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*Tomás Monterrey*

Old and New Elements in  
Muriel Spark's *Symposium*

Hurley Reed, an American painter, and Chris Donovan, a rich Australian widow, enjoy entertaining friends at dinner parties. On the 18th of October the guests are four couples: Lord and Lady Suzy, who had been robbed by a gang the previous week; Ernst and Ella Untzinger, who had recommended Luke, an American student and one of the informers of the gang, as a serving assistant for the party; Roland Sykes, a genealogist, and his cousin Annabel Treece, an assistant television producer; and the Damiens. William Damien and his recently married wife Margaret, née Murchie, have just arrived from their honeymoon in Italy. William is the son of Hilda Damien, a close friend of Chris and also a very wealthy widow, who suspects Margaret's intentions. Margaret, the central character, comes from near St. Andrews, in Fife, and maintains a strange relationship with her mad uncle Magnus, who is a sort of adviser to the Murchies. In the past there have been a number of mysterious deaths (a school friend, her grandmother, a nun, —even a teacher disappeared—) involving the presence of Margaret, although her responsibility upon the events is never explained. After the murder of the nun she decides to deliberately "perpetrate evil,"<sup>1</sup> and tries to get married for that purpose, following Magnus's advice and recommendations. During the weeks before the party, William's sudden marriage and the personality and identity of his wife were favorite subjects of discussion

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<sup>1</sup>Muriel Spark, *Symposium* (London, 1990), p. 144. All quotations are from this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.

amongst those present at the party. By the 18th of October they have been able to trace her past so:

while they are talking amongst each other, most of the guests and the two good hosts are, with another part of their minds, thinking of Margaret. To the accompaniment of good food and wine everything seems less drastic, including the position in the world of Margaret with her long red hair . . . (p. 182).

At the end of the book she is most disappointed when she hears of Hilda's violent death since she had planned with Magnus to kill her the next weekend in Blackie House, the "turreted edifice near St Andrews" (p. 51), where the Murchies live, but, as he had told her, "Like it or not . . . destiny might do it for you" (p. 160).

This is a brief summary of *Symposium*, Muriel Spark's nineteenth novel which begins with the robbery at the Suzys' and the introduction of characters at the dinner party in the London area of Islington, and ends when a police officer interrupts the party to inform them that Hilda Damien has been murdered by the same gang who robbed the Suzys. Throughout the novel we are told, in the present tense, how the dinner party is going on, what they are talking about, what they are eating; most of the story, however, is a series of flashbacks, narrated in the past tense, in which characters are introduced, their interests and worries conveyed in conversational pieces and the plot thickens to reach the climax at the end of the party. The novel may be divided into two parts, from the beginning to chapter seven, where characters are introduced, and from here to chapter fourteen, mainly focussed on Margaret's past and family, and the attempts to find out who and what she is. Some flashbacks are set in Scotland as far as the Murchies are concerned, but there are more interesting things in terms of Scottish fiction and Sparkian narrative than the mere setting.

Although Muriel Spark was born and educated in Edinburgh, Scotland has not explicitly been the place or the subject of her novels, with the exception of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) and perhaps *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960). From what we know about the novelist, it is impossible to assess her views of Scotland and how they have changed since she left Edinburgh in 1937 at the age of 19 until the present. Muriel Spark thinks of herself as an expatriate, "a constitutional exile": she went to Africa, settled in London, moved to America, and from 1967 has lived in Italy. It is well known that the main source of her fiction is her own life, though transfigured by her distinctive observation and representation of the environment around her. Thus the early years in Edinburgh are covered by *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, where she is somehow playing the part of Sandy Stranger whose mind is opened to us, and a great deal of the novel is told from her

point of view. It is this way of perceiving and analyzing facts that makes Muriel Spark a major Scottish novelist rather than a social, historical or regional novelist.

In 1976 Muriel Spark published *The Takeover*, in which the myth of the goddess Diana of Nemi is useful to describe the chaos of Western culture after the 1973 oil crisis. This ancient myth had already been carefully and extensively analyzed by James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, a comparative study of religions, myths and rituals, a work which is quoted in Spark's novel. Perhaps she intended to write a similar book with a British background as Lorna Sage suggested when she interviewed her in 1976: "At the moment she's researching the Dark Ages: her next book will be set in ancient Britain, and has, she said, 'a character who can see into the fortune, a Celt with a bit of ESP.'"<sup>2</sup> But Spark obviously changed her mind because *The Takeover* was followed by *Territorial Rights* (1979), a novel that continues the exploration of evil in human nature and Western society, set in autumnal Venice. The impact of this city on Muriel Spark was enormous when she first visited it, as she explained in the article "The Sensation that Is Venice":

It was comparatively late in a much-travelled life that I made my first trip to Venice. That was in 1975. I was vaguely saving it up for a romantic occasion. Special and romantic occasions were not wanting in my life but they never coincided with the possibility of a trip to Venice. So in the winter of 1975 I suddenly went. Venice itself was the romantic occasion: the medium is the message.<sup>3</sup>

However, from an interview with Victoria Glendinning in 1979, we see that Muriel Spark still had the intention of writing such a novel about Britain: "There are already two new novels planned, one about the Romans in Britain; the other, a novel in the form of an autobiography, is to be called 'Loitering With Intent.'"<sup>4</sup> Her next novel was indeed *Loitering With Intent* (1981); then *The Only Problem* (1984), which is a penetrating reflection on the Book of Job, one of her favorite subjects, and on the painting by George de La Tour *Job visité par sa femme*. There followed *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988), that seems to be a personal response to Derek Stanford, a

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<sup>2</sup>"The Prime of Muriel Spark," *Observer*, 30 May 1976, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>Muriel Spark, "The Sensation That Is Venice," *The Times*, 13 May 1988, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup>"Talk with Muriel Spark," *New York Times Book Review*, 20 May 1979, p. 48.

close friend of hers in the fifties whose memoirs had infuriated the novelist.<sup>5</sup> Because Spark likes fictionalizing her own experiences and perceptions, it would have been unattractive for her to write about a time and a place she could only have known through someone else's investigations and studies, as Naomi Mitchison did in novels like *The Blood of the Martyrs* and *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*. Although it is difficult to ascertain what remains of the original plan, there are still elements in *Symposium* which make us think that it is the result of the project planned fifteen years earlier.<sup>6</sup>

The novel presents some aspects which remind us of *The Takeover*, for example, the characters are very wealthy, the Charismatic Revival of the mid-seventies is mentioned (p. 84), and Luke and Lauro are very much alike in appearance and in their tendencies. There are also certain connections with *Territorial Rights*: Venice is one of the places that William and Margaret visited during their honeymoon, Roland makes a long and descriptive speech of autumnal Venice (p. 184), and there is an echo of Grace Gregory in *Territorial Rights* when Magnus states, "guilty people do not feel guilty. They feel exalted, triumphant, amused at themselves" (p. 160). What is particularly similar is the organization of the story: scenes are interrupted to move in time in order to provide more information, to explore the characters, and to interweave the multiple sub-plots of the novel; as in a mosaic, the union of many different pieces gives us the whole. This is possibly one of the reasons for the title of the book.

*Symposium*, however, contains elements of the early novels: the gang of thieves who killed Hilda Damien is similar to the gang who murdered Dame Lettie Colston in *Memento Mori* (1959), the supernatural and witchcraft are strong components in the structure of the novel as they were in *The Bachelors* (1960) and in the *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, and again Muriel Spark imposes the style and spirit of the traditional ballads on her fiction.

Not only are some ballads quoted ("Allison Gross," "The Daemon Wife" and others) by Magnus and Margaret (as are the Bible and other literary works), or that William and Margaret are among the most common names of the characters in traditional ballads, but most important is the fact that Spark

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<sup>5</sup>Alan Taylor, "The Vital Spark," *Scotland on Sunday*, 16 September 1990, p. 25. The extent of her reaction against Derek Stanford is evident in the fact that "she has embarked on her autobiography, 'He is the limit' she pronounced. . . . 'He's a mythomaniac.'" Cf. Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae* (London, 1992), Ch. 7.

<sup>6</sup>This is not the first time that Muriel Spark intended to write a novel but the book was not published until years later. There is the case of *The Hothouse by the East River*, planned around 1965 and published in 1973, during which time three other novels appeared.

has attempted in *Symposium* to write a ballad in the form of fiction for the contemporary reader.

Margaret is a sort of modern witch despite her "goodness and honey-moon sweetness" (p. 33) and "her attitude . . . always on the side of light" (p. 32). The narrator's introduction of her so effectively suggests the diabolic side of her nature: "Margaret Damien is a romantic-looking girl with long dark-red hair, a striking colour, probably natural" (p. 12); then we are told of her "protruding teeth" (p. 30), her "green velvet" dress (p. 34), and so on. From the middle of the novel onwards, we learn of the misfortunes involving her presence. It is after the murder of the nun when Magnus assures her that she has got "the evil eye" (p. 134) and it is then when she is determined to act according to her nature and to take advantage of it,

I'm tired of being the passive carrier of disaster. I feel frustrated. I almost think it's time for me to take my life and destiny in my own hands, and actively make disasters come about. (pp. 143-4)

So, following Magnus's advice, she decides to marry a wealthy man to obtain his fortune. Magnus prepares a list of marriageable candidates for her to choose one by sticking a pin in it. After failing to attract Warren McDiarmid (for whom Magnus prognosticates suicide), she pursues and watches William until she eventually happens to meet him—what he thinks is mere coincidence—at the fruit section of Marks & Spencer's when she says to him, "Be careful, those grapefruits look bruised" (p. 35).

Mention of this event is repeated by the narrator and characters throughout the book, as well as mention of Margaret's red hair (or her pre-Raphaelite looks whenever Hurley's point of view is concerned), and her enigmatic philosophy of *Les Autres*. Repetition is a very important element in the fiction of Muriel Spark, as it is in traditional ballads; the flashbacks and the topics of conversation mark the rhythmical pattern of the novel, which is formed by a series of dialogues with small, clarifying, narrated observations, another characteristic of the traditional ballad.

William is an expert in artificial intelligence, although it is ironical that he still childishly keeps his toy animals. He is easily seduced by Margaret's charms, whereas the other characters suspect there is "something wrong with her" (p. 34), and something which is discovered by Roland, and Annabel who thinks that Margaret is "a female Jekyll and Hyde" (p. 187). We do not know if William will be the next victim of his wife's evil eye, because the story ends when Hilda, his mother, is murdered by thieves, thus spoiling Margaret's plot: "From upstairs comes Margaret's wild cry: 'It shouldn't have been till Sunday!'" (p. 191). On the other hand, Ernst and Ella Untzinger are worried about Luke who seems to be leading a secret life of

which they know nothing.<sup>7</sup> Luke will be helping Charterhouse, the butler, in serving at the dinner party and in informing the gang of thieves<sup>8</sup> whose criminal actions are also spoilt by the unexpected arrival of Hilda at her son's flat. Her cries alert some neighbors and eventually the gang is caught by the police and the servants arrested.

There are, then, two main plots that converge. The plotters, the gang and Margaret, have been successful in the past, although Margaret was not conscious that she was the cause of those misfortunes around her, but when they try to perform their skills during the hours covered by the present tense of the narration (the dinner party), they fail completely. This implies, as in *The Comforters* (1957) and *The Driver's Seat* (1970), the presence of a truly supernatural force in the story, that of the novelist's, or implied author (using Booth's terminology) manipulating destiny. The novelist succeeds in granting autonomy to the characters, controlling their lives and imposing contingency upon the events. Under the influence of Catholicism, these are issues which Muriel Spark has always liked dealing with in her novel, thus equating the role of the novelist, or implied author, on the story to that of God upon the world. It is characteristic of Spark's narrators to anticipate climactic events, increasing suspense or forcing the reader, when the climax takes place, to look for a message beyond the event itself. As early as the end of chapter four, we learn that "Hilda Damien will not come in after dinner. She is dying now, as they speak" at the party (p. 45). In this case, it is an anticipation in relation to the act of narrating, but it is a *simultaneous narration* with respect to the linear chronology of events in present tense as they are actually happening. More information is provided in the second flashforward of the novel, which is an anticipation from a flashback of a fact that has just taken place but has not been narrated yet:

Hilda was right. Except that in the destiny of the event Margaret could have saved herself the trouble, the plotting. It was the random gang, . . . of which Margaret knew nothing, who were to kill Hilda Damien for her Monet (p. 176).

Margaret, thus, is an anti-heroine since she does not manage to complete her plans satisfactorily, as also with Annabel in *The Public Image* (1968) and

<sup>7</sup>Corby, the Mauritian chef at Chris Donovan's, also suspects Luke and the butler, and after he warns Chris about them, she says, "Mauritius still has a very primitive element. . . . Their witchcraft. They sense things" (p. 179). This reminds us of *The Golden Bough* and emphasizes the supernatural element in the atmosphere of *Symposium*.

<sup>8</sup>In the novels of Muriel Spark servants are perfect plotters at trying to obtain easy money, notably Mrs. Pettigrew in *Memento Mori* (1959), Lauro in *The Takeover* (1976) and particularly Lister in *Not to Disturb* (1971).

Lise in *The Driver's Seat* (1970). What is new about Margaret in the fiction of Muriel Spark is that for the first time a wicked female is the central character.<sup>9</sup> The focus of the novel is centered on the relationship, or "old alliance" (p. 143), between Magnus and Margaret and how it works for destiny or the plans of the novelist. Nevertheless, Spark gives hints here and there about Margaret and her influence upon the mysterious deaths. On the one hand, she is another two-sided character, sharing with Magnus some sort of madness and his Jekyll-and-Hyde identity. On the other hand, Margaret is the means by whom evil or devilish acts try to control other people's destinies. The structural position of Margaret in *Symposium* is metaphorically described in chapter twelve.

She took out a comb from her bag, combed her long hair in front of the mirror, and went to the door. Just as she was leaving Magnus opened his eyes and said, sleepily, 'At school I was good as Lady Macbeth. It could be in the family' (p. 153).

In this way Magnus helps the reader understand the meaning of the story, and the narrator completes the account since she, the narrator, is not able to penetrate into Margaret's mind until the end of the party, when Hilda is dead and Margaret seems to realize that she is another character in the novel:

She longs for the weekend. . . . She thinks: What am I doing among these people, what am I doing here? . . . Her brain fills with a verse of a wild ballad:

Awa', awa', ye ugly witch,  
Haud far awa' an' lat me be!  
For I wouldna once kiss your ugly mouth  
For a' the gifts that ye could gie (pp. 186-7).

Margaret's mad uncle Magnus, described by Lorna Sage as "one of the novel's most colourful and minimally plausible figures,"<sup>10</sup> needs closer attention, not in terms of realistic fiction, but as far as Sparkian narrative is concerned, since he is completing the narrator's task, like Jean Taylor in *Memento Mori*, Ronald Bridges in *The Bachelors*, Sandy Stranger in *The Prime*, Sister Gertrude in *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974) and Grace in *Territo-*

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<sup>9</sup>Wicked female characters such as Jean Brodie in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* or Alexandra in *The Abbess of Crewe* struggle to succeed in their immoral ambitions, but they did not have the explicit intentions Margaret had—"I want to actively liquidate the woman. Compared with the evil eye, what I have in mind is just healthy criminality" (p. 159).

<sup>10</sup>Lorna Sage, "Seeing Things from the End," *Times Literary Supplement*, 21-27 Sept. 1990, p. 998.



*rial Rights*, just to mention a few. They are characters who consistently help the reader interpret the story.

Magnus, a patient in the Jeffrey King Hospital, spends most Sundays at Blackie House, and seems to be that "Celt with a bit of ESP," who can see into the future. His physical appearance resembles more the cliché of the giant in fairy tales than the druid of a Celtic forest. He is marked in the set of characters by a huge and powerful body, like Mrs. Hawkins in *A Far Cry from Kensington*, and by his extravagant and strikingly colorful clothing, like Lise in *The Driver's Seat*. The narrator points out that Magnus is usually normal, but for occasional fits of madness: "It was only his overwhelming fits of wild and savage mania, lasting sometimes for as much as three weeks . . . that distinguished him from a normal Scottish eccentric and made necessary his permanence in hospital" (p. 144). His fits and his being secluded in a medical institution remind us of two Sparkian characters closely connected with the role that Magnus performs in *Symposium*.

In *Memento Mori*, Jean Taylor stays in a home (Maud Long Medical Ward); she is visited and informed about telephone calls advising characters over seventy that they must die. She thinks of the past, of the present, of her acquaintances in and out the hospital, and reaches the conclusion that the caller is Death himself, and so she becomes the link between the natural, empirical, world of the characters, and the supernatural, novelistic/religious, world of the author. The other character is the epileptic Ronald Bridges in *The Bachelors*. On the one hand, Ronald was constantly consulted by his friends: "[He] felt he was regarded by his friends as a sacred cow or a wise monkey"<sup>11</sup>; Magnus, likewise, has become the "guru" (p. 67) of the Murchie family. On the other hand, Ronald's thoughts in the aftermaths of a fit serve the novelist to depict not only the solitude in the lives of anonymous bachelors in London but also the fictional quality of the novel. Ronald and Patrick Seton, a medium, are very similar in showing the existence of two related supernatural worlds, one inhabited by ghosts and spirits, the other managed by God or the novelist; but it is through Ronald Bridges, whose surname is descriptive enough, that these two active levels of existence are presented. In both novels, *Memento Mori* and *Bachelors*, Muriel Spark seems to be as interested in sociological and psychological issues as in working out the possibilities of the novel. In *Symposium*, she is still concerned with the latter, but the former has been shifted to the theme of destiny, in which plans, chronology and contingency are the basic issues. This marks a difference in Magnus with respect to Ronald Bridges, because Ronald is necessary for the reader to interpret both the set of bachelors and the metafictional devices,

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<sup>11</sup>*The Bachelors* (London, 1960), p. 67.

while Magnus is only necessary for the second, because he is "the only imaginative factor that had ever occurred in the Murchie's family" (p. 65).

In *The Bachelors*, Isobel Billow says to Ronald, "There's a diabolical side to your nature," and explains, "Well, possessed by a devil, that's the reason for your epilepsy" (p. 117). In *Symposium*, it is Greta, Magnus's sister-in-law and Margaret's mother, who remarks, "In the Middle Ages . . . the insane were considered to be divinely illuminated" (p. 66); and it is Magnus himself who confirms this gift, defined as an affliction, "Out of my misfortune, out of my affliction I prognosticate and foreshadow. My divine affliction is your [Dan's] only guide" (p. 81). The use of the word "divine" implies that Magnus is possessed by a supernatural force, that of the novelist; the same goes for Margaret who, according to Magnus, "could have inherited something wild" from him (p. 81), and "might well be under divine orders" (p. 108). Isobel was unable to distinguish the devil from the novelist in *Bachelors*; neither is the narrator of *Symposium* because of the use of an apparently limited point of view. The narrator prefers to use words like "diabolic" or "demonic," for example when she cannot solve the mystery of Magnus obtaining the list of potential husbands for Margaret; she tries to give an explanation by commenting, "but not so much a mystery when the amount of time on his hands was considered, and, not least, the demonic will and single-minded purpose of the mad" (p. 146). The use of the adjective "demonic" is confusing in the narrator's speech,<sup>12</sup> but in this quotation we can see, as in every Muriel Spark novel, how the narrator's task is completely independent to that of the implied author's. So we should take it almost as a real "demonic possession" by the novel-maker of "the spirit of comedy," in the sense Fleur Talbot expressed in *Loitering with Intent*: "I was aware of a *demon* inside me that rejoiced in seeing people as they were . . ." <sup>13</sup>

The moon, the forest and the Murchie family seem to be key concepts to express that supernatural force which controls the autonomy of Magnus and Margaret in the novel. The moon, because the madwoman who killed Margaret's grandmother is caught by the police "in the moonlight" (p. 70), and Magnus referred to the principal of the mental institution with the old-fashioned expression "the Master of Lunacy" (p. 67); the forest because, when Mrs. Murchie was murdered, Dan asked Magnus for advice in the nearby woods (p. 80); and finally the Murchie family, since Magnus explains that

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<sup>12</sup>Cf. Francis Russell Hart's article on demonology in the novels of Muriel Spark, "Ridiculous Demons," in *Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision*, ed. Alan Bold (London & Totowa, NJ, 1984), pp. 23-43.

<sup>13</sup>*Loitering with Intent* (London, 1982), p. 8.

"Margaret is a Murchie, Covenanting stock who refused to accept the rule of bishops. It is written the scriptures, Samuel 9:11, 'According to all that my lord the king hath commanded his servant, so shall thy servant do'" (p. 107).

In *Bachelors*, Ronald Bridges was able to describe the fictional role of characters in the novel; in *Symposium* Magnus is able to realize the nature of the fictional plot in the novel. When Margaret is determined to get rid of Hilda, Magnus reminds her of the story of Judith, before he praises the sunsets as done by Walter Scott and is put in bed as a metaphorical end to his novelistic part:

For myself let me remind you of Judith and what she did to Holofernes. Pass me the Bible.'

Margaret got ready to go. 'It needs more planning than you think,' she said.

Magnus was reading: 'And approached to his bed, and took hold of the hair of his head—'

'Plans. We should make plans,' said Margaret.

'And she smote twice upon his neck with all her might, and she took away his head from him.'

'Hilda's coming next week' (pp. 159-60).

Holofernes had besieged the city of Bethulia, its inhabitants remained peacefully awaiting a divine intervention to liberate them from the enemy until the situation became desperate. Then the Bethulians pleaded with the local principals to fight against Holofernes, and still they decided to wait for the intervention of God during five more days. It is then when Judith reprimands the local principals by telling them that testing God is a great sin against the second commandment. So she herself will go to Holofernes's tent after having perfectly planned the killing, and returns to the city with his head. As Judith did, Magnus warns Margaret against tempting God (the novelist) to act in her favor, not by reading Judith's reprimand but by reading the passage about cutting off the head; however, when Magnus is reading the text, Judith's prayer "Strengthen me, O Lord, God of Israel, this day" is omitted by the narrator and substituted by Margaret demanding plans. This marvellous case of intertextuality is eloquent enough to show the high degree of Magnus's consciousness about the nature of the plot in the novel, and ironic enough as to reveal the structural performance of both Magnus and Margaret in this book, because *Symposium* is about how plans fit in the ways of destiny and contingency, as the narrator explicitly lets us know:

It was at Liège, that innocent and beautiful city, that young Jean was to encounter a certain Paul, eighteen years old, son of an old Belgian school friend of Greta's. . . . Eventually Jean was to have a child by Paul and to live lovingly with

him year in, year out; but that is another story, or would be but for the mere fact that her destiny was contingent upon the murder of her grandmother and her having been packed off quickly to those faithful nuns at Liège (pp. 74-5).

Magnus fits the "spooky" (Hilda's term, p. 87) atmosphere of this modern novelistic ballad and is a character connected with the Scottish literary tradition by his devilish pieces of advice and his dual personality materialized by his fits of madness and moments of lucidity. He quotes the Bible and the ballads, religion and tradition, the two components of the Scottish character. Perhaps that is why, as a Scottish archetype, he solemnly states, "Here in Scotland, people are more capable of perpetrating good and evil than anywhere else" (p. 159).

Scotland and Scottish identity are, however, minor subjects in *Symposium*,<sup>14</sup> although the narrator seems to be familiar with them as some images show: "the light had that angelic radiance of a Scottish autumn and its tingling freshness, so welcome to people who enjoy feeling cold, as the Scots so often do" (p. 65).

The narrator is never able to convey what is going on inside Magnus's mind; she can read everyone else's mind, although characters tend to express themselves in their conversations. This is another technical feature of *Symposium* which relates it to *Territorial Rights*, where we could see the characters in Venice as if they were playing on stage with a few indications about the setting and about the actions and appearance of the characters from the narrator's point of view. But there are two important technical differences in the narrative voice between these novels.

The first is marked by a recurrent explicit address to the reader in commentaries such as

. . . Charterhouse, the name, believe it or not, of the new young acquisition from the Top-One School of Butlers (p. 47),

or

[Dan] came into the room with that stiff, correct, Jaruzelski walk that we used to see on the television when the Polish news came up (p. 53).

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<sup>14</sup>The Murchies must not be taken as representatives of a middle-class family because the narrator clearly states at the beginning of her account of them, "The Murchies were different" (p. 66); later on she adds, "They were not a mentally stable family, those Murchies" (p. 80). Dan Murchie's sisters, wife and daughters (all minor characters except Margaret) form a good set of independent female personalities who would be excellent subjects of scholarly investigation in the context of contemporary Scottish feminism and Spark's ideas on the matter, because she, like Hilda Damien, is "above and beyond feminism" (p. 50).

We find this kind of comment from the beginning when the narrator places herself at the same level of knowledge as the reader has at this point in the story, as though the narrator is alerting him/her that her point of view is limited: "Some are new to each other but on the whole the pair of hosts and their eight guests are far better known to each other than they are, at present, to us" (p. 11). And indeed the reader will notice, for example, that sometimes the narrator gives the name of a character who has been previously mentioned by another, although the narrator claims to be a very acute observer: ". . . so that the likeness would not have been apparent to a casual observer" (p. 169). Likewise, the reader will see that there are some unsolvable mysteries even for her: "how he [Magnus] had got to know who were the rich, young and unattached bachelors available in the country, was, yes, a mystery" (p. 146). This device may be explained by the fact that Muriel Spark wrote two first-person novels (*Loitering* and *A Far Cry*) between 1979 and 1990, and she may have decided to experiment with the characteristics of first-person narrators in third-person novels, departing once again from the omniscient point of view of *The Takeover* and the pseudo-omniscient narrator of *Territorial Rights*. However, it can also be explained by the fact that Spark does not intend to write a psychological or realistic novel in which thoughts and actions must be precisely described; *Symposium* is nearer the romantic gothic tradition of witchcraft and mystery, so that a narrator pretending to have a limited point of view may be used more effectively to maintain suspense and at the same time to show evidence of an extratextual controller.

The second difference has to do with the organization of the story, because it is clear that it has not been the narrator—though very precise and elegant in her observations and commentaries<sup>15</sup>—who has arranged the story, because the characters seem to be unknown to her at the beginning; it has been the novelist, or implied author, who not only has provided characters, plot and setting, but also the mosaic-like order of the story to show how destiny operates in the world. The narrator thus faces a linear chronology in the present tense to narrate the events at the dinner party and an interspersed series of flashbacks to deal with the past as if this were just one way of many of ordering the story. It is the reverse of the technique used in *The Driver's Seat*, where the narrator follows a linear chronology in the present tense, interrupted by several flashforwards. This technique is a new and important achievement in Muriel Spark's literary career.

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<sup>15</sup>In *Symposium* the narrator sometimes comments about extra-fictional realities such as "he couldn't help calculating the Pope's worldly riches (life-proprietor of the Sistine Chapel, landlord of the Vatican and contents . . .). Ernst knew . . ." (p. 26) and "Florian's overpriced café" (p. 29), in which we almost hear the voice of Muriel Spark as the real author.

Another notable achievement of this novel is the deliberate use of two literary works with the same title, Plato's and Lucian's *Symposium*. Spark had previously attempted this experiment, in *The Comforters* and *The Only Problem*, where she represented modern versions of Job's sufferings, and in *The Takeover* using Frazer's research on the myth of the goddess Diana of Nemi.

As we said above, one of the reasons for the title could be the putting together of parts to give a different whole picture; but there are other reasons for the title attached to the meaning of the word itself. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* gives two meanings for "Symposium," the first is a drinking-party of ancient Greeks after a banquet, exemplified in Plato's *Symposium*, and parodied in Lucian's. The drinking party is substituted in Spark's novel by a dinner party, while quotations from the two classical works are used as epigraphs to the book. The second meaning is "philosophical or other friendly discussion; set of contributions on one subject from various authors and points of view," so, whereas those gathered at Agathon's talked about love, those dining at Chris Donovan's seem to portray a number of diversified illustrations of contemporary relationships between men and women, with the issue of marriage a recurrent subject throughout the novel.

The first epigraph is a quotation from the beginning of Lucian's *Symposium*: ". . . the affair even ended in wounds and the party was finally broken up by the shedding of blood." By this means the author anticipates the end and creates an ironic gap between the reader and the characters at the wedding banquet. There are more points of comparison between this and Spark's novel, for example: characters do not talk about a specific subject, Ernst's attempt to touch Luke when serving. Lucian, parodying Plato's *Symposium*, scorned the intellectuals and wise men of his time. In turn, Muriel Spark's parodying Lucian's account seems to be ridiculing those who try to provoke things to happen, forgetting there are supreme rules governing their lives, those of the plot and the implied author in the novel, and those of destiny and God in the world.

The quotation from Plato is a reference to what Socrates was arguing at the end of the dialogue, when almost everyone else was drunk or had fallen asleep: ". . . the genius of comedy was the same with that of tragedy, and that the true artist in tragedy was an artist in comedy also." This statement is indeed very appropriate for Spark's work, because, as Lorna Sage explains, "her whole career has questioned the category of the serious in fiction, and divorced the serious from the solemn."<sup>16</sup> But it is more appropriate for this novel in which Spark shows the complicated trends of destiny—the essential theme for Greek tragedies—and patterns the work on the style of traditional

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<sup>16</sup>Lorna Sage, "Seeing Things from the End."

ballads, thus allowing the characters and the narrator to express themselves in plain language, though full of tragic ironies due to the narrator's limited point of view and her showing Hilda's death before the actual narration of the event.

Another possible reason for the title might be the variety of plans to be carried out throughout the novel. We are told that Hurley Reed prepares every dinner party well in advance, the narrator says, "Many were the ideas for this course put forth by Hurley and Chris on those evenings, in those few weeks, before the party. . . . They could have been eating *aiguillette de carnad* . . . . But they are eating pheasant" (pp. 41-2). This simple event is going to be the pattern of more complex events, such as Dan's intention to persuade his mother to change her will in his favor, Margaret's marriage, Margaret's plan to get rid of her mother-in-law, Hilda's wedding present for William and Margaret. *Symposium* is a novel in which most of the characters want to impose a plan, a plot, and they do their best to control chronology and contingency, but in the end it is destiny that prevails—the order is imposed, either consciously or randomly, by a superior entity.

The end of *Symposium* is, of course, open because the novel stops when Hilda's death is being reported and we never know what Margaret did next, or what happened to William; the narrator shows Andrew Barnet instead, someone Hilda met (by chance?) on a plane from Australia, looking for friends "to tell them how he had met Hilda Damien" (p. 192), just as William did when he met Margaret. The irony is stronger than ever in the book because Andrew is a completely irrelevant character both in the plot and the story, and therefore he may represent anyone, including the reader.

Muriel Spark's novels have always been very complex, have constituted involved studies of human nature and the role of man under God's designs, although she has been criticized for doing exactly the opposite. It seems to us that a statement of Margaret about William's job clearly defines Muriel Spark's method for writing novels, "Inspiration from nature . . . is after all, from what you tell me, the basis of the study of artificial intelligence" (p. 132).<sup>17</sup>

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