

The Ethics of Form in Muriel Spark's *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*

PETRONIA PETRAR

Authors, Readers, Interpretations

“THERE IS NO more beautiful sight . . . than to see a fine woman bashing away at a typewriter,”¹ Dougal Douglas, the intriguing protagonist of Muriel Spark's *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960), muses as the text's multiple plot lines converge towards an end, though not towards closure. Dougal has just persuaded Miss Merle Coverdale, who will soon be revealed as the victim of murder—possibly as the result of his machinations—to take down shorthand notes of, and subsequently type down, what amounts to one version (out of many) of the novel's ending (his departure from the London suburb that provides the narrative setting). He then enigmatically invokes the figure of a woman writer, pushing the reader into full awareness of the caustic subversion of the former image of the female typist who passively records what the male voice dictates. Given Dougal's disruptive status as the trickster who wreaks havoc on the lifeless turpitude of Peckham Rye, the question of what Spark meant by Merle's death becomes pressing. It may be a consequence of her incapacity to take action or become independent: “Are you a free woman, or are you a slave?”² Dougal asks her at one point, to no avail. On the other hand, her murder might be intended as an ironic reminder of the fragility of the authority of writers, caught between the demands of traditional realism (as “head of the typing pool” at the factory where most characters work, Merle's job is to truthfully and meticulously jot down what she is dictated to, or to copy what has already been written) and the imperative of rendering the complexity of a receding world in a manner as fresh as possible. In Muriel Spark's case, this imperative is both aesthetical and ethical in nature, involving, as she puts it in an interview, “a philosophy of recognizing the existence of others,”³ but also the refinement of our capacity to appraise ourselves and the world through formal inventiveness and intellectual depth.⁴

Dougal's vision of the “fine woman bashing away at a typewriter” recalls several other instantiations of the (mostly female) author within the Sparkian universe. To mention but a few: the repeated and ironical exclamation by the narrator of a later novel, *Loitering with Intent* (1981): “what a wonderful thing it was to be a woman and an artist in the twentieth century;”⁵ “MURIEL THE MARVEL with her X-ray eyes” in the ads published by Tom Wells, the nefarious occultist of *Robinson* (1958);⁶ Caroline, the aspiring writer of Spark's debut novel, *The Comforters*, who becomes convinced that she lives inside a story being written by another author.⁷ Of course, a better example might be offered by

Dougal himself, since he is employed by a former actress to ghost-write her autobiography, with whose accuracy he does not hesitate to take shocking liberties. According to many critics, the novel's plot is instigated and controlled by Dougal, who secretly schemes to unsettle the social order by denying the certainties of capitalism, popular culture or romantic delusions about married life.

The list may go on: it has already been well documented that Spark's texts frequently feature fictional authors, embodying various attitudes or degrees of importance, but always projecting a well-defined location from which writing as the interpretation of the world emerges, and towards which the act of reading as the interpretation of the story gravitates. Authorial positions and their counterparts, fictionalized readers, are part of the arsenal utilized by Spark to draw attention to the difficulties inherent in our attempts to make sense of the world, and to foreground the ethical particulars intrinsic to the conflict of interpretation. We come thus to the focus of the present essay, which consists of investigating the ethical conundrums raised by Spark's highly idiosyncratic formal choices, via a detailed analysis of her fourth novel, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, and drawing on the suggestions offered by Leona Toker's influential inquiries into the ethics of narrative form.

In her two seminal contributions⁸ to the field of narrative ethics, Leona Toker proposes a "rhetorical" approach founded on the premise that the ethical dimension of fiction resides in the specific experience into which it plunges the reader through formal and thematic dispositions, rather than in pre-existing moral values it might be thought to illustrate or debate. Toker follows Martha Nussbaum's suggestion that generic choices are not neutral vehicles of thought, but are charged with ethical import, in order to analyze emotional responses, and triggered by "*our own information-processing performance* rather than the *vicarious* emotions aroused by the experience of the characters."⁹ One of Toker's main analytical instruments is the concept of "parallel experience"—the novel's imposition of "an intellectual predicament analogous to that of the characters"¹⁰ during reading. Reading thus occupies a time of voluntarily accepted self-effacement in the course of which readers are subjected to the same kinds of disorienting cognitive scenarios that the characters are caught up in. Narratives acquire the potential of altering attitudes or values at the end of the reading process, not by way of sympathetic identification, or the passing of moral judgments, but by compelling audiences to reevaluate their own stances or modes of interpreting the world.

Toker's conceptualizations may become the foundation of an ethics of narrative form whose principles of "aesthetic [self-]forgetfulness," agonistic engagement with the text and intersubjective communication¹¹ are aptly illustrated in Muriel Spark's writing.

"I'm fey. I've got Highland blood": *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and the Emplotment of Form

THE NOVEL's many-layered plot revolves around Dougal Douglas, recently hired as an "Arts man" by the textile manufacturers Meadows, Mead and Grindley. His job is described as "human research:" "to take the pulse of the people and plumb

the industrial depths of Peckham.¹² However, he rarely uses his office, and spends a lot of his time in pubs or parks, socializing with various women (including Merle Coverdale, who is revealed as the lover of their married boss, Mr. Druce; “his landlady Miss Belle Frierne who had known all Peckham in her youth;”¹³ Nelly Mahone, an Irish destitute woman and a Protestant convert whom he uses as an informer; Dixie Morse, the illegitimate daughter of an American GI; Beauty, lover of Trevor Lomas, “Elaine Kent, process-controller,”¹⁴ etc.). Dougal soon attracts the ire of Dixie and Trevor Lomas, best man at the wedding, who blackmails him when he realizes that Dougal has obtained a second job with the competing company of Drover Willis’s, but also the sexual interest of his employer, Mr. Druce, and the friendship of Humphrey Place, “a qualified refrigerator engineer and a union man,”¹⁵ and Dixie’s fiancé. In addition to this, Douglas also works on Maria Cheeseman’s autobiography, which he insists on relocating from Streatham to Peckham (ostensibly to protect the privacy of real-life people). His busy life includes attempts to regain Jinny, his former love, whom he has lost because of the self-confessed “fatal flaw” of not bearing to be in the vicinity of illness. By the end of his stay in Peckham, Dougal gets a promotion at Drover Willis’s, Merle has been murdered by Druce (who becomes convinced that she has given Dougal the details of his illegal activities), Nelly and the blackmailing gang suspect him of working with the police, Miss Frierne dies suddenly, and Humphrey rejects Dixie at the altar.

Detailing the beginning of her career as a novelist, Spark refers to the context of writing *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* as follows:

*Next I wanted to give my mind a holiday and to write something light and lyrical—as near a poem as a novel could get, and in as few words as possible. So I wrote **The Ballad of Peckham Rye**, the story of a curious young man who causes trouble and high jinks wherever he goes. I set the story among the young people of Peckham, which is near my home.*¹⁶

Such statements may have contributed to underserved “minor” position of the novel within the Spark canon.¹⁷ Despite being treasured among its authors’ comic masterpieces by devoted readers, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* has not enjoyed the same kind of critical attention as her other novels. It is mostly cited in support of the sometimes tenuous task of including Spark within the Scottish tradition, as instanced by approaches as different as Bryan Cheyette’s (2000)¹⁸ and Gerrard Carruthers’s (2010).¹⁹ Spark’s enduring love for the Scottish border ballads or for the works of James Hogg or Robert Louis Stevenson is described in her autobiography²⁰ and verified by recurrent intertextual references dispersed throughout her fictional output. In the case of *The Ballad*, Hogg’s *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) are invoked most conspicuously by the doppelgänger figure of the Scottish central character, who gives his name variously as Dougal Douglas, Douglas Dougal or even Dougal-Douglas, and is once referred to as “Mr. Doubtless.”²¹ Dougal has red hair and a crooked shoulder, attempts to persuade people that he used to sport two horns that he was forced to have surgically removed from his head,²² and accounts for his powers of penetrating secrets by declaring “I’m fey. I’ve got Highland blood.”²³ However, with Sparkian irony, the narrator informs us that during his days at the University of Edinburgh, Dougal “was thought of as frivolous in the pubs, not being a Nationalist.”²⁴ Spark

is certainly in no hurry to distance herself from her Scottish roots, but neither does she hesitate to caution readers against forms of essentialism and fundamentalism, which are at odds with her unwavering commitment to a cosmopolitan ethos. Moreover, Douglas's rejection of nationalism contributes to his image as a subversive free spirit, on a mission to liberate the minds of Peckham residents and disrupt the Taylorist patterns of their lives.

Rather than regarding the balladic and Gothic strands of the novel exclusively through the lenses of national identity, it is far more fruitful to explore the apparent fracture between them and the realistic tropes implied by the working-class setting of the novel. Noting its strange mixture of sociological critique and Gothic manifestation of the supernatural, Gerrard Carruthers has remarked that the "choice of mode" in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* "represents the novelist at her most unfashionable (one suspects willfully so)."²⁵ What Carruthers has in mind is the incongruity between Spark's experimentalism (of a kind that has not been yet fully assimilated, more than seven decades after the publication of her first novel) and the working-class realism dominating English writing in the aftermath of the Second World War. Carruthers's analysis glosses over Spark's avowed interest in both modernist reshaping of convention, and the poetics of the French Nouveau Roman (of which more will follow). Nevertheless, his conclusion is worth keeping in mind: he reads the novel's unruly combination of forms and themes as signaling the disharmonious and dissensual nature of the world, which renders any attempt at totalizing appropriation absurd. Spark exploits the versatility of the ballad to destabilize temporal and spatial practices that have been ossified by capitalism, social institutions or the less-than-moral actions of Peckham's residents.

However, focusing on Dougal's function as the "Arts man" bent on counteracting the mechanization of the assembly line workers through mischievous scheming paradoxically produces the same category of "mimetic" readings that Spark's (mis)use of balladic forms seems to run against. "Normalizing" Dougal's role as the trickster—or, for that matter, stabilizing his identity as a demonic figure—reduces the novel's playful complexity and its ethical mission of permanently unsettling readerly values and interpretive certainties. Spark counteracts this danger by duplicating the intricacies of form and content, and therefore compelling the audience to undergo the "parallel experience" described by Toker: readerly confusion at the nonlinearity of the plot is similar to the characters' disorientation when they need to navigate the new Peckham mapped by Dougal. This is one way in which the following important conversation between him and Mr. Druce can be read:

"All our workers' movements are now designed to conserve energy and time in feeding the line. You'll see it on the posters all over the factory, 'Conserve energy and time in feeding the line.'"

"In feeding the line!" Dougal said.

"In feeding the line," Mr Druce said. "As I say, this expert came from Cambridge. But we felt that a Cambridge man in Personnel wouldn't do. What we feel about you is you'll be in touch with the workers, or rather, as we prefer to say, our staff; you'll be in the know, we feel. Of course you'll find the world of Industry a tough one."²⁶

The Cambridge expert seeks to maximize efficiency by minutely controlling the worker's every single move; by contrast, the Edinburgh graduate is called upon to awaken the more spiritual nature of the "staff" through an appeal to the "great tradition" of Industry. Rather than assimilating art to capitalist profit-making, though, Dougal chooses to dispense with the injunctions of mechanical diligence by constantly advising people to skip work, by taking week-long breaks from the office himself, or by crying in the cafeteria in an "unmanly" fashion. His wreaking havoc on the assembly-line mentality is paralleled by the narrative's non-linear pulverization of the plot into short scenes presented in rapid succession, and interrupted by innumerable gaps that often prove impossible to fill in. In Spark's novels, form mirrors content in order to foreground the grids through which each act of interpretation takes place and disrupts readerly habits of seeing the world. In this respect, the reworking of balladic conventions, preserving both its highly stylized lyrical constraints, and its stubbornly boisterous Gothic specters, offers a felicitous ground for exploring the multiple and fluid modes in which we conspire to "emplot" the world through recognizable form. To the same extent, there is a reason behind Spark's preference for blackmailing plots: as attempts to force reality into interpretive frameworks adjusted to our own interests, they serve as perfect allegories of unethical readings that must be displaced and rearranged.

In *Eloquent Reticence*, Toker's concern is with the way narratives guide audience response through "information-withholding devices"²⁷ persistent even on re-reading, when the curiosity about "what comes next" has been satisfied, but nevertheless interpretive closure refuses to occur. The peculiar arrangement of the plot and the unfillable informational gaps in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* prevents interpretive stabilization, as the readers can never be certain whether the gruesome series of events occurs by Dougal's design or as a sequence of uncontrollable contingencies, however "providential" or even well-deserved they might appear. The most conspicuous example is Merle Coverdale's death at the hands of her lover, Mr. Druce, who suspects her of having betrayed him with, and to, Dougal. Other instances include Miss Frierne's stroke after having heartlessly refused to bury her homeless dead brother, or, earlier on, Mr Weedon's mental instability as a result of insecurity triggered by Dougal being hired in his team.

In addition to superimposing a web of micro-narratives that put the reader's coherence-making skills to severe tests, the novel also dismantles chronology by starting with the story's ending. The first and the last chapters frame a prolonged analeptic account of the events that led to Humphrey's decision to abandon Dixie at the altar. The reader's contact with the events reconstitutes the characters' cognitive lack regarding the reasons behind the failed wedding, and anticipate the novel's refusal to provide full closure by mysteriously listing the characters who will never have any knowledge of it (because, we eventually find out, they were actually dead, in prison or gone):

*Miss Merle Coverdale, lately head of the typing pool, did not hear of it. Mr Druce, lately Managing Director, did not hear of it. Neither did Dougal Douglas, the former Arts man, nor his landlady Miss Belle Frierne who had known all Peckham in her youth.*²⁸

By short-circuiting the linearity of emplotment, Spark problematizes the priority of “story” and “plot” (or, in narratological terms, “fabula” and “syuzhet”) that we all take for granted. In other words, she suggests that, rather than regarding the “historical” events as occurring prior to their narrativization, it is precisely through the grids of narrative emplotment that we become aware of events and construct their significance.

**“as you might say there was another world than this”:
The Ballad of Peckham Rye
As a “Narrative of Cultural Remission”**

LEONA TOKER’S insistence on the interplay of distance and closeness during the act of aesthetic reception finds cognate grounds in the work of Muriel Spark. Her emphatic refutation of the “all the slop and sentimentalism” associated with being a “lady-novelist” is always accompanied by a notion of form that she describes as derived from “a poetic perception, a poet’s way of looking at the world.” This “synoptic vision”²⁹ is not confined to Spark’s poetic output, but is stubbornly preserved throughout her fiction-writing career and turned into a weapon against “engaged art” that uses the readers’ susceptibility to sentimental identification to (ineffectually) plead for societal or political change.³⁰ Instead, she opts for cold detachment, coupled with the rejection of the illusions of psychological realism, as the main instruments of “the arts of satire and ridicule.” Much has been said about Spark’s connection to the French Nouveau Roman, which she often cited as the counterexample to the kitchen-sink realism of the Angry Young Men generation active when she began her writing career. The lesson of the Nouveau Roman was first and foremost an anti-mimetic one through its rejection of the claim that authors can present reality or personal consciousness in their depths:

*What I loved about Robbe-Grillet—I tried it of course in **The Ballad of Peckham Rye** and I think it came off—he would write a book without once saying “he or she thought” or “he or she felt.” Thoughts and feelings not mentioned but they are there: he mentioned only what they said and did. In fact Simenon does it a bit. It has a strange atmospheric effect. With **The Ballad of Peckham Rye** I never once mention thoughts and feelings, only what people say and do.*³¹

The art of “ridicule” enacted in the novel dismantles illusions of authorial omniscience, but instead brings to the fore the symbolic violence performed by narrative in its transmutation of reality into form. “Bashing away at a typewriter” introduces a degree of randomness and of capricious force into the act of writing, as does Dougal’s ignoring of Maria Cheeseman’s protests against the fictionalization of her autobiography and compiling a list of clichés borrowed from popular fiction under the title “phrases suitable for Cheese.”³² Soon, however, the gap between reality and narrative gets closed not so much by a return to mimetic prescriptions, but by the imposition of the latter’s rules over the former:

“And Doug dear,” said the voice from across the river; “how did you know I started life in a shoe factory? I mean to say, I didn’t tell you that. How did you know?”

“I didn’t know, Cheese,” Dougal said.

“You must have known. You’ve got all the details right, except that it wasn’t in Peckham, it was Streatham. It all came back to me as I read it. It’s uncanny. You’ve been checking up on me, haven’t you, Doug?”

“Aye,” Dougal said. He breathed on the panel, wrote in a word, then rubbed it off.

“Doug, you mustn’t do that. It makes me creepy to think that people can find out all about you,” Miss Cheeseman said. “I mean, I don’t want to put in about the shoe factory and all that. Besides, the period. It dates me.”³³

On the other hand, as she states in “The Desegregation of Art,” such aesthetic choices are for Spark ethically grounded: not only is satire the sole honest response to the absurdity of twentieth-century reality, but it is also cast as essentially dialogic and inter-relational. The discomfort created by becoming the target of mockery displaces, but does not erase, our perspectival limitations, allowing for the possibility of “mutual understanding.” Novel writing amounts to a lucid and honest confrontation with the ridiculous roles contemporary history has cast us in through tactics of “deliberate cunning” and “derisive undermining of what is wrong.”³⁴ In other words, Spark reminds us that laughter paradoxically presupposes both the singularity of individual point of view, and the social grounding of meaning that makes shared existence possible. The estranging effects of humor criticize without annihilating and permit a repositioning of the world, as well as a readjustment of our interpretive lenses, that renders it eminently ethical: “The art of ridicule is an art that everyone can share in some degree, given the world that we have.”³⁵ As philosopher Simon Critchley has put it,

*The extraordinary thing about humour is that it returns us to common sense; by distancing us from it, humor familiarizes us with a common world through its miniature strategies of defamiliarization. If humour recalls us to *sensus communis*, then it does this by momentarily pulling us out of common sense, where jokes function as moments of *dissensus communis*.³⁶*

Critchley’s stance recalls both Spark’s notion of mocking as paradoxically dialogic, and Leona Toker’s category of narratives of “cultural remission,” which temporarily interrupt the homogeneity of a certain worldview by upending hierarchies, causalities or hegemonic perspectives, thus making room for the renewal of the original culture:

These narratives explore and thematize detours from the logical course of sociocultural determinacy, ultimately leading to a conscious reendorsement of the dominant culture but with a degree-of-freedom openings for change. While creating the aesthetic conditions for such detours in the individual reading process—a work of art “suddenly tears” (or perhaps gently releases) “the person experiencing it out of the context of his life, and yet relates him back to the whole of his existence” (Gadamer 1989: 70)—these narratives provide models, each in its own medium and manner, of parallel cultural remissions.³⁷

Along these lines, Spark's thin, highly charged novels create brief spaces of freedom within the temporality of the reading process, with the potential to transcend the borders of aesthetic experience and ethically touch the readers' lives. Her narratives do not seek to start revolutions (as Spark was well aware, revolutions have a habit of turning even more totalitarian than the social orders they are meant to replace) and are permanently wary of the dangers of aestheticizing ideology. We need go no further than the case of the famous Miss Brodie to be reminded of this. They fit Toker's version of the "carnavalesque" mode far more comfortably: they dismantle hierarchies from within, they dissolve the boundaries between the self and the world, the natural and the unnatural, the past and the present (Peckham as territory and Peckham as "character" become indistinguishable in *The Ballad*), and, more importantly, they aspire towards "a high view of human possibility, a longing for a deontological ethics, and an exploration of its versions and limits"³⁸ rather than contending themselves with merely relativizing ethical values. The chaos triggered by Dougal's arrival within the closed community of Peckham is carnivalesque in nature, charting an unstable territory that never quite returns to its former order. Dougal's identity is fluid, and his demonic nature highly questionable (his friend Humphrey dismisses his supposed horns as more prosaic "cysts"³⁹). He is described as gleefully inhabiting numerous selves and shapes. During his second job interview, he fascinates Mr. Druce by assuming the appearances of a professor, a television interviewer, and "a man of vision with a deformed shoulder."⁴⁰ He is thrown out of a dance club after attempting to replace the jive with the Highland fling and subsequently acquiring the lid of dust bin to use it as a stage prop:

Then he placed the lid upside down on the floor; sat cross-legged inside it, and was a man in a rocking boat rowing for his life. . . . The dancers circled slowly around him while he performed a Zulu dance with the lid for a shield. . . . Next, Dougal sat on his haunches and banged a message out on a tom-tom. He sprang up and with the lid on his head was a Chinese coolie eating melancholy rice. He was an ardent cyclist, crouched over handlebars and pedalling uphill with the lid between his knees. He was an old woman with an umbrella; he stood on the upturned edges of the lid and speared fish from his rocking canoe; he was the man at the wheel of a racing car; he did many things with the lid before he finally propped the dust-bin lid up on his high shoulder, beating this cymbal rhythmically with his hand while with the other hand he limply conducted an invisible band, being, with long blank face, the band-leader.⁴¹

Coming in stark contrast to the constraints imposed on bodies by the regulation of motions efficiently performed at the assembly line, Dougal's warped physique acts as a hospitable repository of diverse corporealities and identities. Unsurprisingly, he has learnt to use his "deformity" as a weapon during fights, notably against Trevor Lomas, who attacks him both literally and figuratively.

On the formal level, Dougal's carnivalesque versions of embodiment are paralleled by the "cockeyed" structure of the novel's plot (to cite the narrator's description of the books Dougal goes on to author in the story's unwritten future). As I have already pointed out, the plot emerges from the overlap of several interlacing narrative threads

that converge towards an ending that feels more like an abrupt interruption than a conclusion: the “industrial” plot, the failed marriage plots, the murder plot, the writing plot (the completion of Maria Cheeseman’s autobiography), the official opening of a tunnel connecting the current police station with the location of an ancient priory, and Dougal’s departure from Peckham. Feigning archeological interest, Dougal follows the progress of the excavations closely, and he makes it a point for the tunnel to be the last thing he visits in Peckham. The tunnel is revealed to be a burial site, sheltering the remains of former nuns (presumably not the same who, according to Dougal, “packed up one night over a hundred years ago, and did a flit, and left a lot of debts behind them”).⁴² The tunnel acts as a *mise en abyme* of the narrative structure (with the main stories relegated to the status of a long analepsis framed by two kinds of narrative “presents”—one expository and realistic, and the second drifting into legend, as befitting the conventions of the ballad). Narrative disposition once again mirrors the themes of the novel, while continuing to proliferate in spirals of replicated storytelling (as when Dougal dictates to Merle the sensationalistic, cliché-ridden version of the events in the novel coupled with the reading of a newspaper report announcing the opening of the tunnel as remembered by Douglas in the future). Material, geological, historical and narrative memory create a carnivalesque archive that acts as a potent reminder of the ethical implications of form.

In a grotesque ending to the blackmail plot, Dougal and Trevor engage in a violent struggle using the bones within the tunnel, during the course of which Dougal is hit in the eye with a nun’s bone. This new, “cockeyed” sort of blurred vision is opposed to both the vision “lacking” from the textile factory and to the electrical light that Trevor is installing in the tunnel. If we are to read the novel’s ending as an illustration of Toker’s ethical longing for “a high view of human possibility,” it is precisely the kind of painful, “deformed,” past-conscious mode of seeing that might pave the way to the image constructed by the last line of the novel: “the Rye for an instant looking like a cloud of green and gold, the people seeming to ride upon it, as you might say there was another world than this.”⁴³ *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* is a novel that admits of no other kind of conclusion (and certainly of no cognitive closure): it is only by pushing the reader in the position to decode the disorienting, self-multiplying shapes of narrative that an ethical unsettling of worldviews becomes possible.



Notes

1. Muriel Spark, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (New York: New Directions, 2014), 128.
2. Spark, *Ballad*, 28.
3. Martin McQuillan, “The Same Informed Air: An Interview with Muriel Spark,” in *Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction*, edited by Martin McQuillan (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire–New York: Palgrave, 2002), 218.
4. See Muriel Spark, “The Desegregation of Art,” in *The Golden Fleece: Essays*, edited with a preface by Penelope Jardine (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2014), 30: “To bring about a mental environment of honesty and self-knowledge, a sense of the absurd and a gen-

eral looking-lively to defend ourselves from the ridiculous oppressions of our time, and above all to entertain us in the process, has become the special calling of arts and of letters.”

5. Muriel Spark, *Loitering with Intent* (New York: New Directions, 2014), 138.
6. Muriel Spark, *Robinson* (New York: New Directions, 2003), 61.
7. Muriel Spark, *The Comforters* (New York: New Directions, 2014).
8. Leona Toker, *Eloquent Reticence: Withholding Information in Fictional Narrative* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1993); ead., *Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction: Narratives of Cultural Remission* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2010).
9. Toker, *Eloquent Reticence*, 3.
10. Toker, *Eloquent Reticence*, 4.
11. See Toker, *Ethics of Form*, 4–5.
12. Spark, *Ballad*, 15.
13. Spark, *Ballad*, 11.
14. Spark, *Ballad*, 11.
15. Spark, *Ballad*, 112.
16. Muriel Spark, “How I Became a Novelist,” in *The Golden Fleece*, 76.
17. Allan Massie, *Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Ramsay Head Press, 1979), 52.
18. Bryan Cheyette, *Muriel Spark* (Horndon, Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House in association with the British Council, 2000).
19. Gerrard Caruthers, “Fully to Savor Her Position’: Muriel Spark and Scottish Identity,” in *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*, edited by David Herman (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 21–38.
20. See Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae* (Edinburgh: Carcanet, 2017), 98: “At the time I was reading the Border ballads so repetitively and attentively that I memorized many of them without my noticing it. The steel and bite of the ballads, so remorseless and yet so lyrical, entered my literary bloodstream, never to depart.”
21. Spark, *Ballad*, 79.
22. Spark, *Ballad*, 75, 81, 114.
23. Spark, *Ballad*, 66.
24. Spark, *Ballad*, 20.
25. Caruthers, “Fully to Savor,” 28.
26. Spark, *Ballad*, 14–15.
27. Toker, *Eloquent Reticence*, 12.
28. Spark, *Ballad*, 11.
29. Muriel Spark, “John Masfield,” in *The Golden Fleece*, 38.
30. Spark, “Desegregation,” 26–30. In this essay, initially given as an address to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1970, Spark famously and somewhat controversially berates the good intentions of “socially conscious art,” which creates vicarious emotions that run the risk of replacing real-life action against social and political injustice.
31. McQuillan, “The Same Informed Air,” 216.
32. Spark, *Ballad*, 91.
33. Spark, *Ballad*, 89.
34. Spark, “Desegregation,” 28–29.
35. Spark, “Desegregation,” 30.

36. Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London–New York: Routledge, 2004), 18.
37. Toker, *Ethics of Form*, 5.
38. Toker, *Ethics of Form*, 203–204.
39. Spark, *Ballad*, 78.
40. Spark, *Ballad*, 13–14.
41. Spark, *Ballad*, 57.
42. Spark, *Ballad*, 102.
43. Spark, *Ballad*, 142.

Abstract

The Ethics of Form in Muriel Spark's *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*

Starting from Leona Toker's inquiries into the ethics of narrative form, the essay explores the modes in which Muriel Spark's novel undermines cognitive and moral certainties by producing plots that subject readers to the same kind of semantic disorientation that the characters "experience" within the fictional reality. The renewal of interpretive grids thus produced paves the way for a more ethical awareness of the shared nature of our positionality in the world.

Keywords

ethics, form, narrative, incompleteness, carnivalesque, parallel experience