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SPECTRAL REALITY: MURIEL SPARK'S *THE HOTHOUSE BY THE EAST RIVER*

Summary

The essay deals with the concept of the supernatural in Muriel Spark's novel *The Hothouse by the East River*, in which all the major characters appear to be dead, while leading apparently comfortable lives. The essay will examine Spark's paradigm of the mundane supernatural, that is, representation of absurd and impossible as quotidian elements of life. The enigma of the plot (the strange way in which Elsa's shadow falls without obeying the rules of physics) is not solved by the end of the novel, but rather by-stepped by revealing a grander mystery, that of her otherworldly status. This peculiarity is of high importance for Spark, who is not interested in solution, but in the way people (or characters, to be more precise) react to mystery and attempt – often in vain – to solve it. But Spark's novel also pushes the reader to realize that what s/he may assume to be irrelevant from the perspective of eternity – namely, our mundanely absurd life and the imperfect memory that tries to contain it – still very much matter and may not be dismissed or reduced to a mere footnote to the main text of divine design.

Key words: Muriel Spark, postmodernism, supernatural, narrative, memory, absurd, ghost story.

Spark's riddles

Muriel Spark's fictions are usually examined through the prism of religion, since it was after her conversion to Catholicism that she began writing novels. Indeed, Catholic characters frequently appear in her texts, and in their unlikely absence – themes which are strongly marked as issues central to religious faith. Yet, it is all too often that the mysterious otherness, the uncanny quality and the absurd resolutions of her fictions are summarily dismissed as games of religious conventions. Spark's particular attraction lies in her ability to treat serious issues irreverently, constructing conventions which resemble those of philosophical or mystical discourse only to destabilize them, reveal their inherent contradictions and create a particularly abstract and unlikely plots, with resolutions that, while providing appropriate and almost traditional closure, leave far too many things suspended and unresolved. As Judy Little writes,

Spark's comic novels are traditional in that they employ the liminal patterns of inversion, life crisis, or festivity, but these patterns are used in massively concentrated doses, and the novels do not finally circle back to an affirmation of the old order – the old order scrutinized and renewed but still the old order. The characters, who have often adventurously and deliberately

set out on some daring psychological pilgrimage, tend to remain in awkward exile from themselves. (Little 1983, p. 99)

Spark thus investigates the mechanisms which are shared by faith, ideology and any other system which leans upon dogmatic thinking or mystical inspiration. Her conclusions are rarely made evident to the reader: it is rather the process of investigation that compels her, again and again becoming the object of her study. This essay will examine one novel in which this is especially clear: *The Hothouse by the East River*, a strange, though very slim novel, almost a novella, with – as usual – an unlikely set of characters, very Sparkian, overdrawn, almost caricatural – since Spark’s sensibility is “predominantly caricatural” (Gregson 2005, p. 15). At the same time, these figures remain somehow underexplored, underdeveloped, mere outlines to be filled out by our interpretations. And – as always – Spark’s characters are wedged into a narrow and confining reality, exiled from themselves: “Muriel Spark shows her characters trapped in structures of meaning which are entirely not of their own making. Their resultant transformation into puppets works both self-reflexively and ontologically” (Gregson 2008, p.7).

Evil in Spark’s novels is never supernatural, but always human. As Baldanza notes, “in no case is the operation of supernatural forces directly responsible for evil consequences, although criminals may use the other people’s faith in the occult for their own nefarious purposes” (Baldanza 1965, p. 193). But it is possible to go even farther and claim that even the element of the otherworldly is somehow secularized and made to appear riddled with very human faults and failings, and though not exactly banal, decidedly within the reach of reason.

In fact, Spark’s matter-of-fact approach to the supernatural is one of the most unsettling features of her novels. Her mediums are mostly clever manipulators, though they often have an uncanny ability to connect to weird powers; her ghosts are disarmingly corporeal and there is nothing extraordinary in their bland and rather disappointingly mundane behavior. The fact that people get calls from Death (in *Memento Mori*) is, of course, disquieting, especially to those who receive the calls, but when Death has such a humanly wicked sense of humor, its stature gets dramatically reduced to a far less intimidating size. Spark works with the occult or the supernatural in a way which, while celebrating their weirdness, yet dismisses the terror they possess when they are treated as belonging to the ultimately mysterious, unknowable realm. She coolly allows that strange situations happen – and not infrequently, therefore all one can do is submit the seemingly incredible to the examination of reason. One of Spark’s early critics wrote that “in the application of reason to a fictional situation lies what is perhaps Mrs. Spark’s greatest weakness as a writer” (Baldanza 1965, p. 192). Yet, this is precisely the feature that makes Spark’s fiction so unsettling and unpredictable: the collision between the supernatural element and completely rational framework within

which it is made to function. Through such treatment, Spark makes the supernatural appear mundane; and then enjoys the absurdity of the resulting paradox. And this seems to be the entire purpose of applying reason to a mystery: to enjoy the process of investigation which will remain inconclusive.

A maniac's memory and a schizophrenic's dream

We may attempt to summarize the rudiments of the plot of *The Hothouse by the East River* in a few sentences (never an easy task with Spark's texts): Elsa and Paul reside in New York; there is something strange about Elsa's shadow which declines to obey the laws of physics and always falls in the same way, independently of the location of the source of light. They have children (quite grown up and very nasty), friends and acquaintances, as well as two psychoanalysts who treat them. The mystery of Elsa's shadow seems somehow connected to their common past – they met and fell in love during the war, while working at the British intelligence compound. Paul believes that a German, Helmut Kiel, who might have had an affair with Elsa, now reappeared in New York. The trouble is, he is supposed to be dead. Can this be explained by an elaborate double-agent game? Or by some mistake of identity? By Elsa's plotting, or by her insanity? Or, more simply, by Paul's very own paranoia?

The following developments make little sense – by the end of the book we seem to be no closer to finding out what really happened at that secret compound, or why Elsa's shadow is behaving in such a strange way. But we learn something more momentous: Elsa, Paul and all their friends and acquaintances from the time of the war are dead. Their children, therefore, cannot exist, while meeting a dead former acquaintance is not so strange after all. Paul and Elsa's life in New York is nothing more than a projection of their dreams and desires before their deaths.

While this information might be treated as a revelation that cancels all the minor mysteries of the text, in fact it explains nothing. Dead people do not have children; when people dream about their future they do not imagine constant rows and endless problems; if most of the characters are dead why only Elsa's shadow is behaving differently. Since the New York described in the novel is both genuine and recognizable as the post-war city (with adverts, buildings, entertainments appropriate to that time), the world of the novel cannot be dismissed as simply a perpetuated idea, frozen in time and run on a repeat loop. The characters in the novel exist in a world which cannot be simply defined as Hell or Purgatory (though many critics are tempted to do so – see Page 1990, p. 86; Whittaker 1984, p. 82): it is too uncertain, yet corporeal, too merry, yet troubled, too inventive, though haunted by memory and unease. The fact that Paul and Elsa's apartment is overheated, with windows which provide magnificent view but do not open is, of course, a nod

towards the infernality of their state of being. Yet, this is infernality which is perfectly consistent with human existence in this world – minor problems plague us more than existential dilemmas, people behave unpredictably, evil creeps up in unexpected places. Thus, the ending is a kind of sleight of hand: a grand solution which should provide all the answers and yet solves no particulars, in the same way as the postulated existence of God should solve all earthly problems and explain all earthly puzzles – but does not. In fact, if in God's perspective all our troubles are simply irrelevant, human existence does not make any sense. And this is the problem at the heart of Spark's fiction: she refuses to dismiss the small things of this life, refuses to dissolve them in the larger perspective of eternity, but instead makes the small unsolvable riddles grate against faith, hopes and grand visions of humanity, turning the irrelevant issues into existential dilemmas.

Therefore, we must disagree with those critics who, like Ian Gregson, decree Spark's texts' non-belonging to postmodernist canon because of their "refusal of open-endedness, their compact definitiveness" (Gregson 2008, p. 105). The endings only appear closed, but in fact nothing is really solved by the neat clinching of the narrative path. Spark is an expert in producing this dissonance: an appearance of completeness which is yet belied by an overwhelming feeling of unease on the part of the reader. This may not be enough to classify her as a postmodernist, though she has often been called that (see, for instance, Sawada 2004); however, this essay is not concerned with classification but rather with the curious mechanisms at work within Spark's "unknowing" (to use one of her favorite expressions appearing several times in the novel) fictions.

The situation of the characters is unclear because their status is liminal, and they themselves seem to doubt both their existence and their inexistence. Elsa and Poppy enjoy their life a little too much for ghosts without any corporeal bodies. The children, whose very existence is absurd, cause too many problems to be mere phantoms – problems which are noticed by the people actually living in New York. Unless we assume that the entire world of the novel is simply made-up stage decorations erected by Paul (or by someone else to plague him), none of this makes sense.

The novel – though clearly dealing with the dimension which lies outside time and with characters for whom only the past has actual existence – is narrated in the present tense that "seems to remove the events from the dimension of time" (Page 1990, p. 89). This is quite a natural choice: it immediately creates not only the sense of immediacy, but also of suspension. It is all the more powerful for those who have been following Spark's publications and read her previous novel *Not To Disturb* (first published in 1971). Also narrated in the present tense, it tells a story of a murder which is all but predestined and expected not only by the chief actors of the drama (actually kept back stage by the novelist), but – with far more immediacy and direct profit – their domestic servants and media. The hyped, distinctly sinister atmosphere of *Not To Disturb* immediately pervades the reader of *The Hothouse by the East River* as an intimation of the uncanny evil – this is a new story, and

yet it feels familiar. This suspicion is confirmed when the psychoanalyst Garven becomes the butler to Hazletts in the hope to collect material about Elsa's "case". Even though Garven is a figure of fun in the novel, when Paul becomes afraid of Elsa's psychoanalyst the readers share the presentiment of evil: in *Not To Disturb* the butler Lister seems to be the sinister authorial figure of the plot, orchestrating the murders and drawing profit from the publicity around them. Such figures frequently appear in Spark's fictions as "Spark's mythomaniacs (...), who, as the novelists manqué attempt to shape reality according to their abiding myths" (Cheyette 2000, p. 105).

Most of the novel is focalized through Paul, which is consistent with the idea that it is his memory and imagination – and a need for closure – that originates and perpetuates the world of the novel. Most critics agree that Paul "resurrects" Elsa and other characters because he has not solved the mystery of Kiel, and he is now trying to work out its particulars by questioning Elsa, by having her followed, by observing her behavior with Kiel – even from afar, learning about it from other people. The solution is, however, slipping away: the dread of the past seems very strong in Paul's subconscious, and it gets out of hand, refusing to unravel the puzzle of the past. The vision, meantime, gains its own momentum and absurdity. It seems Paul was always somewhat paranoid – already in 1944 he was decidedly too concerned about himself and the opinions of other people about him. But now he suspects that secret spies send messages on the soles of the shoes Elsa buys – an idea both absurd and frightening because it shows the depths of his madness. Paul is manic about the past, he is terrified of Elsa, the weirdness of whose shadow is only a small externalized symptom of some strange power she seems to possess. As Meaney writes, "*The Hothouse by the East River* celebrates the uncontrollable destructive powers of the spectacular and sacred 'Woman' invented by the self in search of a mirror" (Meaney 2012, p. 162). And yet, Elsa seems too alive to be merely a reflection, or an invention of obsessive self.

Elsa is presented from the start of the novel as a witch or a queen: "she commands the air [Paul] breathes" (Spark 1975, p. 36). Some of the scenes of the novel are cast from Elsa's point of view, in Paul's absence, which somewhat undermines his status as the originator and master of their dream world. Thus, during the first reading of the text it appears that while Elsa might have been "resurrected" by Paul, she somehow gained independence and begun to rival him in the construction of their liminal realm. Perhaps, this is what her unwieldy shadow is supposed to indicate: "The schizophrenic has imposed her will. Her delusion, her figment, her noting-there, has come to pass" (Spark 1975, p. 15). This is a strange phrase, and clearly slanted through Paul's point of view, since Elsa's behavior in the novel is, in fact, very sane, while unpredictable, very self-assured, while deliberately theatrical. She looks out of the window while she talks, and to Paul it appears that the view is Elsa's conspirator. But this, surely, testifies more to his mental instability than to hers. She is probably watching the reflections in the window pane as she talks – a cunningly simple way to evaluate situation without confronting it directly.

Tertiary oblique approach

In the novel, this constitutes another rather comically absurd theme. Both psychoanalysts in are very fond of indirect approach to their subjects. Garven, who boasts of being “unusually observant” (Spark 1975, p. 102) takes years to finally notice Elsa’s peculiar shadow, and then wishes to analyze Paul as a way to understand Elsa, that is, as a more reliable source of information than Elsa herself. Annie, Paul’s analyst, pushes this idea one absurd step further, becoming a source on Paul for Garven: “It’s the secondary associative process of the oblique approach. And through you I have a tertiary oblique approach to Elsa” (Spark 1975, p. 129).¹ This is how the entire text works: everything is studied indirectly, presented through secondary and tertiary perspectives. Paul is the central consciousness, and everything else – other characters, their affairs (even those in which Paul does not participate) are present only as reflections or imaginings of Paul, though this does not imply that they don’t exist outside his consciousness.

Thus, though Elsa acts and thinks independently of Paul’s will, when we read about Elsa’s thoughts, we are actually reading what Paul thinks Elsa is thinking. And this goes further: when we read about Elsa thinking of Paul, it is yet another turn of the same process: Paul imagining Elsa thinking about him and imagining what his thoughts might be. Even those scenes in which she appears on her own are imagined, constructed by Paul. But because his imaginings have to be constructed on the basis of Elsa’s actions outside his consciousness, Paul can never predict her behavior, and is always taken aback by what she says or does. We continue to watch both Elsa and her shadow – from within Paul’s mind. Characteristically, Elsa behaves with enigmatic irreverence, constantly mocking those around her and remaining tantalizing to Paul – and the reader. The discourse allows access only to Elsa that exists within Paul’s consciousness, and that remains both unknown and unknowing, uncanny, familiar and alien at the same time.

Can Elsa be mad? Only Elsa’s shadow “proves” her madness. To Paul, of course, it is a sufficient proof: it is the evidence that the fantasized, the invoked phantom imposed her will over her “author”. Therefore the meaning of “schizophrenia” has more application to Paul than to Elsa: it is the state of internal split, that is, the split between the author and character who dares to assert her independence.

That Elsa might be a troublesome character is indicated in the passages relating to 1944 events. Elsa, declining to share a room with another girl, explains to her superiors: “I am really a bit uncanny. I have supernatural communications” (Spark 1975, p. 60). She is thus a person already in touch with the liminal world while still alive. Whether this is true or not is left unclear: Elsa (as she is in 1944) might be a little crazy, or – more likely – very cun-

¹ This certainly comic phrase strangely echoes Spark’s speech “The Desegregation of Art”: “the art of literature is a personal expression of ideas which come to influence the minds of people even at second, third and fourth hand” (Spark 2014, p. 27).

ning: she might be making up this story to avoid having a roommate. But she is marked as unique in the rather stifling little world of the secret compound. Paul should have been forewarned that by calling out of the abyss of death such a ghost he would have to contest with her uncanniness – or that actual life with such a person would always resemble the spectral existence in a fictionalized world. In their “afterlife” in New York, their relationship is that of memory and intellect (Paul) contesting imagination (Elsa): “She tells him everything that comes into her head (...) and it is for him to discover whether what she says is true or whether she has imagined it” (Spark 1975, p. 7). Again, this is Paul thinking of what Elsa is trying to do to him, making Elsa stand for his own imagination. Note also that imagination assumes primacy, putting memory and intellect to work.

When Paul tries to relate his difficulties to Pierre, his (possibly phantom) son, the latter responds with a mixture of indifference and aphoristic clarity: “‘What does it matter? Spies don’t matter any more.’ Pierre says. ‘There isn’t any war and peace any more, no good and evil, no communism, no capitalism, no fascism. There’s only one area of conflict left and that’s between absurdity and intelligence’” (Spark 1975, p. 63). This may sound like a neat summary of the status of liminality, but a very similar statement (“a form of profanity” according to Ruth Whittaker – Whittaker 1984, p. 80) appears in Spark’s interviews when she is talking about the current (post-Holocaust) state of the world: “We have come to a moment in history when we are surrounded on all sides and oppressed by the absurd” (Spark 2014, p. 30). An earlier statement in her interview with George Armstrong resembles Pierre’s appraisal of the world even more:

I don’t believe in good and evil so much any more. No one makes pacts with the Devil, as they did in the Middle Ages. Now, there is only absurdity and intelligence. I’m sure that whoever was responsible for that massacre in Bel Air had no sense of actually doing evil, but rather they were vindicating something which was precious to themselves (...). If we are intelligent, we will call it absurd. (Spark 1970)

Once more this supports the supposition that Spark’s “supernatural” is merely a form to address the natural. She is not writing about ghostly existence, afterlife and the troubles of those who died without confession. She is working out a puzzle of our own, corporeal world, which became so unreal after the great horrors of the Twentieth century that it no longer makes sense to write fictions about good and evil, life and afterlife in the old familiar configuration.

What is Reality?

John Glavin describing Paul’s condition writes:

Paul wishes to know the answer to only one all-pressing question: ‘Am I real?’ Its naked self-exposure too risky to be put that openly, he must offer it in deflected form to others ‘are you real?’ And so, in a demonic parody of Cartesian ontology, he summons his wife back from the dead to mirror a narcissism even death cannot still: ‘You are, therefore I know I am.’” (Glavin 1988, p. 231)

Paul seems to think that while Elsa, their children, Poppy, Kiel and Melly are dead or do not exist, he is still alive: “I remember too many things to be dead” (Spark 1975, p. 126). This becomes part of Spark’s peculiar investigation of the question “what does it mean to be alive.” Thus, to be alive means to remember, and the more items one can hold in one’s memory, the more alive one is. Since the readers are made to suspect that Paul is, in fact, dead, this definition suggests a curious concept of afterlife: existence perpetuated through memory and imagination, and if one’s intelligence is strong enough (Paul’s “intellect has a hundred eyes,” writes his mother – Spark 1975, p. 51), one can also keep alive numerous others by an act of memory, supported through the work of somewhat frantic imagination. And as in a dream, only a small part of what is going on in this world is truly controlled by the “dreamer” – he is constantly worried by his inability to solve problems, unpleasantly surprised, mystified.

Throughout the book, various answers to the question “what does it mean to be alive, what does it mean to be real?” will be suggested, but none of them can be taken seriously. For instance, the peculiar set up of Elsa and Paul’s life indicates that in order to be alive one needs to have a problem (the more unsolvable the better)² and a psychoanalyst who would be helping one to unravel it. Another rather obviously jocund definition of “reality” is: to have real estate and money – both Elsa and Melly (Paul’s friend whom he visited during the war and who arranged his life in America afterwards) are supposed to be rich and therefore no one for a long time doubts their reality. “Melly, are you real?” asks Paul at the end of the novel, already realizing that most of the presences in his world are phantoms. “‘Sure I’m real,’ she says, ‘and I’ve got the money to prove it’” (Spark 1975, p. 138).

Yet another definition is “to have people around”, and Elsa and Paul are very consistent in throwing themselves into the midst of people, strangers or acquaintances or domestic servants, no matter. Melly too constructs a list of guests to her charity show and demonstrates it to Paul “to show whether I’m alive or not”: “Here’s the list of the names who’ve answered. It’s quite a list” (Spark 1975, p. 138). It *is* quite a list, judging by the few names she reads out, though, ironically, these are the people who declined or didn’t answer yet: Truman, Solzhenitsyn, “Peggy” (of whom more later), Berthold Brecht. The novel was published in 1973, and by that time Berthold Brecht was certainly long dead (since 1956), President

² Annie, Paul’s psychoanalyst, rattles off a list of all possible problems, missing only the one that is most essential for the novel, the problem of mortality (Spark 1975, pp. 108-109).

Truman freshly dead (died in 1972), while Solzhenitsyn still alive (died in 2008). Melly, by showing her list is thus only confirming her liminal status, inviting people from across the supposedly uncrossable divide between life and death.

The most interesting person on Melly's list, however, is "Peggy". This must be Peggy Guggenheim, the contemporary art collector and a lover of Samuel Beckett among other luminaries. Of her, Melly says something a little strange: "She just had a robbery but then I read in *The Times* that she got them all back" (Spark 1975, p. 139). The actual story is even stranger, and, while true, sounds like something invented by Spark. Peggy Guggenheim had not one, but two burglaries, both in 1971, and both times the paintings were recovered. After the first theft in February the paintings were found in a hiding place near some railroad tracks. Moreover, Peggy told her friend Milton Gendel: "They've all come back, and the odd thing is they stole fifteen and sixteen have come back" (Gill 2001, p. 434). Perhaps it was a joke – Peggy had a peculiar sense of humor, but if so, entirely in Spark's style. In December, there was another break-in, and this time Peggy was less amused, but once more, at the beginning of 1972 the police managed to return the stolen works of art to their owner. This situation of a theft that happens and yet does not really happen fits perfectly well into the framework of the overall suspension in *The Hothouse by the East River*. It also helps us to identify the timeframe of the novel: the action is taking place, most likely, between 1971 and 1972. It also testifies to the fact that the world of the novel does not exist in isolation as a dream of a dead man, but stretches across the divide: dead Paul would not have any knowledge about the affairs of Peggy Guggenheim, since she was never part of his life before his death.

The novel is constructed in such a way that "reality" is represented by a series of reversals. Peter Kemp calls this novel "a sinister book (...) in which everything occurs the wrong way round" (Kemp 1974, p. 141). Norman Page explores this further:

A woman's shadow falls the wrong way, producing darkness where there ought to be light; a performance of the children's play *Peter Pan* is staged by a geriatric cast; and the 'hothouse' of an overheated apartment in a highrise block in winter is actually Purgatory. (...) There are familiar elements of satire and parody – for example, of the spy thriller and the ghost story as well as of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, staged by the Hazletts' son Pierre, the son they never had and hence, like Barrie's hero, the boy who never grew up. Again, the parodic method involves inversion, for this is a ghost story in which the dead are haunted by the living. (Page 1990, pp. 86-87)

While the perverse undercutting of life and reality in the novel is all too clear, it still seems that all the critics take too seriously the "solution" of the plot, taking at face value the description of the scene in which all major characters die in a bomb explosion in 1944. As everything else in the novel, this scene is depicted in the present tense, and the tone of the narrative seems

to allow no doubt as to the reality of the scene. Of course, in such case the readers must take for granted the unreality of the entire preceding narrative. However, there might be a different interpretation: the scene in the train is merely another “dream”, another delusion of Paul, who is the main focalizer in the novel, its dominant consciousness. This might be merely a version of the past which he tries out, to attempt to explain the strange and absurd nature of his current existence. Life in New York in the seventies is so strangely punctuated by the past, especially by the wartime experiences of the principle characters, that it is no longer possible to distinguish the ghosts from the living, the reality from a psychotic delusion: “New York, home of the vivisectors of the mind, and of the mentally vivisected still to be reassembled, of those who live intact, habitually wondering about their states of sanity, and home to those whose minds have been dead, bearing the scars of resurrection” (Spark 1975, p. 11). This makes as much sense when applied to the ghostly condition of the characters, as when viewed as a vivid and perceptive depiction of the postmodern condition. Living people betray the signs of decay, people who are supposed to be dead show up without, it seems, realizing that they have no place among the living, traces of age and passage of time are deleted from the faces of the old acquaintances, or, to the contrary, they look changed so completely that only through an act of will one can retain continuity between the past and present appearance. Paul calls Manhattan “the mental clinic (...) where we analyse and dope the savageries of existence (...) the sedative chamber where you don’t think at all and you can act as crazily as you like and talk your head off all day, all night” (Spark 1975, pp. 75-75). Modern life appears as a comfortable mental clinic, centrally heated, if a little stuffy, with constantly busy, if not too competent staff. Some critics take these passages as Spark’s mordant satire of psychoanalysis: “For Spark, psychoanalysis intrudes into normal human suffering and gives people permission to be self-indulgent” (Beveridge 2016, p. 164). In part this may be true. However, Spark’s intention is not to simply mock the methods and concepts of psychoanalysis, nor is it to satirize the peculiarities of life in New York, but rather, more generally to expose the absurdity of modernity, preempted by the great suffering of the previous decades. The most atrocious evil was revealed as the faculty of human mind, and now humankind prepares for itself a wonderful selection of sedatives, to ease the pain of thinking and remembering. The comforts of such life are obvious, and the only disadvantage is that it loses its edge, its reality. Throughout the narrative Paul keeps asking everyone “Are you real?”, soon shifting into negative conviction: “These people don’t exist” (Spark 1975, p. 29), “These people are not real” (Spark 1975, p. 93), and ends up disbelieving his own reality. And this might simply be his great delusion, his choice of a sedative over reality of experience.

Elsa (as she appears within Paul’s mind) only half-shares his delusion, treating it more creatively. She, for one thing, is not nearly as obsessed by the past as Paul is. “What has yesterday got to do with me?” she asks Paul, bothered by his constant attempts to connect the dots, insist on continuity between their old selves from the time of the war and their current identities (Spark 1975, p. 74). Instead of answering his persistent questions about her relationship with

Kiel, she quips: "One will never really know," says Elsa with the air of discussing a distant name. "What does it matter since we all died?" (Spark 1975, p. 131). Anna Walczuk reads this statement in all seriousness: "the profound meaning of Elsa's answer is that such details have no real significance when regarded from the eternal perspective" (Walczuk 2005, p. 178). Yet we might note that while Elsa's words may be understood as accepting Paul's premise of their death in 1944, they may also be interpreted as a way of mocking him: since *he* believes that they are all dead, what is the use of bothering about the truth of the past?

This is precisely the issue here: the past *is* still interesting, and it still matters, and the readers are far from satisfied by the abortive and evasive ending. The story of Kiel (which from the very start appears with its own unwieldy shadow: there were two Kiels at the compound, though both names were alias) is Elsa and Paul's personal war trauma: something evil they might have done, causing Kiel's death in prison; or some form of betrayal each of them has committed separately and secretly from the other that they keep trying to hide. The eternal perspective cancels nothing, it is merely a way to dodge the question that one is hesitant to answer.

As mentioned earlier, Elsa and her shadow assert independence even while remaining within Paul's fantasy, and she is happily making up new fictions for him to unravel. She is never bothered by the patent absurdity of the New York life, but rather enjoys it and manages to fit in with her own little absurdities: buying shoes with strange marking on the soles, talking to the view in the window, driving her maid crazy, menacing her psychoanalyst, taunting her children, going off to Zurich with a younger man who resembles an old would-be lover, throwing tomatoes at the rotten actors on the stage, raising a riot, crashing a party. The novel depicts a mechanism of dealing with the absurd tumult of contemporary life in which even one's own reality is constantly disputed: this kind of fiction may be only dealt with through appropriation, it may only be combatted with another fiction. As Page writes, in this novel the "main characters are, like so many other characters in other novels, fiction-makers, inventing a life that has never been lived, but also through its intimate and creative relationship with other forms of fiction" (Page 1990, p. 89).

The ending, thus, is not meant to solve anything, but rather to leave the reader in the awareness of his/her own state of suspension, with the profound feeling of unease. Ruth Whittaker admits that this is precisely the impression the novel made on her: "Denied the expressions of shock, despair or authorial moralising that usually attend death in novels, the reader is forced to think instead of feel, to exercise a personal moral intelligence in each case, without explicit guidance from the author. This may be a useful discipline, but I am left, none the less, with a feeling of unease..." (Whittaker 1984, pp.12-13). This is exactly Spark's purpose:

the art and literature of sentiment and emotion, however beautiful in itself, however stirring in its depiction of actuality, has to go. It cheats us into a sense of involvement with life and

society, but in reality it is a segregated activity. In its place I advocate the arts of satire and of ridicule. And I see no other living art form for the future. Ridicule is the only honourable weapon we have left. (Spark 2014, p. 28)

The sense of unease, the frustration of wishing to know something that remains outside our grasp and the suspicion of being mocked by the discourse and its author jointly constitute the little “cloud of unknowing” that we, as the readers of Spark’s novels, will continue to trail after us.

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Widmowa rzeczywistość w powieści Muriel Spark pt. *Cieplarnia nad Rzeką Wschodnią*

Streszczenie

Przedmiotem badań jest specyficzne pojmowanie zjawisk nadprzyrodzonych w powieści Muriel Spark pt. *Cieplarnia nad Rzeką Wschodnią*. Bohaterowie powieści, których życie obfituje w dylema-

ty egzystencjalne, w rzeczywistości nie żyją, jak to niedwuznacznie sugeruje zakończenie powieści. Rozpatrywany jest paradygmat „prozy zjawisk nadprzyrodzonych” (*mundane supernatural*), czyli przedstawianie w utworze literackim zjawisk i wydarzeń uznawanych jako absurdalne i nieprawdopodobne, jako nieodłącznej części ludzkiej egzystencji. Zagadka w fabule powieści (kąt padania cienia bohaterki powieści jest niezgodny z prawami fizyki) nie zostaje wyjaśniona w zakończeniu utworu. Sprawa ta jest odsunięta na drugi plan, ustępując miejsca wyjaśnieniu większej tajemnicy, jaką jest widmowa egzystencja (*spectral reality*) samej Elsy. Ta szczególna strategia narracyjna polegająca na udzielaniu wymijającej odpowiedzi na pytania trapiące Czytelnika jest charakterystyczna dla wielu utworów Muriel Spark. Z punktu widzenia pisarki, bardziej interesującą od samego rozwiązania zagadki jest reakcja postaci poszukujących odpowiedzi na pytania oraz proces ich poszukiwania. Powieść dowodzi również, że sprawy pozornie błahie z punktu widzenia wieczności, takie jak proza życia codziennego, pełnego absurdów, a także niedoskonała pamięć ludzka utrzymująca to życie w chwiejnych ramach dyskursu, mają swoje znaczenie i dlatego nie można ich bagatelizować ani pomijać jako mało znaczący przypis do boskiego dzieła.

Słowa kluczowe: Muriel Spark, postmodernizm, nadprzyrodzone, narracja, pamięć, opowieści gotyckie, absurd.

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