



*Theory and Practice in English Studies 4 (2005):
Proceedings from the Eighth Conference of British, American
and Canadian Studies. Brno: Masarykova univerzita*

The Concept of Evil in *Symposium* and *Not to Disturb*

Ema Jelínková

Faculty of Arts, Palacký University, Olomouc

Muriel Spark's fiction is remarkable for the subtle, intricate insertion of the author's moral preoccupation. However, Spark's later novels not only revisit and rewrite many of her favorite subjects and concepts – such as the role of evil in the contemporary, seemingly godless world – but two of them come very close to contradicting some of Spark's earlier and most basic findings. My paper is to concentrate on establishing a consistent view of the notion of evil in *Symposium* and *Not to Disturb*: evil becomes conspicuous by Spark's silence about it and by her precarious treatment of what is considered good.

Muriel Spark's early novels established her reputation as an unconventional satirist and a moralist with a religious bent: there always exists an ultimate meaning to extricate from the texts, a divine pattern to emerge at last. Lamentably, this notion does not do justice to the real scope of Sparkian intent and methods. Most satirists tend to embed a clearly distinguishable pattern into their fiction that – once decoded – boils down to a rather predictable, homogeneous attitude. Spark's development is by no means that straightforward – it does not continue to flow on in the same direction – there suddenly comes a sharp bend amounting to a reversal of former priorities. Spark gives an impression of someone engaged in a continual and a very dynamic conversation with herself, a conversation that transcends each and any of her separate novels. These are therefore not to be handled as independent entities as Spark's debate entails constant revisions of approaches.

As of 1970s, Spark takes an increasing delight in elusiveness, insists on the artifice of writing and refuses to confer value on her texts or to insert a recognizable moral preoccupation. By having blurred categories of good and evil she has come very close to contradicting many of her previous claims and findings.

Symposium is a slight book, yet it contains far too many evil factors to be handled to any degree of credit within a strictly limited space. For this reason I decided to focus on a single character, an incarnation of the most enigmatic evil that manifests itself in the novel. Margaret Murchie penetrated a circle of wealthy Londoners through marriage to William

Damien, a son of a media magnate. A mystery seems to surround the girl from the very beginning, a mystery that dissolves into vague unease to everyone in the group excluding Hilda, Margaret's well-to-do mother-in-law, who has noticed not only William's apparent infatuation with his Scottish partner, but also disparities in Margaret's nature, appearance and conduct. Hilda cannot help recalling a striking contrast between the girl's excessive meekness and her protruding, violent front teeth and witchlike red hair. Apart from that, Margaret professes an extremely fundamental Christian doctrine compelling its exponents to "center their thoughts and actions away from themselves and entirely onto other people" (Spark 1991: 35) – such a moral position necessarily rings of hollowness. Margaret is too good to be true – yet she gives an impression of oddness. Given a few incongruities in the story of a hastened courtship it is no wonder Hilda's discomfort with Margaret crystallizes into specific misgivings concerning her daughter-in-law's motivations. Hilda suspects Margaret of having engineered the initial meeting with her eligible son; of employing some magic powers to trap that unsuspecting fool in order to gain access to Hilda's enormous property. Apart from the girl's implicit witchlike nature there are more tangible reasons for discomfort, to say the least. As it transpires later, Margaret was implicated in a series of unfortunate incidents and – due to extensive media coverage of the scandals – became a blemish on the family name. Her grandmother was strangled in bed after having changed her will in the interest of Margaret's father. Margaret's subsequent stay in a rather unorthodox convent was terminated by a murder within the religious community. To the puzzlement of the police and media, the most unlikely person imaginable, Mother Superior, a bed-ridden invalid incapable of violence, confessed to committing that hideous crime and died in a cardiac arrest a few hours later. This death remained a mystery as well and aroused suspicion of Margaret's agency as she had been Mother Superior's roommate and confidante. The Murchies are shocked into recognition that both murders appeared in some way linked to their daughter, although there was no evidence. What is more, the very lack of evidence against Margaret seemed even to strengthen the suspicion of her agency. The list of disasters from Margaret's past involves her best friend, who drowned in circumstances that were never fully explained and a mysterious disappearance of a schoolteacher who took Margaret to tea and was never seen again, dead or alive.

However, there is one family member to rejoice in recognition of strange powers in his niece – mad uncle Magnus, a lunatic of demonic powers and prophetic capacity. To him Margaret impersonates the image of "vile woman" from the Scottish Border Ballads – a female possessing "evil eye" that makes disasters come about.

The sequence of incidents is too overwhelming to dismiss the possibility of participation. Yet – despite the sinister aura that builds up – the evolution of the story puts Margaret's evil eye into a rather different perspective. We never gain access to Margaret's thoughts on the subject of her evil deeds until she makes a revealing statement herself: "I am tired of being the passive carrier of disaster. I feel frustrated [...] I am tired of being made to feel guilty for no reason. I would like to feel guilty for a real case of guilt" (Spark 1991: 160).

This revelation is double-edged: Spark has managed to trick us, gullible readers, into taking Margaret's dark intentions for granted. We have read proximity for participation, form for content and contingency for pattern. Yet, simultaneously, we have observed a downfall of an individual: Margaret makes a deliberate choice of evil because good has willfully and maliciously eluded her in bonfires of mockery at all honorable intentions she might ever have. Needless to say, the implied, not the obvious becomes crucial for understanding. A story of evil incarnate infiltrating a circle of rich friends offers various interpretative alternatives; it may even read as a sinister tale of individual human frailty, represented by a person whose endurance was tested beyond limits. Margaret cannot escape: neither family nor religious institution may provide solace to a person who is afflicted with evil and whose talent consists

in disseminating it. Margaret has acceded to the otherness attributed to her and succumbs to the dark side of her personality. Instead of resuming the role of a passive carrier of disaster she attempts to liberate herself by making disasters happen. Her rebellious dream of final control dissolves in an illusion of power: she has decided to mastermind and perpetrate evil instead of being haunted by it. This statement obviously marks a turning point in the narrative. Still, there is no upper limit to surprises in Sparkian fiction. Margaret's evil eye seems to be failing its mistress precisely in situations when it was consciously activated. Hilda was essentially right – the Scottish witch did set her powerful eye on William. However, the task of attracting an eligible bachelor turned out more complicated than Margaret would expect. Indeed, her intrigue ended in marriage to a doting husband, but it could have been a mere result of contingency or a triumph of natural inclination rather than magic powers. The simple fact of someone falling in love with an attractive person need not be necessarily inscribed to any powers beyond the ordinary. And there is even a greater degree of randomness to be highlighted in the awkward business of the murder of Hilda: destined as she might be for an untimely death, it is not going to be contrived through any conscious effort of Margaret. On having learned that Hilda Damien was murdered in her flat for a precious Monet on the wall, Margaret cries in anguish: “No, it can't be! Not till Sunday!” (Spark 1991: 191)

Let me observe it was Margaret's willfulness that destroyed the magical powers – had there been any. Margaret has renounced the good left in her nature at the cost of her humanity and gained nothing in return. At this very moment she is perfectly aware of being doomed to arbitrariness and ambiguity – which is the worst punishment ever reserved for plotters in the world of Muriel Spark. Thus the traditional concept of evil is rendered void as Margaret's evil power gets thwarted and vanquished not by good but by even greater, more determined evil – Hilda manages to escape a deadly push into a pond only to fall victim to a gang of robbers. What kind of authority does the narrative evoke? This novel perhaps marks an absolute transition in the literary output of Muriel Spark: she has become an acolyte of power that may be omniscient and omnipotent – but not necessarily bent on benign intentions.

The notion of evil in *Not to Disturb* lends itself to even more arbitrary treatment, if possible. The story takes place in Chateau Klopstock somewhere in Switzerland and concerns an eternal triangle that is about to come full circle: the Baron and the Baroness von Klopstock and their mutual secret lover, Victor Passerat, lock themselves in the library on the eve of a stormy night, where they are not to be disturbed on any account. The household staff – orchestrated by Lister the butler – keeps a vigil downstairs, waiting for the deaths of their masters. According to Lister who obviously possesses a gift of foresight, a massacre is a predetermined and therefore a necessary outcome of the library session: “They have placed themselves, unfortunately, within the realm of predestination [...] To all intents and purposes, they are already dead, although as a matter of banal fact, the night's business has still to accomplish itself” (Spark 1971: 17).

In the meanwhile, the servants are not to be disturbed either. They are busy rehearsing interviews for the press, signing contracts for film rights and giving finishing touches to their memoirs. Lister is very effective in diverting any visitor who might want to tamper with the course of destiny by trying to join the doomed triangle – and to upset the delicately balanced homicidal atmosphere in the library. The following morning duly finds the three accursed masters in a pool of blood. The staff resume control over the property as one of the maids – aided and abetted by Lister – achieved marriage to the Baron's idiot brother and heir to the title.

Muriel Spark used to regard a story as a part of a predetermined design. This particular story amounts to a calculated reversal as a god-like narrative authority is rejected for the art of ridicule. We might consider the servants technically innocent, yet morally complicit.

However, in a deterministic universe, where meaning is not derived from the present action – or the lack of it – but from an already established future, Lister is perfectly right in dismissing his masters as insubstantial bodies doomed to die.

Traditional moral concepts and religious principles sustained Muriel Spark's fiction for quite some time. They are to be displaced now, as Rankin points out: "I do not believe in good and evil so much any more. Now there is only one area of conflict left and that is between absurdity and intelligence" (Rankin 1993: 50).

Lister the surrogate novelist of *Not to Disturb* ranks among the most memorable manipulators and plot-makers to have inhabited the fiction of Muriel Spark: Jean Brodie, Lise, Dougal Douglas or Hildegard Wolf. Most of these individuals were doomed to more or less spectacular failures as they dared to impose their own plots on a pre-existent, and therefore superior divine pattern. A change of mood must have come over Muriel Spark because Lister emerges victorious with nobody to challenge him and his designs receive a stamp of approval – the only two people to thwart his plans get killed in the most fictitious fashion imaginable: by a sudden flash of lightning. Does this equate a divine manifestation of power? Certainly not, as there is no God presiding over this fictional universe, only a minor deity called Muriel Spark, who takes much pleasure in poking fun at anyone whose perception of literature might have been conditioned by the traditional notion of omniscience and omnipotence of narrators.

Sparkian fiction never failed to create tension. Dame Muriel has taken turns in being silent about her motivation and providing relative accessibility to the moral intent encoded in her texts, thus stressing the protean and multi-layered nature of her fiction. There is no single or singular principle operating in each and every text. Even Spark's authorial detachment is not absolute and neither is a change in attitude: her fiction from this period operates mainly on the assumption of positive values negatively defined. Evil becomes conspicuous by its absence and authorial "meaningful" silences are intended to eclipse and shatter all connections that would have been established too easily. The need for explanation is not resisted absolutely but satisfied by proxy – it is Spark's audience who find themselves cast into the role of "amateur Providence": the one intended to pass final though not irrevocable judgment on a moral intent of each text. Which is an encouraging thought.

Works cited:

- Spark, Muriel (1991) *Symposium*, London: Penguin Books.
Spark, Muriel (1971) *Not to Disturb*, London: Macmillan Press.
Rankin, I. (1993) 'The Deliberate Cunning of Muriel Spark' in Wallace, G., and Stevenson, R. (eds) *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.