

**LIFE AND DEATH IN THE TENSE PRESENT: TIME,
NARRATIVE AND DOOMED DEDUCTION IN MURIEL
SPARK'S *THE DRIVER'S SEAT***

JAMES BAILEY

The (traditional) Book is an object which connects, develops, runs and flows, in short, has the profoundest *horror vacui*...to write is to secrete words within that great category of the continuous which is narrative; all literature...should be a narrative, a flow of words in the service of an event which 'makes its way' toward its denouement or its conclusion: not to 'narrate' its object is, for the Book, to commit suicide. (Barthes, 'Literature and Discontinuity' 173–74)

Her lips are slightly parted. (Spark, *The Driver's Seat* 9)

What remains to be said about *The Driver's Seat*? Since its publication in 1970, Muriel Spark's brief, brittle, resoundingly bleak little book about the days and hours preceding the rape and murder of its protagonist, a middle-aged woman named Lise, has attracted controversy, acclaim and widespread critical inquiry.¹ Lise's restless wanderings from mysterious origins, her preoccupation with meeting the man she calls her 'type' (68), combined with her propensity to erupt into fits of laughter or tears, make her intentions and state of mind ambiguous, and her presence unsettling and often uncomfortable to endure. Arguably, however, it is the novel's intricate temporal design—its startling use of proleptic narration, in particular, to forecast Lise's imminent, brutal death, and the police investigation that follows it—that accounts for its enduring power to fascinate and disturb. Suspended between glimpses of a known future and a detached, concurrent narrative that records Lise's present actions as they unfold, the reader is compelled to view a woman's life in the shadow of her death, to invest contingency with design, to read for the plot.

This is a reading that *The Driver's Seat* not only anticipates but gestures playfully toward. Near the beginning of the novel, as Lise prepares to board a flight from her home in an unidentified country somewhere in northern Europe to an unspecified city somewhere in the south, she purchases an unnamed novel from an airport bookshop, which

she will clutch tightly to her chest for the remainder of the journey. ‘Who knows her thoughts?’ the narrator remarks, ‘Who can tell?’ (50). The implications here are impossible to ignore. Lise (whose name evokes the French ‘lisent’—they read), exists both inside and outside the novel as a text in need of deciphering. She personifies our *horror vacui*—that awful, profound dread of the void, of ambiguity and the absence of meaning—and thus demands to be ‘filled in’, to be conquered and banished by our interpretations, however strange or spurious they might be. Like the police investigators and journalists who later attempt to reconstruct Lise’s final hours, ‘elaborat[ing] with due art’ upon a small number of uncertain details ‘for the few days it takes for her identity to be established’ (51), readers attempt to rebuild something that never was. Nevertheless, the pattern of the classical detective story haunts the text, seducing readers and characters alike with the irresistible prospect of coherence and closure.

The lure of playing the detective is evidently rather difficult to resist; even some of the most incisive critical readings of *The Driver’s Seat* have stuck steadfastly to the linear, causal approach that its temporal structure invites, perceiving Lise to be the artful plotter of her own demise. For at least one critic, the protagonist’s loud and uncontrolled behaviour can be interpreted as evidence not only of an incipient mental derangement and a desire to be noticed, but of an ‘elaborate’, self-destructive strategy of which death is an inevitable conclusion:

Throughout the novel [Lise] complains, quarrels, speaks more loudly than is normal, laughs hysterically, bursts into tears, stares at strangers; and this behaviour is both evidence of her serious mental instability...and part of the elaborate trail she is laying....Lise is the spinner of her own plot, a very active and purposeful victim hunting a passive and reluctant murderer. (68)

Like so many other readings of *The Driver’s Seat*,² Norman Page’s interpretation makes a convincing attempt at rationalising the novel’s tense present in relation to its certain future. On reading his construal of the text, however, it is difficult not to be struck by an extreme glibness of tone; if Lise laughs, cries, shouts and rages more ‘than is normal’, Page seems to say, she is effectively imposing herself upon a potential killer, who, despite his reluctance, will proceed to punish this ‘active and purposeful victim’ for her excessive behaviour. Ian Rankin, himself no

stranger to narrativising the logic of crime and its deduction, takes this extreme causal logic to its limit:

[Lise] is, in the end, not to be pitied too much, for her plan has worked. Her victim is more in need of sympathy. He, a rehabilitated sex-offender, goes to prison. This is a macabre form of suicide, and one which hides its planner's intent....Lise has decided to commit suicide, yet cannot bring herself to do it....[S]he is committing suicide because she has been a lonely anonymous woman, and both the modus operandi of her suicide and her actions during the hours preceding it, will ensure her at least posthumous recognition in the world. (158)

Before the reader's eyes, Rankin, eager to attribute purpose to the protagonist, infers a series of causes for the novel's presented 'effect'; Lise's actions, he asserts, result from her being isolated and suicidal, and craving posthumous notoriety. Yet, despite the imaginative leaps in their logic, there remains something perversely comforting about the above readings. For all that they tell us about Lise as a deranged, deviant and self-destructive being, they also assure us that the inconsistencies in her behaviour, and her awful fate at the hands of her murderer, can be explained, understood, and neatly put to rest. Suddenly, the protagonist's complexities dissolve away; Lise, readers are led to believe, is nothing more than 'a lonely anonymous woman', whose drastic actions result from a desperate want of attention.

And yet, rather like Lise's 'slightly parted' lips—a detail repeated an excessive thirteen times within this slight novel's one hundred or so pages—*The Driver's Seat* seems poised to tell us something that we have not already heard. The novel has far more to say, it seems, about the ways in which readers decipher texts, respond to a narrative's temporal structure, and uncover or even fabricate meaning than it could possibly reveal about the motivations of a single character. In this essay, therefore, I suggest an 'off-road' reading of *The Driver's Seat*, whereby the reader strays from the linear, causal 'track' of time that has become so well-travelled in previous interpretations of the novel. After discussing the linear logic that invites but ultimately confounds convincing causal readings of the text, I turn to look at the novel's bewildering, immersive and plotless present tense sequences, and the tension they register between reader and text. I will conclude by focusing

on *The Driver's Seat*'s disturbing final scene, and the unsettling link it presupposes between reading, violence and mastery of the text.

Lines of Inquiry: Linear Logic and the Limits of Reading

In his essay, 'An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative', Roland Barthes argues that 'the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence—what comes after being read in narrative as what is caused by'. Here, Barthes equates causation with the order of the textual sequence so that narrative, with its illusory impression of causality, can be read as 'a systematic application of the logical fallacy denounced by Scholasticism in the formula *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*—a good motto for Destiny, of which narrative...is nor more than the "language"' (94). The application of this fallacy, which translates as 'after this, therefore because of this', is nowhere more prevalent than in the traditional detective novel, where it becomes the genre's chief *raison d'être*. The story we read in these novels—the story of the investigation—reconstitutes the preceding story of the crime, working backwards from the murder to its motive, from effect to cause, along a chain of interconnected events.

The traditional detective story, a genre of fiction which narrativises a hermeneutic logic of interpretation, thus carries within it a set of values concerning the way in which mysteries are approached and meaning is recovered. That meaning is something that can be recovered in the first place is crucial here; detective fiction has at its centre a faith in the total coherence of all things, a state of order which will be restored after the detective's work is done. What this genre privileges and subscribes to, then, are modes of understanding based upon empirical reasoning, and sequentially unfolding patterns of cause and effect in linear time. Such stories function fundamentally to rationalise experience—the strange is made knowable, the once ambiguous events are reconstructed in the order in which they occurred, and the perpetrator, whose deviant behaviour has eventually been categorised and comprehended, is finally punished. Order can at last be resumed. The plight of the victim is conspicuously less important in all of this; his or her mysterious death functions in the genre as a kind of sacrifice, a necessary emblem of the loss of order and of the need for the detective to restore it. The sense of satisfaction experienced by the reader at the end of these texts is by no means incidental, therefore, but is essential to their purpose. The neat resolutions of these fictions act as confirmations of the meaning-making practices and beliefs to which the genre subscribes, so that the continued

reading and retelling of these stories becomes a ritual of near religious significance.

Central to this faith in the progressive recovery of meaning is faith in a linear, causal model of time—what the cultural theorist Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth describes as the time of ‘history and project’. This mode of time—consciousness, Ermarth argues:

is always future-bound, always defined by a progress that binds past and present in a structure of significance that is only perceptible from the vantage point of its future outcome. That future position is always occupied in a ‘modern’ (historical) narrative because any ‘present’ in the historical triad of ‘past–present–future’ is always already past, already part of a structure of significance being unfolded in the past tense and thus from the point of view of the future. (‘What if Time is a Dimension’ 143)

Historical time, and the consciousness that is coextensive with it, is thus tethered to the promise of the future significance and coherence of present experiences. As such, the ongoing present is never allowed to exist fully; it is viewed instead from an imagined future perspective not only as having already passed, but as having been somehow worthwhile. It is viewed, that is, as having been a key component of an ever-unfolding ‘narrative’ of progress and discovery. It is this desperate hope for the eventual coherence and significance of present tense existence that *The Driver’s Seat* sets out to expose and undermine. At the beginning of the novel’s third chapter, the sprawling, present tense narrative is interrupted, for the first time, by the following, proleptic excursion:

[Lise] will be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab-wounds, her wrists bound with a silk scarf and her ankles bound with a man’s necktie, in the grounds of an empty villa, in a park of the foreign city to which she is travelling on the flight now boarding at Gate 14. (25)

Like a perverse inversion of the kind of teleological grounding described by Ermarth, this passage anchors the reader in historical time not with the reassuring promise of eventual resolution and coherence, but, paradoxically, with the unsettling anticipation of an extreme violation of

order. Where the traditional detective novel works away from disorder and towards an assurance of clarity and reason, Spark's version does precisely the opposite.

Once the reader knows where and when Lise will be killed, the apparently contingent events of the present acquire a significance that they would otherwise lack. As Patricia Waugh puts it, 'Reading the novel for the first time, with its exaggerated sense of an ending and technique of advanced significance, is like the second reading of a conventional novel' (120). This is especially true when, while shopping in the foreign city to which she has travelled, Lise 'buys a silk scarf patterned in black and white', as well as a 'cheap electric food-blender' and 'a plastic zipper-bag' (60). As readers are aware that one of these items will be found attached to Lise's mutilated corpse the following morning, this seemingly mundane shopping trip transforms into something altogether more sinister. Suddenly, the patterned scarf is no longer a gift or souvenir, but instead becomes an accessory for an arranged murder. And yet, if Lise really is devoted to the meticulous planning of her death, one wonders what she is she doing shopping for a kitchen appliance at the same time. Spark's surreal, pitch-black sense of humour is on full display here; the deductive logic that attempts to 'solve' death is never far from being undermined by details that don't quite adhere to the applied reading.

That in 1970 Spark was offering her own take on what would later become known as the 'metaphysical' detective novel—'a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions – such as narrative closure and the detective's role as surrogate reader'—is itself significant (Merivale and Sweeney 2). At a similar time, two influential studies by Michael Holquist and William Spanos claimed that a particular kind of inconclusive, unsettling detective story best represented postmodernism's central thematic concerns.³ What Spanos names as the 'anti-detective story', the primary intention of which 'is to evoke the impulse to 'detect' and/or to psychoanalyse in order to violently frustrate it' (154), is seen by Holquist as a reaction against 'the narcotising effect of its progenitor; instead of familiarity, it gives strangeness', so that '[i]f, in the detective story, death must be solved, in the new metaphysical detective story it is life which much be solved' (155). Interpretation, these studies both argue, always mediates reality. The detective comes to be seen as just as limited and ideologically-motivated as any other reader, confronted only with surface details for clues in the narrative present, and without access to the depth of psychological insight or personal history.

When questioned about her construction of a non-omniscient narrator, who lacks the ability to interpret the thoughts and feelings of characters and determine exactly how future events correspond to the present, Spark responded: ‘God knows....[*The Driver’s Seat*] was from the point of view of someone who doesn’t know what anyone is thinking, but who can see, who can observe....[Y]ou’re either God, or you’re a fly on the wall’ (qtd. in Frankel 450). Against the omniscience of the God-like narrator located in the nineteenth century realist novel, for example, who is free to roam in time and can comprehend a character’s thoughts in their entirety, Spark’s ‘fly on the wall’ is limited, largely, to observing present phenomena. It is likely to have been Alain Robbe-Grillet, the chief practitioner and arguably the best known author of the French *nouveau roman*, whose fictions inspired Spark to invent such a narrator.⁴ In his essay, ‘A Future for the Novel’, Robbe-Grillet claims that ‘Objectivity in the ordinary sense of the word – total impersonality of observation – is all too obviously an illusion’ (23). His novels are ‘objective’, he insists, only insofar as they relate the orientation of a subjective consciousness, from a specific, limited perceptual position, to surrounding objects. ‘Man’, he writes elsewhere,

is present on every page, in every line, in every word. Even if many objects are presented and described with great care, there is always, and especially, the eye which sees them, the thought which examines them, the passion which distorts them. The objects in our novels never have a presence outside human perception....It is a man who sees, who feels, who imagines, a man located in space and time, conditioned by his passions.... And the book reports nothing but his experience, limited and uncertain as it is. (‘New Novel, New Man’, 137–39)

The necessary effect of the *nouveau roman*, the hallmark of its narrative technique, is a unification of the consciousnesses of both reader and narrator into a single, limited positionality in the immediate moment: ‘It is a man here, now, who is his own narrator, finally’ (‘New Novel, New Man’, 139). The title of Robbe-Grillet’s 1957 novel, *La Jalousie*, translates as both ‘jealousy’ and ‘venetian blind’, thereby underscoring the text’s preoccupation with both the emotionally-distorted perception of the world by the ‘man who sees’ and the partial, myopic quality of that his limited viewpoint. Depicting a series of excessively detailed, repeated scenes – the rows of trees in a banana plantation, a woman

brushing her hair, a centipede squashed against a wall – the novel invites the reader’s suppositions as to how these images might be connected. *La Jalousie* is thus a work of detective fiction in the most literal sense, its concurrent, lucidly-rendered narrative remaining fundamentally incomplete until the reader’s surmises have been projected onto it. ‘The postmodern novelist’, Ermarth contends (referring specifically to Robbe-Grillet), ‘attempts to bring to the level of consciousness the imaginative process itself as it takes place in language’ (*Sequel to History* 75).

For Spark, it was this quality of Robbe-Grillet’s fiction, ‘the drama of exact observation’ as she called it (qtd. in Toynbee 23), that held the greatest appeal. While *The Driver’s Seat* does not subscribe entirely to the suspension of time in Robbe-Grillet’s novels (as attested to by the awful future that Lise will face), Spark’s extended focus on the narrative present has a similar effect, encouraging the reader to respond to the activity of reading, and thus the activity of constructing, the text. Towards the end of the text, before Lise is reunited with Richard, the man who will kill her, she decides to discard her airport paperback, handing it over to a hotel porter as though it were a parting gift: ‘You can have the book as well; its a whydunnit in q-sharp major’ (101). As opposed to the whodunnit, the name of which points to the search for a guilty culprit, the ‘whydunnit’ would presumably seek to address broader questions concerning origins, motives and states of mind – all of which *The Driver’s Seat* refuses to shed light on. Rendered in a musical key far outside the realm of the diatonic scale, the book Lise holds—that Lise *is*—can never be fully comprehended.

Tense Present: Enduring ‘exploded reality’

A necessary consequence of the teleological character of plot is that the story, by virtue of its trajectory and ending being known already by the storyteller, is always implicitly or explicitly told in retrospect, as having been completed before the telling. In *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), Barthes identifies the French preterite (the past historic, the tense of a completed action) as the ‘cornerstone of narration’:

Through the preterite, the verb implicitly belongs to a causal chain.... Allowing as it does an ambiguity between temporality and causality, it calls for a sequence of events, that is, for an intelligible Narrative....[I]t is the unreal time of cosmogonies,

myths, History and Novels. It presupposes a world which is constructed, elaborated, self-sufficient, reduced to significant lines and not one which has been set sprawling before us, for us to take or leave. Behind the preterite there always lurks a demiurge, a God or a reciter. The world is not unexplained since it is told like a story...the preterite is precisely this operative sign whereby the narrator reduces exploded reality to a slim and pure logos, without density, without volume, without spread, and whose sole function is to unite as rapidly as possible a cause and an end. (30–31)

Assuring certainty, causality, consequence, and the mastery of the narrative at the hands of ‘a God or a reciter’, the preterite comes to establish a solid framework of determinacy, wherein events are not simply described, but also defined in terms of their relative significance to the plot as a whole. What the preterite affirms, then, is both its possession of the past and its elimination of the contingent or unknown.

The ‘exploded reality’ of the concurrent narrative, on the other hand, is precisely without absolute knowledge, defined value or containment. Instead, readers experience an immersive series of moments in time arranged as a series of separate ‘nows’ rather than clearly demarcated stages within a temporal line. This is certainly what takes place in *The Driver’s Seat*. Consider, for example, the following, excessively detailed scene in which a sheikh descends the steps of a hotel, followed by his aides and servants:

There emerge down the steps of the hotel two women who seem to be identical twins...followed by an important-looking Arabian figure...he is flanked by two smaller bespectacled, brown-faced men in business-like suits....Two black-robed women with the lower parts of their faces veiled and their heads shrouded in drapery then make their descent, and behind them another pair appear, men-servants with arms raised, bearing aloft numerous plastic-enveloped garments on coat hangers. Still in pairs, further components of the retinue appear, each two moving in unison. (83–84)

This prolonged, bewildering sequence runs on exhaustively until each of the pairs (and several more besides) have completed their short journey down the steps. Everything is described successively, as if the narrator is

watching the spectacle as it unfolds, offering a running commentary which lacks the assurance of retrospective narration (the two women only ‘seem’ to be identical twins, while the ‘Arabian figure’ is rendered as vaguely ‘important-looking’). The scene does not serve any purpose in terms of the novel’s loosely-rendered plot—it does not lead to a new discovery or play any role in Lise’s future death. Nor does it contribute towards any sense of verisimilitude; it is too clinically precise, too imposingly geometrical in its use of symmetry and numerical patterning, to resemble anything like realism.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the concurrent narrative in *The Driver’s Seat* is its repeated description of near-identical details and actions: the wrapping and unwrapping of objects, the purchasing of gifts and souvenirs, patterns of shapes and colours on dresses, the geometrically precise arrangement of furniture, manic bouts of laughter and crying, pathways and roads, moving images on television monitors, large crowds travelling en masse in the same direction, and, most frequent of all, Lise’s ‘slightly parted’ lips. These details cannot be carried along by the teleological impulse of a conventional plot; their presence within the narrative will certainly not lead to any future discovery or resolution. They do not cause one another to occur, do not sit side by side in a hypotactic sequence of events. Instead, these details work paratactically, forming patterns and rhythms within the text, growing in vividness as the frequency of the repetitions increases. Considered in isolation from the known future, the narrated domain of the present does not appear as a bounded whole, but rather a world progressively taking shape—located on the cusp between certainty and indeterminacy—in the process of narration.

In her excellent study of narrative temporality and postmodernism, *Sequel to History* (1992), Ermarth notes the increase in concurrent narration in contemporary fiction, including the novels of Cortàzar and Robbe-Grillet. These present-tense fictions, she observes, create ‘a kind of hyperfocus’, which isolates and magnifies the ‘space and time that, in realistic narrative, would be the crucial connecting medium making possible mediation between what that very time and space have separated and dispersed’ (75). In this radically disrupted time scheme, ‘details or moments float...free from their customary responsibilities to be ciphers for some meaning...and to be carriers for that rationalisation of consciousness achieved in historical time’ (75). In this way, temporality exists only as the play of the reader’s consciousness across the patterns, repetitions and rhythms found within the text itself.

As a description of the sprawling, vividly rendered, present tense sequences that make up the majority of the narrative in *The Driver’s*

Seat, ‘exploded reality’ could hardly be more appropriate. While the historical mode of time consciousness, as described by Ermarth, must entail a constant transcendence of the depth and detail of the moment at hand, the isolated present has the power to seize and envelop the reader. Spark makes subtle references to the tension between these temporal frames in the imagery she uses throughout the novel. In its opening scene, for example, Lise stands in the changing room of a department store, trying on a dress ‘patterned with green and purple squares on a white background, with blue spots within the green squares, cyclamen spots within the purple’ (1). The dress, we learn, ‘is awaiting the drastic reductions of next week’s sales’, its vibrant, disorientingly detailed design having proved ‘too vivid for most customers’ taste’ (1). The image of the dress—vivid, excessive, bewildering, and yet soon to undergo ‘drastic reductions’ to appeal to the customer—can be read as a *mise en abyme* of the narrative as a whole, both as it is delivered by Spark and as it is reconfigured (or reduced) by the teleological impulse of the reader.

The patterned dress is by no means the only self-reflexive representation of narrative logic in Spark’s novel. *The Driver’s Seat* is replete with images of linear pathways, excavations and trails, which come to resemble ‘significant lines’ and ‘geometrism’ of the teleological plot, as described by Barthes. There is, for example, the minimal, ‘clean lined and clear’ décor of Lise’s designer apartment, in which ‘the lines of the room are pure...circumscribed by the dexterous pinewood outlines’ (13), the extended rows of steps ‘roughly cut out of the earthy track’ (70) of the ruinous city to which she travels, and (perhaps most blatant of all) the scattered trail of brown rice that escapes from the suitcase carried by Lise’s admirer, Bill, and which is duly followed by the police investigators. The painstakingly-drawn, quasi-geometrical landscape of the novel seems to conspire to keep Lise (and, of course, the reader) on the linear temporal ‘track’ of the suspense plot, focused intently on what appears to be a drive to death. Seen this way, the linear landscape makes a mockery of the narrator’s assertion that ‘[Lise] lays the trail’ (51) for others to follow. Lise’s entire narrative ‘world’ is, in fact, composed of a sinister network of trails, lines, tracks, routes and steps which have been plotted before her from the outset, repeatedly threatening to enclose her within set frames of meaning. Viewed from inside these frames, her complex character and mysterious history is immediately diminished and reduced to the ‘slim and pure logos’ that Barthes describes.

What Spark is able to express in these scenes, therefore, is the reader’s urge for the plot to move forward, for Lise to follow the lines drawn out around her. In *The Driver’s Seat*, reading becomes the

experience of a prolonged and often intolerable suspension between an uncertain, contingent present and a future happening that is horrifying but at least certain, and thus anticipated as an end to contradiction and ambiguity. Perceived in this way, the novel comes to resemble a baited trap, which lures the reader in with the promise of eventual satisfaction, where ‘exploded reality’ will at last be reduced to something ‘slim and pure’ by means of a rectilinear logic of interpretation. This is a highly uncomfortable resolution; Lise’s rape and murder do not arrive with new meaning, nor do they complete a causal chain of events, or give way to a crucial revelation. Her violent end—‘he plunges into her, with the knife poised high’ (106)—is rendered as vividly as any other concurrent description.

Dead End: Drawing Conclusions and Reverting to Type

In a novel so devoid of psychological insight, it is especially shocking that *The Driver’s Seat* should end not with the already anticipated image of Lise’s bloody corpse, but with a vision that enters the mind of her killer as he flees from the scene of the crime:

He runs to the car, taking his chance and knowing that he will at last be taken, and seeing already as he drives away from the Pavilion and away, the sad little office where the police clank in and out and the type-writer ticks out his unnerving statement: ‘She told me to kill her and I killed her’. (107)

In their separate yet corresponding readings of this ending both Martin McQuillan and Paddy Lyons interpret the apparently unmanned typewriter in the police station as the generator of the novel we read. ‘From here the whole of the novel’, McQuillan argues, ‘can be reread as an unnerving police report’ (3), which, writes Lyons, has the effect of ‘dramatising whatever crude voices have pronounced smugly that women who suffer rape are somehow ‘asking for it’ (94). This is a tempting conclusion to draw; the metafictional concept of the autopoeitic, or self-begetting, text can be traced throughout Spark’s fiction, no more so than in her debut novel, *The Comforters* (1957), in which the protagonist, sick of her actions being transcribed by an author’s typewriter, takes over the narration and rewrites the story. Although the fraught and often interchangeable relationship between narrator and narrated is one of Spark’s primary thematic concerns, the

above reading of the police typewriter as surrogate author is not entirely convincing. For one, it seems extremely unlikely that a police report could ever capture the vivid poetry of Lise's present existence as effectively as the narrative does.

Secondly, in a novel that so rigorously interrogates the transactive space between reader and text, an outright mimicry of the crude, misogynistic logic of the policemen would leave little room for the reader's own interpretation to develop and emerge. Lyons and McQuillan can thus be seen to presuppose a fundamental passivity on the side of the reader, who, they believe, blindly follows the 'crude voices' of the narrative. What Spark does instead is far subtler. In place of 'crude voices', she offers a wholly dispassionate narrative surface, onto which the reader is tempted and encouraged to supply pattern. In doing so, Spark succeeds in making an accomplice of the reader, who comes to fill the sinister role of 'type-writer'. Spark's hyphenated rendering of the word is surely intentional here; the reader, as surrogate author, becomes the writer of 'types'—someone who portrays, promotes and pursues stereotypical ideas of people and situations. Lise is, of course, killed by her 'type', the man she first sat next to on the plane. But she is also killed figuratively by the written type—the newspapers' descriptions of her as a mad, desperate, suicidal woman—and by the reader's myopic rendering of her life story. The link between violent death and the text may remind us of the etymology of type, from the Greek 'typtein'—to strike or to beat.

The apparently contingent events that lie within the novel's present-tense narrative, events largely devoid of consistency or motivation, are thus forced brutally into pattern by the proleptic revelation of Lise's murder. If Lise appears to display her detective novel deliberately, then, it is perhaps to represent the novel's one and only red herring—that this is the only way of reading the story. The disjunctive, non-linear quality of Spark's narrative thus functions to deflect the reader's attention onto his or her own constructive imagination as work on the text. While the title of the novel can be readily construed as a metaphor for Lise's destructive desire for control of her destiny, therefore, a more fruitful interpretation might point to the readerly compulsion to master the text. Spark's metaphysical 'whydunnit' suggests, in fact, that all detections are doomed to remain mere suppositions, appearing as consolatory fictions that attempt to counter our *horror vacui* by writing ceaselessly over the void.

NOTES

¹ Such sustained interest even secured the novel a nomination for the Lost Man Booker Prize in 2010.

² For similar readings, see Parrinder and Malcolm Bradbury's essay 'Muriel Spark's Fingernails' (Bradbury 268–78).

³ Holquist cites Robbe-Grillet's novels *Jealousy* (1957) and *The Erasers* (1953), Jorge Luis Borges' short story, 'Death and the Compass' (1942), and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) as examples of the metaphysical detective story.

⁴ For more detailed studies of the relationship between Spark's fiction and the *nouveau roman*, see Day and Bailey.

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