ACTA UNIVERSITATIS LODZIENSIS
FOLIA LITTERARIA 36, 1994

Adam Sumera

MURIEL SPARK'S TWO EARLIEST NOVELS

Muriel Spark came to writing novels after having established herself as a critic and a poet. Especially the latter should be stressed here. Her first effort at fiction, *The Seraph and the Zambesi*, which won "The Observer" competition in 1951, remained the only one for several years. In an interview, she explained her reluctance: "I had resisted the novel because I thought it was a lazy way of writing poetry. For me, poetry was literature [...]"[1]. Then the publisher Alan Maclean of Macmillan, who was looking for new writers, suggested to her writing a novel. In the end, she agreed and wrote *The Comforters*. However, she brought much of her distrust against the novel writing into the texture of this book: "[...] before I could even write the novel, I had to write a novel about somebody writing the novel, to see if it was aesthetically valid, and if I could do it and live with myself – writing such a low thing as a novel"[2].

At the time of its publication in 1957 *The Comforters* was an interesting attempt to refresh the traditional way of writing a novel. There are two main plots in this book. One deals with the activities of Louisa Jepp, the venerable seventy-eight-year old grandmother who is the head of a gang smuggling diamonds from abroad, and the efforts of her grandson, Laurence Manders, to disclose her secrets. This could almost form a theme for one of Graham Greene's "entertainments". However, the story is full of intricate and entangled connections between the characters. Mrs Hogg, who used to be Laurence's nursery-governess, turns up as the person in charge of St Philumena's, the convent where Laurence's fiancée, Caroline Rose, has gone to; what is more, she is the wife of Mervyn Hogarth, one of Louisa

[1] I. Gillham, *Keeping it short*, "The Listener", 24 September 1970, p. 412.
[2] *Ibid.*

Jepp's accomplices. Mervyn's bigamous wife, Eleanor, is the mistress of the Baron, the smugglers' London connection. She is also the business partner of Laurence's uncle, Ernest. Evelyn Waugh states that "It is all rather absurd and, I presume, is meant to be absurd"[3].

Much more important seems to be the other plot, dealing with Caroline Rose and her awareness of being written into a novel. After coming back from St Philumena's, where she tried in vain to find some rest, Caroline is lying on the divan in her room and suddenly she hears the sound of a typewriter and a voice or rather several voices – "a recitative, a chanting in unison"[4] – commenting on her own thoughts. It does not take much observation on the part of the reader to see that what the voices say is one of the sentences of narration from the previous paragraph.

She tries to find the source of the voices, moving all pieces of furniture in her room, but without any result. Concerned about her sanity, Caroline goes to see Father Jerome, a Benedictine who has been her religious instructor for a long time. When talking with him, she happens to find the solution:

> 'But the typewriter and the voices – it is as if a writer on another plane of existence was writing a story about us.' As soon as she had said these words, Caroline knew that she had hit on the truth (63).

At that stage, the reader must become concerned whether the traditional conventions of fiction are being preserved in this novel. However, after just a few pages Muriel Spark decides that this hint might not be enough and proceeds with the following statement:

> At this point in the narrative, it might be as well to state that the characters in this novel are fictitious, and do not refer to any living persons whatsoever (69).

Sentences suggesting the fictional nature of what is presented to the reader are scattered throughout the narrative. When Caroline has to stay in hospital after her accident and thus does not take part in the action, the narrator remarks: "It is not so easy to dispense with Caroline Rose" (137). The description of Laurence's visit to Caroline's flat in order to collect some books for her is introduced by the following sentence: "A few weeks later the character called Laurence Manders was snooping around in Caroline Rose's flat" (202). Even more revealing is the passage in which Caroline comments on a fragment of the narration, and the narrator comments on her comment:

---

[3] E. Waugh, *Something Fresh*, "The Spectator", 22 February 1957, p. 256.

[4] M. Spark, *The Comforters*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1963, p. 43. Subsequent references to this book will be made in the text.

[...] *'As God made me,' she may have thought in justification, and in her newfound release.*

'Bad taste', Caroline commented. 'Revolting taste.' She had, in fact, 'picked up' a good deal of the preceding passage, all about Mrs Hogg and the breasts.

'Bad taste' – typical comment of Caroline Rose. Wasn't it she in the first place who had noticed with revulsion the transparent blouse of Mrs Hogg, that time at St Philumena's? It was Caroline herself who introduced into the story the question of Mrs Hogg's bosom (139).

Mrs Hogg herself is a peculiar creation. When she is not needed in the narrative she vanishes:

[...] as soon as Mrs Hogg stepped into he room she disappeared, she simply disappeared. She had no private life whatsoever. God knows where she went in her privacy (156).

This happens most strikingly when Helena and the Baron take her for a picnic in Helena's car. She sits in the back and soon falls asleep. Helena and Willi can hear her snoring. Then she stops snoring. And when Helena turns back looking for matches she cannot see her. She tells the Baron about it, they turn around and Mrs Hogg suddenly appears before their eyes as if after a black-out at the cinema. Similar to that is her apearance at Caroline's:

One morning Caroline had an unexpected caller. She had opened the door of her flat unguardedly, expecting the parcel post. For a second Caroline got the impression that nobody was there, but then immediately she saw the woman standing heavily in the doorway and recognized the indecent smile of Mrs Hogg just as she had last seen it at St Philumena's (181).

Her name itself "undermines the tendency of realistic fiction to assign apparently 'arbitrary' non-descriptive names to characters"[5]. The figurative meaning of the word „hog" is explained by a dictionary as "greedy, dirty, selfish person"[6]. And this, together with her fleshiness, also implied by Mrs Hogg's name, characterizes her perfectly. The method of using telling names will reappear in Muriel Spark's novels several times, most notably in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie.*

Caroline is working on a book entitled *Form in the Modern Novel* and, significantly, has troubles with the chapter on realism. When she realizes that she is being written into a novel she tries to use her skills of a literary critic to analyze her own and Laurence's situation:

'From my point of view it's clear that you are getting these ideas into your head through the influence of a novelist who is contriving some phoney plot. I can see clearly that your mind is working under the pressure of someone else's necessity, and under the suggestive power of some irresponsible writer you are allowing yourself to become an amateur sleuth in a cheap mystery piece.'

[5] P. Waugh, *Metafiction*, Methuen, London–New York 1985, p. 55.

[6] A. S. Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977.

> 'How do you know the plot is phoney?' he said, which was rather sweet of him.
> 'I haven't been studying novels for three years without knowing some of the technical tricks. In this case it seems to me there's an attempt being made to organize our lives into a convenient slick plot' (103–104).

She uses her professional knowledge to look at the events around them and their sequence as if they were elements of a plot. When most of the problems of the people she knows have found their solutions she is able to predict that "the book" is nearing the end.

After all this experience she finishes her book on the novel and decides to write a novel herself. It is to be about "characters in a novel" (202); from the notes Laurence finds in her flat it turns out that she is writing a novel about all the characters appearing in *The Comforters*. Laurence is now aware of being a character in her book and he writes a letter protesting against it:

> I will tell you what I think of your notes:
> (1) You misrepresent all of us.
> (2) Obviously you are the martyr-figure. 'Martyrdom by misunderstanding.' But actually you yourself understand nobody, for instance the Baron, my father, myself, we are martyred by your misunderstanding.
> (3) I love you. I think you are hopelessly selfish.
> (4) I dislike being a character in your novel. How is it all going to end? (203).

However, he cannot help it: in the end, he destroys the letter before sending it to Caroline and scatters the small pieces of it into the wind but "he did not then foresee his later wonder, with a curious rejoicing, how the letter had got into the book" (204).

When Edwin suggests to Caroline: "Make it a straight old-fashioned story, no modern mystifications. End with the death of the villain and the marriage of the heroine," she answers, "Yes, it would end that way" (202). As it is exactly the way in which *The Comforters* ends – with Mrs Hogg's death and Louisa Jepp's marriage – it can be assumed that she is going to write a book very similar to *The Comforters* or – although this would be rather inconsistent with some fragments of the text[7] – *The Comforters* itself.

Still, there is more to it than just a play with realism and fiction. Caroline is opposed to being involved in the mysterious writer's plot for religious reasons:

> 'I refuse to have my thoughts and actions controlled by some unknown, possibly sinister being. I intend to subject him to reason. I happen to be a Christian' (105).

And she continues:

> 'I won't be involved in this fictional plot if I can help it. In fact, I'd like to spoil it. If I had my way I'd hold up the action of the novel. It's a duty' (105).

[7] Cf. e.g. the fragment quoted above in which the narrator is definitely outside Caroline's mind ("She had, in fact, 'picked up' a good deal of the preceding passage [...]").

Caroline holds a position that will be Muriel Spark's own in many of her novels. No man is allowed to usurp the right of God and to manipulate lives of other people (we should not be misled by the fact that Caroline is just a character in a book – for her, her own life is **real**[8].

This motif is also developed in the person of Mrs Hogg. She is morally guilty of trying to influence other people's lives by bullying them and by blackmail. Her death in the muddy waters of the river can be treated as a symbolic act of justice.

Religion is an important theme in this, as in several other of Mrs Spark's books. The religious character of *The Comforters* is already revealed in its title. It is an allusion to the Book of Job, the part of the Bible that seems to be of great importance to Muriel Spark and which was to form the basis of one of her latest novels, *The Only Problem*. In the Book of Job, Job's comforters' attempts to comfort him are in vain because they cannot understand him; closed in their solipsistic world, they are not able to see his problems from his point of view. Similarly, Caroline has to face her trial alone. The Baron supposes that she is mad; Laurence wants to record the voices using a tape-recorder. They cannot accept the possibility which she expresses: "This sound might have another sort of existence and still be real" (64). It is only on her own that she manages to cope with her problem and to solve it succesfully[9].

The attitude to Catholicism taken by Mrs Spark's Catholic characters, however, is not, as one would expect in the writings of a convert, unequivocally positive. For Caroline, who seems to be closest to the author's point of view in this respect, it is an ordeal:

> Caroline thought, 'The demands of the Christian religion are exorbitant, they are outrageous. Christians who don't realize that from the start are not faithful. They are dishonest; their teachers are talking in their sleep. "Love one another [...] brethren, beloved [...] your brother, neighbours, love, love, love" – do they know what they are saying?' (39).

Still, she is convinced that there is no alternative to her faith: "Ernest always agreed with Caroline that the True Church was awful, though unfortunately, one couldn't deny, true" (81). This "uncomfortable allegiance to the Roman Catholic faith"[10] goes together with critical and often ironical

[8] After the accident, her leg has caused Caroline a lot of pain, and it is when the Baron visits her in hospital that she tells him: "this physical pain convinces me that I'm not wholly a fictional character. I have independent life" (160).

[9] One is also reminded of other comforters, those of Silas Marner's, who, full of good intentions as they were, could not grasp his situation and thus were not able really to help him. Cf. G. Eliot, *Silas Marner*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1984, pp. 130–140.

[10] R. Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark*, Macmillan, London–Basingstoke 1982, p. 27.

attitude to the fellow Catholics, as in the case of the convert met by Caroline at St Philumena's:

> 'The wonderful thing about being a Catholic is that it makes life so easy. Everything easy for salvation and you can have a happy life. All the little things that the Protestants hate, like the statues and the medals, they all help us to have a happy life.' He finished there, as if he had filled up the required page of his school exercise book, and need state no more; he lay back in his chair, wiped his glasses, crossed his legs (40).

It should also be remembered that Mrs Hogg, the black character of the novel, is a Catholic. Caroline calls her "a frightful advertisement for the Church" (71).

Unexpected, too, is the author's attitude towards the miraculous healing of Hogarth's crippled son. In order to cover up the actual aim of their smuggling trips, father and son, "not religious at all" (174), pretend every time that they are pilgrims going to some shrine of the Virgin Mary. In case they are watched, they really visit the places, although without any religious purpose. And then, ironically, after a visit to an Alpine shrine, Andrew recovers from his invalidity. In the way it is presented it looks like a miracle by accident – or perhaps by mistake[11].

As it is the case with most first novels, *The Comforters* does not yet fully display its author's talent. However, although often in an immature form, it contains many elements that will reappear in her later novels.

Her ear for dialogue and her interest in reproducing little idiosyncrasies of speech are shown in what the Baron says:

> 'I am interested, for instance, in relig-ion, poetr-ay, psycholog-ay, theosoph-ay, the occult, and of course demonolog-ay and diabolism, but I participate in none of them, practise none' (157).

There are a few instances of the Sparkian tone, light humour resulting from a juxtaposition of the narration and the dialogue:

> When he was small she used to tell Laurence 'Don't just answer "Yes"; say "Yes, certainly", that's how Queen Mary always answers.'
> 'How do you know that, Grandmother?'
> 'A person told me.'
> 'Are you sure the person was telling the truth?'
> 'Oh yes, certainly' (41).

Already in this book we can see that she is fond of paradoxes: "It was a humiliating thought, which in turn was good for the soul" (198). There is also an example of using the technique which she was to exploit fully in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. Some time after their accident Laurence asks Caroline:

[11] The healing removes the pretext for the Hogarths' travels abroad. Thus it could also be seen as a paradoxical way of thwarting their criminal plans.

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

Here Mrs Spark uses a flashback to describe another thing that had surprised him about Caroline – her changing her mind twice about their journey to Lausanne. After this interruption which takes three pages she comes back to the dialogue she has broken off. She does it in a way characteristic of her style of writing:

> 'How is your book going?' and she, her mind brooding elsewhere, answered, 'I think it is nearing the end.'
> 'Really? You were saying only the other day that you still had a lot to write' (170).

The liking for repetition, but repetition with slight variations, and the freedom with which she treats her narrative, breaking off and resuming its threads, were to become dominant features of her writing, especially in its earlier phase.

Caroline Rose has many autobiographical features, as do several other characters in Muriel Spark's later works, most notably in *Loitering with Intent*. A convert to Catholicism, a critic and a writer who has spent some time in Africa, she goes through a mental crisis as Mrs Spark herself did not long before writing this book. Some scenes, e.g. that of milk and biscuits being offered to Caroline in the convent by Father Jerome every time she visits him, seem to have been drawn directly from Mrs Spark's personal experience[12].

However, although it is not difficult to find in *The Comforters* elements taken from Mrs Spark's own life, one should be careful not to exaggerate the autobiographical character of the book. It has been stressed several times in the novel that the persons appearing in the story exert an influence on the narrative[13]. This is the topic Evelyn Waugh comments upon in his review of *The Comforters*, drawing probably also from his own experience:

> Every novelist, good or bad, must know the odd stages of intimacy and independence in which he deals with his 'creations' [...]. Sometimes he is in control, forcing his characters into situation convenient for his theme. Sometimes the characters assume responsibility and he finds himself following them anxious and bewildered many paces behind[14].

Although in *The Comforters* Caroline seems to have at least some free will and by her behaviour manages to change the plot created by the "author", it

[12] Cf. D. Stanford, *Muriel Spark*, Centaur Press Ltd., Fontwell 1963.

[13] Besides the examples already quoted, the following seems rather important. It is a comment on the relation between Caroline and the novel: "Of her constant influence on its course she remained unaware [...]" (181).

[14] P. Waugh, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

would be misleading to extend this and apply it to the relation of Mrs Spark to her characters. She expressly denies it:

> [...] I don't understand about writers who tell you that the characters take over, develop a will of their own. I know the whole time that I'm making them up and I have to go on making up what they do [...][15]

The Comforters has not been an easy book for critics. An example can be Evelyn Waugh, who treated it as a case-history of insanity and produced a psychological explanation of the mysterious voices:

> [...] the narrator, herself an important character in the story, goes off her head. The area of her mind which is composing the novel becomes separated from the area which is participating in it, so that, hallucinated, she believes that she is observant of, observed by, and in some degree under the control of, an unknown second person. In fact she is in the relation to herself of a fictitious character to a story-teller[16].

It is an interesting interpretation, but it disregards the hints at the fictitious character of all events presented in the novel. Little wonder that, having gone so far in his creative reading of the novel, he had to admit: "I can't think [...] why it is called *The Comforters*"[17].

The general reaction of critics to the book was positive. *The Comforters* was described as "a funny, intricate exercise in plot that owes something to the masterly and malevolent mechanisms of Wilkie Collins"[18]. It was said to be "an extremely sophisticated piece of metaphysical writing"[19] displaying "a degree of polish not customarily found in an initial effort"[20]. Only the "Times Literary Supplement" criticized it as an "already heady brew" perplexingly mixed with a "strong dose of Roman Catholicism"[21].

Muriel Spark's second novel, *Robinson*, describes three months in the lives of three survivors of an aeroplane crash and the resident of an Atlantic island who lives there with a small boy, his adopted child. On the surface, it seems to be a parody of two literary genres of long established tradition.

The title of the novel, which is the name of one of the characters, and the fact that he leads a solitary life on an island, bring to mind an immediate association with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Cruose* and other books written in imitation of it. This impression is strengthened by other elements: the

---

[15] M. Holland, *The Prime of Muriel Spark*, "The Observer Magazine", 17 October 1965, p. 10.

[16] P. Waugh, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] W. Balliett, *Moses in the Old Brit'n*, "The New Yorker", 18 January 1958, p. 93.

[19] F. Hope, *Joking in earnest*, "The Observer", 28 April 1963, p. 26.

[20] M. Levin, *Spritely Tale*, "Saturday Review", 31 August 1957, p. 26.

[21] "Times Literary Supplement", 22 February 1957, p. 109.

small boy, Miguel, can be seen as a variation of Man Friday; for most part of her stay on the island, January Marlow, one of the survivors who is also the narrator, keeps a journal in which she notes all important events taking place around her; there is a map of the island enclosed with the text of the novel which helps to follow the adventures described in the book; Robinson and Jimmie save some things from the wrecked plane as Defoe's character did from the wrecked ship. One could even go so far as to mention that Robinson keeps a goat which supplies him and Miguel, and afterwards also the survivors, with milk.

However, Robinson is not a castaway; he has himself chosen the life on the island: he prefers being alone to living in a society and his motto is *Nunquam minus solus quam cum solus*. He does not have to rely on the things he has saved from the wreck; he has a large store of tinned food renewed every year by the pomegranate men. Although the soil is fertile, he does not grow any of his food. The only plant he chose to cultivate was mustard – but even this he did only "for the effect"[22]. There is a plantation of pomegranates, but Robinson does not pick the fruit himself, he leaves it to the men who come especially for this purpose every year in August. Thus he resembles his namesake from Defoe's novel only seemingly; in fact, he is just the opposite of him.

Another genre that is parodied in *Robinson* is the detective story. After Robinson's mysterious disappearance the reader is presented with a scene that suggests a fight or even a murder:

> Tom Wells came to meet us. He held out towards us a heavy corduroy jacket of a faded tawny colour, which I recognized as one of Robinson's which he would sometimes wear when the weather turned cold, or he went out of doors at night [...].
>
> We went down to the mustard field, and there, even before Miguel ran to point out the spot where the coat had been found, I saw the dark trampled patches among the glaring yellow plants. There was blood on the ground, still slightly sticky. When we came to look closer, there seemed to be the marks of blood all round about. There was also a complete pathway of trodden-down plants splattered with blood, leading out of the field from the spot where the coat had been found. Following this newly-beaten track, towards the mountain path, we found a green silk neck square which was Jimmie's property. This was also soaked in blood, not yet dry [...].
>
> Tom Wells said, 'There's something fishy about all this. Someone wounded had been dragged through the field, you realize' (101–102).

There are more blood-stained articles forming a trail leading to the volcano called the Furnace. Quite close to it are Robinson's clothes and underclothes, also covered with blood.

[22] M. Spark, *Robinson*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1964, p. 32. Subsequent references to this book will be made in the text.

The atmosphere of suspense is created. All evidence seems to suggest that Robinson has been killed and that there is nobody else on the island who could have done it but the three survivors. Thus January suspects alternately Tom Wells and Jimmie Waterford. Wells wants the whole affair to be covered up and suggests that January and Jimmie should sign a statement that Robinson's death was due to an accident. When January declines to do it he does not hesitate to threaten her with a gun. However, in the end Robinson turns up and explains that he has fabricated all the traces for the survivors to believe him dead and has gone to live alone in a part of the island which can be reached only from the sea and which thus has not been searched by January, Jimmie and Tom. In this way, all the suspense is deflated.

Some critics have pointed out another similarity – to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*[23]. Finding themselves on a desert island, the characters have to face continually their fellow survivors. Their behaviour is kept under control by Robinson; however, when he, fed up with incessant petty conflicts, withdraws, feigning his own death, the two other men show fully their characters: Tom Wells his inclination to blackmail and violence, Jimmie Waterford his tendency to compromise.

Still, there are elements in the novel which can justify a more complex reading of this book. The island is shaped like a man and its various parts are called like parts of human body. There is the North Leg and the West Leg, the North Arm and the South Arm, and the Headlands. The novel starts with an ambiguous sentence:

> If you ask me how I remember the island, what it was like to be stranded there by misadventure for nearly three months, I would answer that it was a time and landscape of the mind if I did not have the visible signs to summon its materiality: my journal, the cat, the newspaper cuttings, the curiosity of my friends: and my sisters – how they always look at me, I think, as one returned from the dead (7).

The phrase "landscape of the mind" may be understood as describing imaginary events. It may, however, also imply that the whole novel is to be treated as a psychological allegory dealing with the working of January's mind. In the ending of the book this phrase reappears:

> In a sense I had already come to think of the island as a place of the mind [...].
> It is now, indeed, an apocryphal island. It may be a trick of the mind to sink one's past fear and exasperation in the waters of memory: it may be a truth of the mind (174–175).

The last sentence is connected with the fact that after the return of the survivors the island begins to sink and is supposed to disappear completely in a short time.

---

[23] Cf. V. B. Richmond, *Muriel Spark*, Ungar, New York 1984, p. 38.

Thus, the events on the island can be interpreted as acting out January's inner problems, the Furnace and the tunnels and her attraction to them as an expression of the dark forces of her subconsciousness, her return home as settling her inner conflicts.

The psychological reading, supported by many critics[24], is pushed to extremes by Carol B. Ohmann[25]. In this interpretation, the plane crash is seen as an expression of the split of January's personality. The characters appearing in the novel are just various sides of her personality. The stern Robinson is her superego, the weak Jimmie her ego, the sensual Wells her id. Robinson's disappearance is thus the death of the superego, which rsults in a dangerous attempt at domination by the id. When Robinson returns, the order is restored.

Ohmann finds support for this Freudian reading in an interpretation of the character's names. Robinson's first name, Miles, in its original Latin meaning – soldier – suggests his sternness, austerity, disposition to command. "Wells" hints at the sources of hidden or unconscious energy. The juxtaposition of "water" and "ford" in Jimmie Waterford's name suggests compromise; this is reinforced by his pattern of speech, a mixture of archaisms and slang, which he has acquired "first from a Swiss uncle, using Shakespeare and some seventeenth-century poets as textbooks, and Fowler's *Modern English Usage* as a guide, and secondly from contact with Allied forces during the war" (25). January Marlow's name is also meaningful. The name January comes from the god Janus, who showed two faces. And "Marlow" "carries Conradian associations that also suggest the possibility of a self divided"[26].

The book can also be read as a religious allegory, the three men functioning as "possible varieties of religious experience"[27]. Wells, with his magic charms, represents a primitive response to reality. Robinson, a former student for the priesthood who left the Church "on account of what he considered its superstitious character" (77) and later wrote a book entitled *The Dangers of Marian Doctrine*, is Wells's opposite. Remaining a Catholic, he is strictly against any material symbol of faith. Jimmie Waterford stands for the middle way, being a conventional Christian. January wavers in her attitude to them, especially to Wells and Robinson, who represent two extreme viewpoints. Her attraction-repulsion attitude to them is further developed by the fact that they resemble her two brothers-in-law, whom she dislikes: Wells has some features of Curly Lonsdale, and Robinson is in some respects similar to Ian Brodie.

[24] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 39–40.

[25] C. B. Ohmann, *Muriel Spark's Robinson*, "Critique" 1965, Vol. 5, p. 70–84.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 71.

[27] K. Malkoff, *Muriel Spark*, Columbia Essays on Modern Writers, No. 36, Columbia University Press, New York–London 1968, p. 13.

Many contemporary British writers are glad to talk about the "message" of their fiction, about what Henry James called "the figure in the carpet". Some of them, as for example David Lodge or Malcolm Bradbury, go so far as to try to be their own critics, supplying afterwords in which they give comment on, and even a kind of analysis of, their own novels[28]. Mrs Spark, however, does not belong to them. Although she has given quite a number of interviews, she has tended rather to stick to more general statements, not going into details of her particular works. Thus, a critic of her fiction has to rely in his analysis mostly on the text of her novels and short stories, not having much help in the form of her personal comments. In this situation, all analyses should be rather cautious.

Taken separately, both the Freudian reading and the interpretation of *Robinson* as a religious allegory seem to be too schematic and do not account for all the elements of the novel. Hints at allegory are undoubtedly present in the texture of the book but they must be treated very carefully.

The analysis of the novel is made still more difficult by the existence of some elements that are stressed by the author but do not form any coherent pattern. One of them is the use of the number three: before the crash, January was to write a book about islands "in a series which included books about threes of everything. Three rivers, three lakes, and threes of mountains, courtesans, battles, poets, old country houses. I was supposed to be doing Three islands. Two of my chosen islands I already knew well: Zanzibar and Tiree. I had thought one of the Azores would complete an attractive trio. Someone else, now, has written the book on Three Islands. I believe someone has added to the series Three Men in My Life" (75). The last one could be written by January: during her stay on the island she has to deal with three men. There are three survivors and three tunnels on the island. The meaning of it is obsolete[29].

Another "loose end" is the fact that all four characters' names are at the same time geographical names. This leads to misunderstandings:

> 'Where am I?'
> 'Robinson', he said.
> '*Where?*'
> 'Robinson.'
> He was short and square, with a brown face and greyish curly hair.
> 'Robinson,' he repeated. 'In the North Atlantic Ocean. How do you feel'?
> 'Who are you?'

[28] Cf. e.g. D. Lodge, *Out of the Shelter*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1985; id., *Ginger, You're Barmy*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1982; M. Bradbury, *Eating People Is Wrong*, Arena, London 1985.

[29] A connection with the Holy Trinity, an obvious association with the number three, seems out of place here.

'Robinson,' he said. 'How do you feel?'
'*Who?*'
'Robinson' (10).

The same happens when Robinson starts asking January:

'What is your name?' he said.
'January Marlow.'
'Think,' he said. 'Try to think.'
'Think of what?'
'Your name.'
'January Marlow,' I said, and placed the mug of soup on the floor beside me.
He lifted the mug and replaced it in my right hand.
'Sip it, and meanwhile think. You have told me the month and place of your birth. What is your name?' (11–12).

Jimmie's name is mistaken, too:

Robinson said: 'You must have heard it from Waterford.'
'I've never been to Waterford' (20).

There is no reference to Wells's name but the connection is obvious. The reason for this choice of names is not clear. As a joke, it is rather cheap. However, it is difficult to fit it into the pattern of a more complex reading of the book.

The novel has some truly funny passages. The humour results mostly from Jimmie's peculiar way of speaking, as in this example:

'I did see this chappie at the airport,' said Jimmie, 'and in the moment I behold him I perceive he is not a superior type of bugger. I say to myself, Lo! this one is not a gentleman' (28).

Sometimes the contemporary colloquialisms are missing and the fun is created just by the out-of-place choice of words, bookish or archaic:

'mayhaps they now shall cease to write,' said Jimmie, 'when they hear of your bad luck which has befallen' (56).

Often he is unconsciously pompous:

'Should you desire to possess some of the volumes around us, please to make a choice [...]. Please to retain those which you fancy' (125).

His imperfect knowledge of English is also the source of a play on words:

'That's sweet of you, honey,' said Wells.
'Is not to call Miss January honey,' said Jimmie, 'as if she was a trumpet, and any –'
'You mean strumpet,' I said (62).

Another device exploited by Muriel Spark is the eighteenth-century typography, with the similarity between letters s and f. When January tries to read one of Robinson's novels, she cannot recognize the s's properly:

> Now the agonies which affected the mind of Sophia rather augmented than impaired her beauty; for her tears added brightnefs to her eyes, and her breafts rofe higher with her fighs. Indeed, no one hath feen beauty in its highest luftre, who hath never feen it in diftrefs [...]. (152).

There is also an instance of more abstract humour. After January's return home, her sister Julia says to her: " 'We would have had a lot of business trouble with your affairs. I've had a lot of trouble with Agnes. It was foolish of you to die intestate. You'd better make a will in case it happens again' " (169).

The whole book is narrated as a reminiscence of January, who relates the events chronologically. There are several flashbacks, presenting her sisters and brothers-in-law. There is also one particular flashback concerning the life on the island. It describes January and Jimmie's expedition over the mountain. The method used here closely resembles that employed in *The Comforters* and discussed above. Again the flashback is bordered by two similar, only slightly varied passages:

> 'Keep up your journal,' he said. 'It will take your mind off Jimmie.'
>
> 'I don't see that I want to keep my mind off Jimmie,' I said.
>
> Of course, working over this conversation later, in my fury, I regretted not having replied, 'You are insolent', or something like that (64).
>
> It was the afternoon of the next day that I crossed the mountain with Robinson to procure mineral water for the goat. Jimmie had wanted to accompany us but Robinson had found an emergency to prevent him: dampness in the storehouse. All the packages had to be moved, and the piping behind one of the walls replaced.
>
> 'Keep up your journal; it will keep your mind off Jimmie.'
>
> To which, of course, I should have replied, 'You are insolent.'
>
> And while I answered, 'I don't see that I want to keep my mind off Jimmie', I was wondering how best, during the weeks remaining to me on the island, to preserve some freedom from Robinson's interference in the matter of Jimmie, while retaining his protection from Wells (72).

Another interesting example of using the technique of repetition is starting two passages with the same phrase: " 'Let's get out of this' ". First time the sentence is spoken by January to Jimmie when they start on the excursion mentioned above, second time she says it to her son Brian before they go to France for a couple of days. Both times she tries to escape from the attempts at directing her life – by Robinson and Ian Brodie, respectively – and both times she fails. The use of the same phrase to introduce those passages creates still another link between Robinson and Brodie.

Like Caroline Rose in *The Comforters*, January Marlow has some features in common with Muriel Spark. Like her, she is a "poet, critic and general articulator of ideas" (23). She is also a convert to Catholicism. However, this time Mrs Spark not only uses the autobiographical material to help herself in creating the character, but includes some jokes in which

the fun results from allusions to her private life. Thus "Muriel the Marvel with her X-ray eyes" (61), mentioned in an advertisement in Tom Wells's magazine "Your Future", is no doubt Mrs Spark herself; "Brother Derek" from the next ad is presumably Derek Stanford, with whom she has collaborated for some time. Peter Kemp goes so far as to suggest that the title itself is a private joke, Mrs Spark having a son named Robin[30].

Robinson was Muriel Spark's first, and for a long time the only novel narrated in the first person (until *Loitering with Intent*). This method of narration did not seem to work. Harold W. Schneider sees the reason for this failure in the fact that January "is not merely the onlooker – she is at the center of the action. We are therefore diverted from our concern for the moral disintegration of the characters to concern for the heroine"[31]. Unlike in most of her other novels, the setting of *Robinson* is abstract – a desert island in the Atlantic. There is only a small group of characters, which is Mrs Spark's favourite, but their choice is arbitrary and rather forced, whereas in other novels it ususally results from some common features shared by the personae[32]. Its insistence on allegorical elements is also unique in Mrs Spark's works. Still, there is one sentence in *Robinson* that foreshadows one of Muriel Spark's later works. When January observes Miguel playing on the beach and the boy suddenly disappears, she reflects: "For a moment I thought perhaps they had never existed, that Robinson and his household were a dead woman's dream, that I was indeed dead as my family believed and the newspapers had by now reported" (36). The idea of the whole story being a dead woman's – or rather a dead couple's – dream was to be the starting point for *The Hothouse by the East River*.

Institute of English Studies
University of Łódź

Adam Sumera

DWIE WCZESNE POWIEŚCI MURIEL SPARK

Artykuł omawia powieści *The Comforters* i *Robinson*, zajmując się zarówno ich treścią, jak i aspektami formalnymi. Dużo uwagi poświęcono motywom katolickim. W analizie uwzględniono również odniesienia do późniejszych utworów Muriel Spark.

[30] P. Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, Elek, London 1974, p. 37.

[31] H. W. Schneider, *A Writer in Her Prime: The Fiction of Muriel Spark*, "Critique" 1962, Vol. 5, p. 38.

[32] Cf. P. Kemp, *op. cit.*, p. 36.