"In came the self-evident and luminous little mess":
Ethical Life Writing in Muriel Spark's *Loitering with Intent*ⁱ

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Abstract

Starting from a brief examination of Muriel Spark's position as a Scottish novelist within the framework of her anti-essentialist, anti-authoritative aesthetics, my essay will take a seemingly abrupt, but in fact consequential turn to investigate the complex antinomies involved in her fictional representation of the lives of others. Although at home and abroad she is hailed as Scotland's most celebrated author of the twentieth century, Spark's writerly practice consists of regularly dismantling grand narratives or fixed, stable identities, often clashing with more localized or prescriptive views on the social and national functions of narrative. My argument, however, is that it is the very unease of her "Scottishness" that acts as one of the foundations of her literary ethics, embodied in her acute awareness of the antinomies involved in textualizing the lives of others. Spark's shrewdly metafictional *Loitering with Intent* (1981) openly thematizes both the obligation, and the risks of telling one's own and other people's stories, performing a radical ethics of narrative alterity through its staging of the enmeshments of writing, (auto)biography and experience.

Keywords: Scottish fiction, Muriel Spark, narrative ethics, life writing, alterity, biography, autobiography, authorial responsibility

Muriel Spark and the Problem of Scottishness

"Yes, I'm Scottish as far as I can claim to be anything," Muriel Spark professed in the interview granted to Martin McQuillan in 1998 and included in the latter's seminal edited collection, *Theorizing Muriel Spark*

(McQuillan 226). Notoriously reluctant, both in her nonfictional work, and in her novels, to pin down origins and pigeonhole identities, Spark seems to relish a distinctively personal notion of Scottishness as a fluid and complex process, rather than a static category: "I consider myself a Scot. I can't consider myself anything else. I've got foreign blood of many types but sooner or later you become a Scot" (227). This notion of Scottish identity as becoming, rather than stable being, offers an opportunity to ground nationhood in an (albeit partial) act of choice, rather than in historical determinism. She implies as much in her essay "What Images Return," while musing on Edinburgh as not only as the place she is "essentially exiled from," but also the condition of possibility for exile, which, she states, "has ceased to be a fate, it has become a calling" (Spark, *Golden Fleece* 64). Exile as calling, nationality as becoming: these fluid, provisional and migratory forms of identity retain modes of agency, avoid the fixity of categorization, and allow Spark to oppose the disorientation and the "sense of the absurd" described in another famous essay, "The Desegregation of Art" as a mark of the contemporary (Spark, *Golden Fleece* 27).

Spark's mixed ancestry (part Scottish, part English, part Jewish) and self-imposed exile from her native Edinburgh, her lack of patience with "nationalism as an idea" (McQuillan 227), coupled with the apparent scarcity of "Scottish" subject matter in her writing have caused some unwarranted hesitation with regard to her being designated as a Scottish writer. In his contribution to another important volume of studies dedicated to Spark, Gerard Carruthers has provided an illuminating analysis of the problematic nature of nativist trends in Scottish thought, which may find it difficult to accommodate Spark's internationalism and relentless critique of essentialism (21-22). Before analyzing the ways in which Spark's work continues certain strands of Scotland's literary, moral and intellectual tradition, Carruthers does acknowledge an affinity between Spark's preference for inconclusiveness and fracture as modes of writing and recent approaches to the Scottish canon through the lenses of a "crisis in identity" said to be triggered either through the intrusion of English literature, or through the trauma induced by Calvinism (25-26). It would be difficult to deny the validity of this argument, which nonetheless

appears as somewhat insufficient to Carruthers himself. However, it might be worth noting that, especially during the second half of the twentieth century, the “overworked trope” (25) of crisis is not exclusively applicable to Scottish culture, but can be said to define the world at large – what Spark referred to as “the ridiculous oppressions of our time” (Spark, *Golden Fleece* 30). It could be more productive to decentralize the concept of Scottishness itself, to view national identity as the protean effect of “becoming” and amalgamation, and take note of the resemblance between such a version of nationhood and Spark’s interest in multifarious forms of belonging and mobile selves. From such a perspective, Spark’s “Scottishness” may be summoned as one of the multiple engines driving her persistent interrogation of the novelistic potential to project individual and collective identities, of narrative’s ambivalent capacity both to free up and to authoritatively delimit self-definition. Crucially for my present purposes, it would pave the way for an understanding of Spark’s writing as a fundamentally ethical project directed at recovering, or at least pointing at, ever-vanishing flickerings of alterity in an increasingly autocratic world. The ways in which Scottishness has been constructed discursively, either from the position of the master, or that of the subject, must have contributed to Spark’s constant interest in the power of narrative to explain, or explain away, the lives of others. From such an angle, a novel as outwardly “un-Scottish” as *Loitering with Intent*, which tackles forms of domineering (biographical and autobiographical) discursivization, as well as the means to elude them, may gain previously unsuspected undertones.

Spark’s essays and interviews reveal two additional dimensions to her professed allegiance to Scottish identity. In an interview given in 2004, she associates the Scotland of her youth with a space of feminine affirmation and freedom:

I’ll tell you what I felt when I left Scotland to go abroad for the first time as a girl, when I was a young girl. I found that I didn’t realize that men were supposed to be superior to women. In Scotland, the equality of the sexes was much more. It was almost a necessity in a mountainous country. I think that everyone’s work was equally valid and valuable and maybe the protestant ethic was very much more for the equality of the sexes, I found. I wasn’t aware of it at the time but when I went away from Scotland, I

realized that there had been quite an advantage in having been born there. There was a freedom of expression open to women that wasn't available in other countries. (Brooker and Saá 1039)

While she is not a typical feminist, Spark's oeuvre is often preoccupied with exposing the discourses of power constructing the positions of women at various points in history: January Marlow's disruption of patriarchal authority in *Robinson*, the entire "Brodie set" and Miss Jean Brodie herself in Spark's best-known novel, Lise's inversion of misogynistic clichés in *The Driver's Seat*, Fleur's evasion of Sir Quentin's machinations in *Loitering with Intent*, etc. The longstanding and conventional reading of Spark as a "Catholic novelist" throughout the first four decades of her career dominated critical reception and obfuscated other, equally important, dimensions. It was only after 2002, which saw the publication of Martin McQuillan's *Theorizing Muriel Spark*, that sustained critical attention was paid to Spark's treatment of gender, whose contradictions prompt Fleur to enigmatically and ironically declare "How wonderful it feels to be an artist and a woman in the twentieth century" (Spark, *Loitering* 15). There are various possible interpretations to this rather unexpected sentence, but I will be especially focusing on it as the ground for Fleur's embrace of an inclusive and ethical mode of novel writing through a practice of "care."

"What Images Return," originally published in 1962 under the title "Edinburgh Born," articulates what has come to be taken as a cardinal principle of Spark's writing. Although the paragraph in question has been much quoted, its relevance to my argument might justify another lengthy reproduction:

I have started the preceding paragraph with the word "nevertheless" and am reminded how my whole education, in and out of school, seemed even then to pivot around this word. My teachers used it a great deal. All grades of society constructed sentences bridged by "nevertheless." It is my own instinct to associate the word, as the core of a thought-pattern, with Edinburgh particularly. ... I believe myself to be fairly indoctrinated by the habit of thought which calls for this word. In fact I approve of the ceremonious accumulation of weather forecasts and barometer readings that pronounce for a fine day, before letting rip on the statement 'nevertheless, it's raining'. I find that much of my literary composition is

based on the nevertheless idea. I act upon it. It was on the nevertheless principle that I turned Catholic.” (Spark, *Golden Fleece* 65)

The “nevertheless principle,” formulating the double vision that informs Spark’s writing, brings to the fore the fissures of monolithic perspectives, continuously counteracted by alternative interpretations, or by the hardness of fact; it also fractures the logic of discourse, exposing its incapacity to arrange reality in an orderly fashion. Simultaneously however, and perhaps more importantly, it “bridges” the gulfs between incompatible versions of reality (“All grades of society constructed sentences bridged by ‘nevertheless,’” Spark insists). “Nevertheless” irrupts as a site of linguistic and narrative hospitality, as an ethics open to unlikely forms of otherness such as the conversion to Catholicism of an Edinburgh-born Jewess, or a woman artist celebrating the joy of living through the troubled “middle of the twentieth century.” It may be significant that during the conversation with Martin McQuillan, when attempting (rather halfheartedly) to locate instances of Scottish specificity, Spark refers to the Scottish legal system and its singular inclusion of a third verdict following a trial: “I don’t know if the non-proven verdict is still in force. If it is, that is different” (McQuillan 227). As legal experts show, the currently contentious “not proven” verdict, introduced during the 17th century, originally indicated the ambiguity of facts invoked by accusers in support of their argument (Chalmers and Leverick, “No, ‘not proven’ did not come first”). Resorting to juridical authority to explain a matter as perplexing for Spark as national identity comes across as an unlikely gesture, until it gets cast in the terms of a general admission of the failure not of facts, but of human interpretations of facts. Not given, but arrived at, Scottishness for Spark represents a multitudinous source of ethical encounters disturbing authoritative and normalizing versions of reality and problematizing the origins of narrative descriptions of the world. As Carruthers has put it, “Imaginatively, Scotland is a strong site of the dissonant and interpolated human reality that she conveys throughout her fictional oeuvre, where truth and transcendent identity can never be exactly located but are indicated through the imaginative aspirations both of Spark herself and her characters” (35).

Loitering with Intent and Ethical Life Writing

"I think it awful," I said, "to contemplate a world in which there are only two luminous and self-evident beings, your creator and yourself. You shouldn't read Newman in that way," insists Fleur, the narrator and heroine of Muriel Spark's *Loitering with Intent*. Fleur is replying to what she takes as another character's misinterpretation of Cardinal John Henry Newman's *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (Spark, *Loitering* 71). Published in 1981, *Loitering with Intent* continues and intensifies its author's long-standing concern with the responsibilities of fictional (self-)representation and the difficulty of constructing life narratives. Famously relying on autobiographical events – to the extent to which the Sparkian mode of detached irony can be categorized as such – the novel features a protagonist-narrator who is herself a writer, and who gets hired as the secretary of a mysterious (and nefarious) Autobiographical Association. The Association's affiliates are involved in an attempt, secretly orchestrated by its sinister founder, Sir Quentin Oliver, to put down their life stories, which they intend to keep secret until a safer future allows them to be read without giving offense. While performing her duties, Fleur furnishes the Association's members with a library copy of Newman's exemplary autobiography, one of her own (and Spark's) literary models. As the questionable purposes of the Association, coupled with its adherents' obtuseness and penchant for misinterpretation, become clear, Fleur comes to regret her recommendation, but the exchange quoted above forces her to reconsider her own reading of it. Temporarily dismissing Newman's self-revelation as "a beautiful piece of poetic paranoia," she provides Spark with an opportunity to give voice to the ethical foundations of her aesthetic project: "For my part Father Egbert Delaney is a self-evident and luminous being. ... So are you, so is my lousy landlord and the same goes for everyone I know. You can't live with an I-and-thou relationship to God and doubt the reality of the rest of life" (71). In typical Sparkian fashion, Fleur's recognition of other persons' irreducible alterity is replete with ironical undertones: as she will soon learn from trying to untangle the machinations behind the Autobiographical Association, the "luminous" self may also be seen as a

delusion perpetrated by the likes of Sir Quentin, who insists on “absolute frankness” in order to be able to appropriate his acolytes’ lives and disintegrate their agency to the point of self-destruction. To Fleur, the “reality of material phenomena” that Newman purports to disregard will constantly get in the way of clarity, signaling the aporias of ethical life narration that provide the central theme of the novel: the responsibility to narrate oneself and others is met with the realization that, as Spark put it in an interview, “you can never describe a person fully” (Brooker and Saá 1041), that the inescapable strangeness of the selves cannot be wholly transposed in writing.

Fleur’s predictably unsuccessful efforts “to muddle [her] way into clarity” (Spark, *Loitering* 47) are transmitted in the form of the retrospective telling of both her own story, and of the stories of various people with whom she is inextricably connected. Like Spark, Fleur is aware of the ethical quandaries posed by inviting others in her narrative: “The story of a life is a very informal party; there are no rules of precedence and hospitality, no invitations,” she concludes in an important scene where she contemplates the differences between inventing fictional characters, which can be placed “in convenient order” and the biographical imperative of recounting “whatever actually happened and whoever naturally turns up” (41). The irruption of others and their “turn[ing] up” is not only accompanied by the obligation to tell their story, but also by the perils of appropriating and domesticating them in our own terms. In many respects, Fleur comes dangerously close to the position and methods of Sir Quentin, who has no qualms about instrumentalizing the lives of his friends. Fleur treads a fine line between hospitality and domination, as we are reminded by the welcome she extends to the poet Gray Mauser, the current partner of Leslie, Fleur’s former (married) lover. When Gray shows up at her door looking for Leslie, Fleur notices that this “self-evident and luminous little mess,” as she ironically describes him, “was not put together right” – a remark that becomes particularly suspect if we take into account the possibility that Fleur might be the text’s, and therefore Gray’s, “author,” and hence responsible for creating him in the “right” way. Further ironies derive from the name attributed to this personage, “who was so literally called Gray Mauser that he wrote under

the pseudonym of Leander" (73). Fleur provides an oxymoronic association of the name with Newman's description of the self as a "self-evident and luminous being," before spending a pleasant evening with him in a bar and deciding that, for all his dullness, he is much saner than her employers. This scene, predicated as it is on Fleur's disenchantment with Maisie Young and the latter's misuse of Newman's text, encapsulates one of the central concerns of this particular novel, and of Spark's writing in general: "a writer also wants to write about what other people feel like" (Brooker and Saá 1040), while being aware that narrativizing lives can become a dystopian venture.

Loitering with Intent draws on the period its author spent working for the Poetry Society in London, in the aftermath of World War II, as well as on her experience of becoming a first-time woman novelist. Its themes and forms reconfirm Spark's fine blending of realistic representation – satirizing both "the grubby edge of the literary world" (81) inhabited by the heroine, and the snobbery of English upper classes – and self-conscious exploration of the mechanics and functions of narrative. The text effects a return to earlier experiments with overt metafictional structures: its protagonist is writing a novel, *Warrender Chase* – the title of an aborted Sparkian project, according to Martin Stannard (444) – which we begin to suspect is the very one we are reading, as she gradually realizes the people around her start copying the behavior of her (second-degree) fictional characters. To support herself, Fleur gets a job working for the Autobiographical Society, dedicated to recording the so called "very full lives" (Spark, *Loitering* 10) of Sir Quentin Oliver's friends, with the alleged goal of preserving them for a more enlightened, libel-free posterity. Fleur is supposed to proofread and type the memoirs: as Sir Quentin puts it, she is hired "to rectify any lack or lapse in form, syntax, style, characterization, invention, local colour, description, dialogue, construction and other trivialities" (14). *Pace* Sir Quentin however, these are hardly trivial matters, having to do much more with composition and creation, than with reproducing *a priori* discourses. Fleur soon finds herself copiously editing and "emphatically touching [the memoirs] up" (23) to make them more dramatic. For instance, she devises a scandalous sexual encounter on a rocking horse, between a nanny and a

butler, “during the parents’ absence, while little Eric was locked in the pantry to clean the silver” (23). Even though she is fascinated by the strangeness of this circle, Fleur’s suspects her employer of planning to use the autobiographical material, to which he has made abundant additions of his own, to blackmail its authors. She later discovers that he has been actually manipulating them to the point of driving them to self-destruction. The most psychologically vulnerable, Bernice Gilbert, commits suicide, mimicking the fate of one of the characters in Fleur’s book. The narrative climax is reached when Fleur finds out that after realizing that the protagonist of her *Warrender Chase* uncannily resembles himself, Sir Quentin has instigated its theft and persuaded her publisher, Revisson Doe, to prevent its printing and to destroy its copies. After stealing the Association’s memoirs in the hope of carrying out an exchange, Fleur manages to retrieve *Warrender Chase* and to have it published to great success. Just like his fictional counterpart Warrender, Sir Quentin dies in a car crash, the Association is dissolved, and Fleur goes on to become a renowned author.

Seemingly less enigmatic than other works in the Spark canon, such as *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, *The Driver’s Seat*, or *The Abbess of Crewe*, *Loitering with Intent* has nevertheless given rise to various, sometimes incompatible readings. Bryan Cheyette sees it as an attempt to fictionally reconcile “her converted and unconverted selves” (102). Fotini Apostolou cites it as the “climax” of Spark’s dramatization of the “struggle for possession of the text” by authors, readers and characters striving to escape from narrative “seduction” into the freedom of playful textuality (95). For Bran Nicol, it stages Spark’s debunking of the godlike author figure to the status of a “menacing entity, more like a stalker than a deity” (113). Patricia Waugh invokes it to illustrate what she describes as Spark’s ethical poetics of voice that refashions the novelistic genre as “the realization of a principle of radical alterity at the heart of the self” (1636). At the opposite end of the critical spectrum, Lewis MacLeod examines the questionable extent of Fleur’s domination over the stories of other people, manifested as control and surveillance (209-216). The novel is undoubtedly all that, and more. However, what has been largely, and perhaps surprisingly, ignored is the protagonist’s acute alertness to the

problematic nature of the attempt to represent lives: "Not that I reproduced them photographically and literally. I didn't for a moment think of portraying Sir Quentin as he was" (Spark, *Loitering* 8), she cautions us: she is "an artist, not a reporter" (116). The question – the crucial conundrums performed by the text – is whether the artistry inherent in narrativizing lives amounts to hospitality to the other, or to colonizing comprehension and reduction of their strangeness.

Fleur's wavering between the exertion of authorial control and the recognition of the others' freedom opens up a possible reading of *Loitering with Intent* through the lenses of the Anglo-American tradition that Dorothy J. Hale has recently described as "a novelistic aesthetics grounded in the assumption that the social value of literature lies in the ethical encounter made possible through the reader's phenomenological experience of modes of ontological otherness that is credited to narrative form" (5). According to Hale, the modernist project of formalizing the particular aesthetic properties of the novel, initiated by Henry James and directed towards character representation, triggered an understanding of the genre as charged with ethical significance. Through the modernist attempt to theorize generic specificity, an ethics of form was aligned to, and became indistinguishable from, the representation of moral issues and ethical uncertainties that always provided the content of narrative discourse. For all the modernists' suspicion of the relationship between literature and morality, their interest in the depiction of autonomous lives founded a narrative ethics of alterity that culminates in a contemporary consensus that the social value of the novel is produced by the affective encounter with alterity that occurs during the act of reading. As Hale points out, it is a consensus born out of divergent premises, but the concern with the ethical potential of narrative brings together aesthetic, ideological positions that may otherwise appear incompatible (embraced by authors as diverse as Zadie Smith and J.M. Coetzee, or theoretical discourses ranging from Martha Nussbaum's liberal humanistic approach to poststructuralism or Marxist criticism).

Hale's study provides both a history of the novel as a genre, and an overview of narrative ethics as a multifaceted discipline, with the explicit aim of showcasing the common ground between the contemporary novel

in the aftermath of postmodernism and various critical and theoretical orientations. She points out that the overall valorization of the novel as a quintessentially ethical form in recent decades, by audiences and writers alike, as well as the fascination it has attracted in the academia, originates in Henry James's self-conscious conflation of characters' individuality and freedom with their instrumentalization as products of aesthetic form – notably, the technique of point of view famously vilified by Fredric Jameson as a mode of installing the bourgeois version of identity (Hale 177). On the one hand, James creates his characters as fully “other,” “beings” endowed with subjectivity, whose ontological freedom and unicity he feels compelled to respect; on the other hand, he necessarily intrudes upon their independence “through the aesthetic functionalism that the novel as an art form necessarily assigns them” (Hale 190-191). The aporetic realization that the others we encounter – fictional or not – are both irreducible singularities and objects of knowledge, or means to an end, lies at the heart of Spark's novelistic concerns, starting with her debut with *The Comforters* and furnishing the substance of her most famous work, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. By foregrounding the overlap between “real” lives and the various authors' appropriations, *Loitering with Intent* openly positions itself as an investigation of the ethical conundrums inherent to narrative typical of the Jamesian tradition.

Hale goes on to discuss the far-reaching consequences of the Jamesian invention of point of view on triggering the readerly “meta-ethical emotion” of “unverifiability” (191) – the recognition of the untranslatable strangeness of the other that confronts us with our own epistemological limitations. Hale follows Judith Butler's formulation of the foundational unverifiability of fiction, which she also identifies in a philosopher as dissimilar to Butler as Nussbaum; for all their important differences, ultimately, they both theorize the reading of fiction as free submission to an alterity situated inescapably out of our control and which appears simultaneously as independent ontology and constructed artwork. At stake is the complex interplay that Hale places between the reader's provisional suspension of social conditionality and her awareness of such a “disavowal” – in other words, an “avowal of disavowal” inherent to “what novelistic narrative demands” (181). Accessing the fictional world,

the reader temporarily brackets off her own social positionality, only to be reminded of it by the encounter with the other whose existence "binds" her: "Readers experience the free play of imagination as produced through a power struggle with a social other. The struggle to bind turns back upon the reader, enabling him to experience himself as unfree, as in a constitutive relation with the other, who in turn binds him" (190). As Butler had pointed out, the impossibility of knowing the other is granted ethical value because it produces the reader's awareness of her own investment in and by the "regime of the norm" (187) – that life, as fiction, is a matter of invention and interpretation, and that all interpretation is "hypothetical." The unverifiability of other lives sets off a train of questions that disturbs the comfortable vision of the world and dramatizes the unverifiability of our own goals.

Although there are significant differences between Spark's and James's novelistic visions and practices, they do share an interest not only in the difficulties of representing character, but also in the hazards posed by the aestheticization of life stories and in the problematization of authorial control. Spark repeatedly invokes James as one of the guiding figures she keeps on going back to (Spark, *Golden Fleece* 143; Hosmer 154), even though her commitment to a style of ironical aloofness distances her poetics from the modernist probing into the depths of consciousness. Randall Stevenson lists modernism and its extended impact among the "postwar contexts" of Spark's art, especially through the disillusionment with the capacity of the artist to avoid complicity with, or at least resist, historical and ideological wreckage (104). While the conversion to Catholicism, the French *nouveau roman* or her own version of playful postmodernism are more commonly examined as key backgrounds of Spark's work, her novels are informed by modernist scepticism, rearrangement of chronology, questioning of the reliability of memory, mistrust of the capacity of language to accurately represent reality and suspicion of strong, well-organized plots – all of which are certainly featured in *Loitering with Intent*. Moreover, one of the characters that Fleur initially befriends is called Maisie (Young) – a possible reference to James's foundational investigation of limited perspective and epistemological uncertainty in *What Maisie Knew*. Examining her own

writing, Fleur even realizes that she has to extricate herself from the temptation of mimicking the master's style: as she quizzically confesses, "I had probably been reading too much Henry James at that time [when she was composing *Warrender Chase*, itself a novel that uses the Jamesian technique of multiple perspectives], and 'beautifully' was much too much" (52). Retracing James's steps in the formulation of an implicit novelistic ethics of alterity, Fleur emerges as "a woman and an artist there and then" (156) – significantly, from the perspective of Hale's theory, fully conscious of the historical determinations that the catastrophic twentieth century and her own social marginality will impose on her construction of the lives of others.

The rapports between autobiography and the narrative representation of lives (one's own and those of others) constitute one of the pivotal concerns of *Loitering with Intent*. The text ostensibly presents itself as Fleur's memoir of her early years as an author, and delves into an overt problematization of Maisie Young's naively asked question, "If one is writing an autobiography one should model oneself on the best, shouldn't one?" (*Loitering* 33). The ambiguous reference of the pronouns renders the question double-edged: does "one should model oneself" concern the act of writing, or action in general? Trying to receive confirmation that Cardinal Newman's autobiography is the "best" example of the genre, Maisie reminds Fleur that writing is a form of acting, and that living is a matter of writing the self. Writing the self down also becomes an ethical goal, since recording the "mess" of experience can act as an ethical imperative against self-imposition: "[p]erhaps we should all write down our reminiscences to keep us from straying from reality in our latter days" (Spark, *Curriculum* 14). Both Spark in her own memoir and Fleur as the narrator of *Loitering with Intent* claim to rely on the archivization of the past in the form of preserved documents such as letters (Fleur even stores bookshop receipts and notices from landlords or book sellers) and objects, or resorting to testimonial accounts: "I determined to write nothing that cannot be supported by documentary evidence or by eyewitnesses; I have not relied on my memory alone, vivid though it is. ... Truth by itself is neutral and has its own dear beauty; especially in a work of non-fiction it is to be cherished" (*Curriculum* 11).

Read in the light of the "nevertheless principle," this obsession with verifiability attests not so much a belief in the immutability of truth, as the reverse – the suspicion that one's own narrative construction of the (auto)biographical self is unverifiable and needs corroboration from an external perspective. Despite her authority as narrator and putative author of *Loitering with Intent*, Fleur's word is never to be taken at face value. Her ambivalent ethical act of authoring the lives of others needs to be counteracted by reading between the lines of her "intent," and by seeing her also through the eyes of the characters.

As Hale reminds us, the autobiographical issue and its relation to the depiction of other lives intensely preoccupied Henry James, who worried about the distinction between "watching" the others live and actually "living" (Hale 37). This dilemma was solved by James through the creation of subjective focalizers caught both in the act of watching and in that of being watched (from the vantage point of narratorial transcendence), which effectively converted his autobiographical fascination for otherness into a foundation for the ethics of fiction (36-37). The position of the observer and its incumbent moral challenges are captured in the title of *Loitering with Intent*, Spark's mischievous nod to the debates on authorial determinations of the text. Although the suspicion of entertaining dishonest purposes literally falls on Fleur, it can be attributed to most of the characters, and with greater certainty to Sir Quentin than to her. (There is also hardly a need to remind ourselves how rapidly observing degenerates into surveillance for Spark, with *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* or *The Abbess of Crewe* only the most obvious instances.) The novel's well-known opening scene – later revealed as the source of the title – can be read as a tropological adumbration of the theme of ethics:

One day in the middle of the twentieth century I sat in an old graveyard which had not yet been demolished, in the Kensington area of London, when a young policeman stepped off the path and came over to me. He was shy and smiling, he might have been coming over the grass to ask me for a game of tennis. He only wanted to know what I was doing but plainly he didn't like to ask. I told him I was writing a poem, and offered him a sandwich which he refused as he had just had his dinner himself. He stopped to talk awhile, then he said good-bye, the graves must be very old,

and that he wished me good luck and that it was nice to speak to somebody. (*Loitering* 1)

In his interpretation of *Loitering with Intent*, Nicol cites this episode in support of his argument that Fleur fails to provide an explanatory account of the period of her life covered by the novel. Nicol maintains that the choice of date – the precise middle of the century, “the last day of June 1950” – and its designation as a milestone – “This was the last day of a whole chunk of my life but I didn’t know that at the time” (1) – are never fully elucidated (125). He believes the “enigmatic inconclusiveness” of *Loitering with Intent* is a tactic for creating a rapport of “suspicion” between narrator and reader, inspired by the aesthetics of the *nouveau roman*, its rejection of realist consensus and its admonishing of the reader’s interpretive capacities (126). Nicol is certainly not wrong to foreground the incompleteness of the text. The many gaps in Fleur’s narrative result primarily from Spark’s repeated dismissal of causality as a viable strategy for creating characters, or from the attempt to endlessly frustrate readerly certainties. Fleur’s annoyance with psychologizing the interpretation of works of fiction illustrates the ethical unverifiability of life stories:

All these years since, the critics have been asking whether Warrender was in love with his nephew. How do I know? Warrender Chase never existed, he is only some hundreds of words, some punctuation, sentences, paragraphs, marks on the page. If I had conceived Warrender Chase’s motives as a psychological study I would have said so. But I didn’t go in for motives, I never have. (Spark, *Loitering* 61)

It is also true that Fleur’s insistence on the decisive impact of the graveyard incident on her biography appears as somewhat arbitrary: by this point, she had finished her first novel but did not know it would be successful; she was already embarked on composing and planning the next two, and the conversation with the policeman does not seem to have much of a connection with them. However, if read through the lenses of the constitutive ethics of alterity, the scene turns into a compelling textual incipit, foreshadowing its complex tensions.

The encounter with a "shy" policeman, who interrupts Fleur's writing of a poem, in an ancient cemetery destined for demolition, represents an inaugural scene of hospitality that is essentially a scene of address. Fleur offers the policeman a sandwich which he refuses, but only in order to reciprocate with the gift of language. He presents Fleur with his good wishes, and declares as he leaves: "it was nice to speak to somebody" (1). Thus, the text's opening begins "suspiciously" (to use Nicol's well-applied term), with the menace of authoritative control on the part of the policeman, which is nevertheless soon diffused by an invitation to dialogism. On the other hand, the Dantean reference to "the middle" (of the twentieth century) locates the narrative both personally and historically, amounting to what Hale has termed the "avowal" of one's historical positionality. It invokes the specter of World War II, which, we will find out later, has left its marks on some of the characters – notably, the limp of Fleur's friend and supporter Solly Mendelssohn. The insinuation of the lingering impact of fascism set off by Solly's presence cannot be accidental in a novel as concerned with the propagandistic potential of storytelling as *Loitering with Intent*, authored by a partly Jewish writer who had witnessed the Eichmann trial first hand. The scene's setting in a cemetery destined for destruction ("an old graveyard which had not yet been demolished") (1) is charged with ambivalence: on the one hand, it attests to Fleur's responsibility as an author to speak for the absent and the voiceless, but it is also haunted by the prospect of the other's death at the hands of narrative representation. The prosopopoeic work of (auto)biography simultaneously functions as a mode of erasure through discursivization, anticipating Bernice Gilbert's suicide as a result of Sir Quentin's interfering with the narrativization of her life. Interestingly, the graveyard scene is interrupted before we find out details about why Fleur's literary activities appear as dubious to the policeman; the interruption consists of no less than the retrospective narration of her involvement with the Autobiographical Association which makes up the bulk of the novel, as if to suggest that the various forms of testimonial storytelling it comprises overlap the possible "crimes" the policeman enumerates to Fleur: "'Well, it could be desecrating and violating,' he said, 'it could be obstructing and hindering without due regard, it could be

loitering with intent" (155). Writing desecrates because it abolishes the non-iterability of the other and of the self, morphing them into repetition, or because it encroaches on and domesticates them for utilitarian purposes.

The policeman's cautionary words echo Fleur's unethical feelings of possessiveness towards her fictional creations: "my novel," "my characters," "my Warrender Chase," she keeps on repeating throughout the text. Perhaps the stealing of the manuscript by Dottie at the behest of Sir Quentin is a lesson she needs to learn, not so much a crime as an attempt to reappropriate the narrativized accounts of their lives by the members of the Autobiographical Association. By the end of the novel, after the death of her son, Lady Edwina destroys the copies of the affiliates' compromising memoirs, so that their story is preserved exclusively in its fictionalized form in Fleur's novel. Nevertheless, Fleur has assimilated the need to relinquish control over her characters' fate: her publishing house sells "the American rights, the paperback rights, the film rights, and most of the foreign rights of *Warrender Chase*" (171), marking the end of her "youth" and her determination to spend her life "writing ever since with great care" (171). It is difficult to exhaust the full meanings of "care" in the context of Spark's work, but given the title of Fleur's second novel, *All Souls' Day*, they may comprise an opening towards forms of authorial responsibility and collective hospitality conceived as she was writing a poem in the old graveyard. The final scene of the novel shows Fleur after visiting her friend and foil Dottie, who accuses her of "wriggling out of real life, unlike herself" returning a ball to a group of boys at play by kicking it with "a chance grace" that she thinks she could not have achieved if she had "studied the affair and tried hard" (172). The spontaneity of "grace" is, however, reached by means of responsible narrativization of self and others: far from avoiding real life, Fleur locates its meaning by overlapping her story with that of past and present storytellers, such as that of Benvenuto Cellini – the other paradigmatic autobiography invoked in the novel.

The last but one paragraph of the novel also provides my argument with a nice round final touch of oblique Scottishness by reminding us that the two friends and rivals, Fleur and Dottie, share a signal when they wish

to pay each other a visit at socially inappropriate times: they stand outside windows "late at night singing 'Auld Lang Syne'" (172) – the traditional Scottish song first recorded by Robert Burns, whose verses presentify the past and which has been internationally adopted as a symbol of renewal and communion with others. This intrusion of a primeval, but veiled identitarian tinge in a text otherwise oblivious of ethnic or national divisions (with the exception of the derisive allusions to the figure of the "English rose") may serve as a felicitous reminder of the manifold sources of unsettling otherness haunting Spark's self-conscious narrative. Repeatedly used and misused by the characters in order to make contact, avoid detection, disrupt peace, or even achieve revenge on each other, the ditty ironically parallels both the subversiveness of the text, and Fleur's liberating gesture of kicking the ball with its spectral disturbance of convention.

To conclude, *Loitering with Intent* explicitly performs Spark's inclusive version of narrative ethics by poisoning it against the hazardous, potentially immoral dimensions of life writing, and associating it with a notion of authorial "care" as responsibility. Bringing together enduring themes and tropes of Spark's writing, it sets in train a series of questions regarding the ethical imperative of "model[ing] oneself on the best" (33) – not the best preexisting discourses, as Maisie Young mistakenly presupposes, but on the possibility of a chance encounter with grace.

Notes:

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Violence, Innocence and Redemption in Irvine Welsh's Chemical Mythos

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Abstract

Scottish author Irvine Welsh has crafted an internally cohesive cosmology, grounded in mapping a somewhat loosely defined “chemical generation” that helped spearhead a personal brand of anti-Thatcherite counterculture (with an especially heavy focus on the marginalized, disgruntled and boisterous youths of Edinburgh). Examining some of the writer’s most recent and lesser-known works, my essay will argue that a series of archaic mythical patterns, symbols and cosmological coordinates can be shown to guide a large number of the axioms that Welsh employs to refine his own vision of a modern, emergent mythos.

Keywords: Irvine Welsh, comparative mythology, emergent mythology, archaic cosmology, altered states of consciousness, ritual initiation, chemical generation

The reemergence of mythical patterns in modern transgressive fiction has drawn critical attention in relation to the ostentatious eschatologies constructed by authors such as Bret Easton Ellis or Chuck Palahniuk. The main goals of transgressive literature are generally thought to consist of the intentional deconstruction (via the deployment of unmitigated or hypertrophied vulgarity) of various alienating or dehumanizing aspects of consumerism and its maladaptive cultural outgrowths. In the case of Scottish writer Irvine Welsh’s particular brand of riotous fiction these budding tropes of social dissent and rebellion have fully flourished into a shared universe, bearing all the general characteristics of a cohesive mythos. Its features range from a flurry of cosmological axioms, to