

REVIEWS

Ema Jelínková: *Ambivalence v románech Muriel Sparkové* [Ambivalence in the Novels of Muriel Spark]. Olomouc: Periplum 2006, ISBN 80-86624-29-3, 110 pp.

Muriel Spark's visit to Prague under the auspices of the British Council in 2003 was marked by a hasty translation into Czech of the writer's then new novel *Aiding and Abetting* (2000), probably somewhat to mask the general lack of availability of the novelist's work in Czech. The sad truth of it being that only *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960) was translated way back in 1970 at the time of Spark's rising popularity in Britain and nothing since then until the more recent *Symposium* (1990) in 1997. It is to be hoped that Ema Jelínková's present study will inspire more, though belated, translations and interest in the famous writer's life and work in this country.

Jelínková approaches Spark's *oeuvre* chronologically in ten cleverly ambiguously titled chapters – in tune with the thesis and the title of her monograph. These chapters, mostly containing analyses of several novels each, are preceded by two concise introductory chapters – on Spark's personal life and creative life. Considering that Spark is but little known in the Czech Republic, the two and a half pages of biographical information seem too concise and although they manage to squeeze in the important milestones of her life, the chapter could supply the reader with more facts and references rather than what frequently amounts to no more than hints. In this manner, hinted at is Spark's "middle age" (p. 10) when she joined the literary scene in the 1950s, while she was in fact only in her thirties and hailed as a new, young talent, and of the same generation as the Angry Young Men, whose category she did not fit for reasons other than age. The second introductory chapter characterizes Spark's writing as ambivalent, idiosyncratic and manifold in terms of form and interpretation, stemming from the Scottish oxymoronic tradition with a strong satirical element. Its trajectory is described as twofold: on the one hand developing a debate between two subsequent and thematically related novels, on the other hand marking a radical departure with every new decade of writing. Here again Jelínková hints at the importance for Spark's satire of the principle oxymoronic image suggested by Wringhim and Brodie, but does not specify how other than metaphorically the two eighteenth-century Scottish figures can be linked with Spark's writing. In terms of clarity, more could be done for the Czech reader by providing intelligible background. That could also include minor matters like chronological ordering of Spark's novels in the Bibliography, where the (incomplete) alphabetical order proves to be confusing rather than helpful.

In Chapter 3 entitled "Reckoning" Jelínková analyses Spark's first novel *The Comforters* (1957) as an experiment with autobiography and a novel in a novel. To make the chapter title relevant, she claims that this first novel could be Spark's last in terms of reckoning, because it contains all that was to puzzle her readers and critics in the decades to come and to the very last of her writing. What seems to contradict the flattering assessment of *The Comforters* though is Jelínková's view that evil is pictured here with boring predictability and that it is only the more elusive good, unconventional and even unseemly, that underpins her thesis of ambivalence as the pervading feature of Spark's novels. In the same chapter she discusses as the one exception from the rule of ambivalence Spark's next novel *Robinson* (1958), where evil is identified and the day of reckoning duly comes. Nevertheless this lack of ambiguity is not to be encountered in the following novels as Jelínková assures us.

The “Disturbers” of Chapter 4 connect the line of argument involving the *Memento Mori* (1959) voice and the mysterious figure of Dougal Douglas from *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960). Jelínková classifies *Memento Mori* as a Catholic novel raising the question of the meaning of suffering and foregrounds its focus on the aged and their attitude to death while she fails to comment on the playful, comic side. Comparing the two novels Jelínková concludes that they represent counterpoints in the clarity of moral attitudes of the former and the negative moral connotations of the latter and she therefore goes on to argue against Richard Kane’s inclusion of Spark’s Douglas among the literary figures that he theorises as “didactic demons”. However, here Jelínková should consider a wider range and go beyond this novel for more of Spark’s views on falsity and lies in writing (especially in the later novels *Loitering with Intent*, 1981 and *A Far Cry from Kensington*, 1988) before passing her judgement and implicating the novelist in willingly serving “the father of lies” (p. 33).

Chapter 5 called “Idolaters” offers analyses of three of Spark’s early 1960s novels with the best loved *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) flanked by *The Bachelors* (1960) and *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963) on either side. A pity Jelínková does not make any connections between them, not even through the promising eponymous idolaters, leaving this line of thought entirely to the reader to deal with or forget about. There goes a fruitful image with a good potential for comparison wasted, never once referred to throughout the chapter.

Chapter 6 takes us briefly through *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), which Jelínková reads as a parody, albeit with a serious message, and as a conciliatory intermezzo in the context of the chronological development of Spark’s fiction, with its confrontational phase to come. The announced “Turning point” discussed on the three pages of thus titled Chapter 7 furnishes an introduction to Spark’s experimental ventures - *The Public Image* (1968), *The Driver’s Seat* (1970), *Not to Disturb* (1971) and *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973) – summed up under the Chapter 8 title “In their image”. Here Jelínková points out that Spark’s experimental fictions retain the characteristic ambiguity of her writing and despite the *nouveau roman* influence emphasise and intensify rather than lose realism. In spite of that she argues against Malcolm Bradbury’s attempt to identify a common denominator of Spark’s prose in her religious and absurdist view of the world. However, Jelínková’s plot-based commentaries on the novels seem to contradict her opposition to Bradbury when she in fact largely disregards the experimental aspect of these novels and foregrounds the continuing importance of their religious underpinning and thematics of determinism. Conversely, it is hard to tell why Jelínková excludes from Spark’s experimenting the equally mysterious and grotesque *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974) or *Loitering With Intent* (1981). After all, the various ways of abandoning traditional realism in the 70s do not clash with Jelínková’s emphasis on the image of “Mythmakers” as a convenient chapter title under which she includes *The Abbess of Crewe* together with *The Takeover* (1975) and *Territorial Rights* (1979), the last moreover clearly experimenting with the popular genre of the spy novel.

Loitering With Intent is separated from what Jelínková defines as Spark’s experimental novels by a “Reconsideration” mini-chapter, pitting the novel right back to Spark’s beginnings in *The Comforters*, but without giving a recognition to its experimental nature as a stage of rewriting continued and perhaps completed seven years later in *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988) or in a way carried on in the debate about the creative process to the very last *The Finishing School* (2004). Unfortunately, in Jelínková’s view the five novels of Spark’s last two decades of writing form a mere kind of “Postscript” on her *oeuvre*, disappointing rather than culminating.

To hold a critical opinion is the critic’s prerogative and on the whole the somewhat dismissive judgement on Spark’s “Postscript” does not override Jelínková’s predominantly appreciative study of Spark as a novelist. The monograph deserves praise for offering the Czech reader and serious student of literature an inspired and thorough introduction to Muriel Spark through content-based analyses of novels that may so far not have been available to him/her to read.

Milada Franková