen. *Victimology: The Victim and his Criminal*. Northwestern University, 1968.

- Smart, Carol. *Women, Crime and Criminology: A Feminist Critique*. London: Routledge, 1976.
- Spark, Muriel. "Interview with John Armstrong." *Guardian*, September 30, 1970.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Typology of Detective Fiction." In *Modern Criticism And Theory: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge. London and New York: Longman, 1988.
- Whittaker, Ruth. *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark*. London: Macmillan, 1982.

**Το θύμα και οι δια-πλοκές της: η λειτουργία του επικυρίαρχου θύματος
στο *The Driver's Seat* της Muriel Spark**
Μαρία Βάρα

Η Θέση του Οδηγού (*The Driver's Seat*, 1970) της Muriel Spark είναι μια αριστοτεχνικά δομημένη νουβέλα, η οποία επαναδιαπραγματεύεται με εξαιρετική οξυδέρκεια την κλασική τελεολογική γραμματική του αστυνομικού μυθιστορήματος, αν και έχει μόνο επιδερμικά συνδεθεί με αυτό από τις σύγχρονες κριτικές μελέτες. Τα παιχνίδια με το χρόνο της αφήγησης και η ανατροπή της ισορροπίας ανάμεσα σε θύτη, θύμα και ερευνητή της υπόθεσης (detective) μέσα στο κείμενο διαταράσσουν τη λανθάνουσα γραμμική λογική του αναγνώστη και τις κοινωνικές πρακτικές της κυρίαρχης ιδεολογίας.

Το παρόν άρθρο εστιάζει στη σύζευξη της νουβέλας της Spark με τις αφηγηματικές εφευρέσεις του nouveau roman, όπου γίνεται χρήση της αστηρής γεωμετρίας του αστυνομικού μυθιστορήματος με σκοπό να αποδομηθούν οι ερμηνευτικοί μηχανισμοί που καθιστούν τον detective υπερασπιστή και έμβλημα της κυρίαρχης ηθικής τάξης. *Η Θέση του Οδηγού* με τη Lise – μια εκκεντρική γυναίκα που έχοντας λεπτομερώς οργανώσει τη δολοφονία της, επιλέγει και καταδιώκει το δολοφόνο της – ως καταλύτη της αφήγησης, ασκεί επιπλέον έμμεση κριτική στις μελέτες της εγκληματολογίας στο ξεκίνημα της δεκαετίας του 1970, σχετικά με το μερίδιο ευθύνης που φέρει το θύμα μιας εγκληματικής πράξης. Σε ένα άλλο επίπεδο, ερευνάται η πρωτοποριακή λογική του κειμένου, που ενώ αρχικά απορρίφθηκε ως ακραίο και αντιφεμινιστικό, αποδείχθηκε πρωτοπόρο για την εποχή του, μια που σχετίζεται με τις φεμινιστικές θεωρίες τρίτης γενιάς.