HeyJ XLVIII (2007), pp. 713–741

FRAMING THE HUMAN CONDITION: THE EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA IN IRIS MURDOCH'S *THE BELL* AND MURIEL SPARK'S *ROBINSON*

MICHAEL GIFFIN
Broken Bay Institute, Sydney College of Divinity, New South Wales, Australia

One of the features of modernist and postmodernist novels is the way they interrogate classical metaphysics, in the spirit of what Habermas calls post-metaphysical thinking, otherwise known as the post-Enlightenment critique of the Enlightenment. As a literary prism, post-metaphysical thinking is not anti-metaphysical: it conducts its interrogation and still accommodates both secular and religious frames. Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark are often compared but they interrogate classical metaphysics from different perspectives and for different purposes. In the nineteen-fifties, Murdoch was an aspiring philosophical author who treated classical metaphysics as a canon of influential myth, while Spark was an aspiring theological author who had recently converted to Catholicism. Through a reading of *The Bell* and *Robinson*, both published in the same year, this article describes how the young Murdoch and Spark do what emerging literary authors of the nineteen-fifties were expected to do: frame the human condition and reflect on its existential dilemma. With their different perspectives they both write within the same paradigm, or theory of mind; against symbolic backgrounds, and among significant dialogues, they make use of similar tropes. But Murdoch and Spark arrive at opposite positions on the relationship between imagination and reality, between *logos* and *mythos*, and ultimately on the nature of freedom and contingency.

I. FRAMING THE HUMAN CONDITION IN THE NINETEEN-FIFTIES

The twentieth-century English novel once regarded as essential to the curriculum has particular characteristics compared to novels once regarded as less literary. While it is no longer fashionable to speak of a secular canon, or of a great tradition, we still speak of modernism and postmodernism, we still acknowledge the novel written in the shadows of the post-metaphysical interrogation of classical metaphysics,[1] which interrogates the system of metaphysics synthesized from Greek reason, Hebrew revelation and Christian mystery. This is the novel informed by phenomenology, existentialism, metapsychology and structuralism, which responds to evolutionary theory, the proclamation of God's death, psychoanalysis and deconstruction.

As a literary prism, post-metaphysical thinking is not anti-metaphysical: it conducts its interrogation of classical metaphysics and still accommodates both secular and religious frames. For the secular author, her interrogation is grounded in a philosophy still indebted to a theology she no longer believes in – or may never have believed in – as she works out a secular idea of good and evil in a culture and society widely proclaimed to be post-religious.[2] Habermas explains this indebtedness thus: 'Philosophy, even in its post-metaphysical form, will be able neither to replace nor to repress religion as long as religious language is the bearer of a semantic content' which 'eludes the explanatory force of philosophical language and continues to resist translation into reasoning discourses'.[3] For the religious author, her interrogation is grounded in a theology aware of the reality that, since the crisis of belief of the nineteenth century, secularism has dominated literary culture to the point where western religion is widely-perceived to be an anachronistic and declining imaginary.

Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark are often compared but while they are similar they interrogate classical metaphysics from different perspectives and for different purposes. Murdoch is a philosophical author who treats classical metaphysics as a canon of influential myth while Spark is a theological author whose Catholicism, it seems to me, has always given her an ideological and aesthetic edge over Murdoch. Through a reading of *The Bell* and *Robinson*, both published in the same year,[4,5] this article describes how the young Murdoch and Spark do what emerging literary authors of the nineteen-fifties were expected to do: frame the human condition and reflect on its existential dilemma. With their different perspectives they both write within the same paradigm, or theory of mind; against symbolic backgrounds, and among significant dialogues, they make use of similar tropes. But Murdoch and Spark arrive at opposite positions on the relationship between imagination and reality, between *logos* and *mythos*, and ultimately on the nature of freedom and contingency.

II. THE EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA IN *THE BELL*

While *The Bell* appears to be one of Murdoch's more realistic novels she is not a literary realist, in the sense that realism is opposed to myth, which is why she chooses to work with mythological backgrounds. In explaining her choice, Murdoch makes several points paraphrased here: it is difficult for an author to be existential and work without the background myths provide and still keep her head; it is hard to hold to a metaphysics or a morality, in literature or in life, without the drama and personalities myths allow; the author cannot just manufacture myths, she needs to remain within a body of 'valid' myths; the author needs to be aware of the

myths she uses as a 'prop', lest they become an obstacle or barrier and 'close the mind against the acceptance of fresh truth'.[6] The way Murdoch uses myths is to give her protagonists what hermeneutical theory calls horizons, and through her critique of these horizons she exposes what she believes true or false about them.

In interrogating these horizons, Murdoch's intention is to explore 'the whole question of what human nature most truly is'.[7] Such a heady admission, made in an interview in the nineteen-sixties, places her in a self-consciously intellectual and aesthetic tradition few authors would now dare to admit being in, irrespective of what they privately think or feel about their work. As Murdoch says: 'Great art destroys the comfortable images with which each one of us surrounds himself in his daily life. I imagine this is what a great religious man also does. He kills one way of using the imagination, so as to make it free to operate in a different and higher way'.[8] Here Murdoch associates her vocation as an author with the production of great literature and equates it with the vocation of a great religious man. There are dangers here, as Murdoch equates western religion with myth. She regards Judaism and Christianity to have the same mythological status as the religion of the ancient Greeks.

The first frame in *The Bell* is, of course, the opening and closing scenes, which show the heroine entering the story in one condition and leaving it in another. The first thing to notice about Dora Greenfield is the similarity between her name and Dorothea Brooke in Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Murdoch believes Dickens to be a greater storyteller than Eliot,[9] but *Middlemarch* is a novel that demonstrates how the anxiety of influence operates; so many literary authors have written in its shadows, whether consciously or unconsciously. Eliot and Murdoch share a similar post-metaphysical intention – even if the theoretical terms they would use to describe that intention are different – to deconstruct the imagination of their heroines, Dorothea and Dora, as a way of forcing them to confront and work through their existential dilemmas and leading them into whatever degree of freedom they are allowed to have as fictional characters.

Murdoch's philosophical matrix has been called a kind of Platonic Freudianism, and Freudianism is of course indebted to the Platonic model of the mind for its very existence, building as it did on earlier nineteenth-century attempts to map the psychology of consciousness in a broad Hegelian spirit of looking inwards rather than outwards. As such, *The Bell* can usefully be understood as *Middlemarch* with a Freudian makeover, providing Murdoch with an opportunity to explore the mind of her Dora in contrast to the mind of Freud's Dora. Using Dorothea as an inspiration for Dora makes Murdoch somewhat of a 'George Eliot of the Fabulists', and where *Middlemarch* remains one of the most academically interpreted novels in English *The Bell* is now regarded as essential reading in the book club. Indeed, Penguin provides online

discussion guides for *The Bell* as a 'great book', which suggests that some publishers are still fostering the great tradition even if many academics are not.

The young Dorothea is in an altruistic (or *agape*-driven) Hegelian master–slave inspired thrall to her sexless and passively-dominant husband, Casaubon; not only to his person but to the ideas he represents. Those ideas belong to Scholasticism and are therefore grounded in the Aristotelian aspect of classical metaphysics, making them part of the 'mythology' Eliot believes Dorothea must overcome because to her it is as sterile and futile as Casaubon's search for the 'key to all mythologies'. Casaubon dies relatively early in *Middlemarch*, leaving Dorothea a rich widow, but his financial-cum-ideological legacy is entailed and she can only keep it as long as she remains, as it were, a kind of virgin martyr in thrall to her late husband's Scholasticism. According to Eliot, Dorothea's existential dilemma, which is primarily unconscious, is resolved to a degree when she meets Ladislaw, who functions as a trope for late-romanticism-cum-early-modernism. But in giving up Casaubon's rich-yet-barren legacy to marry the insouciant and insubstantial Ladislaw, Dorothea becomes much poorer, financially and ideologically. This is Eliot's way of saying her heroine cannot have it both ways; whatever happiness Dorothea is allowed comes at a cost, as all happiness does.

The young Dora is in an erotic (or *eros*-driven) Hegelian master–slave inspired thrall to her sexual and aggressively-dominant husband, Paul; not only to his person but to the ideas he represents. Those ideas belong to his career as an art historian whose focus on aesthetic history can be usefully contrasted with Casaubon's legacy to see how it is similar and different. The novel begins with a nervous and bumbling and insecure Dora travelling from London to Imber – a play on umber or umbra (shades or shadows) – where she is to visit Paul, from whom she is currently estranged, while he studies Imber's antiquities. Dora is an on-again off-again wife and art student unable to complete her studies because she is always in a state of crisis and angst and cannot apply herself. This is because Murdoch's Dora has been invested with all the pathologies Freud invested in his Dora, and it is implied that these pathologies are caused by the way classical metaphysics has oppressed Dora's natural pagan spirit. Because the individual and collective western imaginations are thought to reflect each other, Murdoch suggests Dora cannot come to terms with the conscious dilemma of Paul until she comes to terms with the unconscious dilemma of Imber.

Dora's trip to Imber, therefore, is the beginning of her journey into maturity, which depends on consciously discovering who she is as a woman and unconsciously reclaiming some of her power as a trope. In other words, Dora must come to terms with what the shadows of Imber represent as well as fulfil her need to show Paul she can 'still act independently' and is not 'his slave'. On her journey to Imber, Dora's

train 'thunders' through Maidenhead – suggesting she is entering Imber as an emotional virgin – and Murdoch ensures this process of emotional deflowering will be confronting for her. Just before entering the gates of Imber, Dora sees a 'blue line of distant hills' and feels it is 'her last glimpse of the outside world'. As she enters this inside world, Imber becomes a place Dora gazes at with an 'odd' feeling of 'solipsistic melancholy'; Imber 'was inside her head'; Imber is a place there 'was no way of breaking into'; Imber 'was all imaginary'. Clearly, Imber is a place where Murdoch's Dora must do the work on herself that Freud's Dora was never able to do on herself while she was under Freud's care.

At Imber, Dora must endure Paul's ongoing humiliation and abuse and contempt, as they act out the master–slave dynamic Murdoch has given them. But Murdoch wants the reader to know Paul cannot destroy Dora; there is a core of untapped strength in her heroine waiting to be tapped. Dora's response to the life of Imber – which she does not understand and is not comfortable with as a woman or a trope – is the measure of the person she becomes. Imber is the mythological heart of Dora's existential dilemma.

The second frame in *The Bell* is what confronts Dora on her arrival at Imber: the Court and the Abbey, two architectural symbols dominating the landscape that combine to form the horizon of classical metaphysics. If we use Gadamerian hermeneutics as a prism to interpret what they symbolize,[10] the decaying Imber Court, with its Palladian façade and Corinthian pillars, represents a neoclassical horizon of reason (*logos*) and the reclaimed and restored Imber Abbey, with its Norman tower, represents an older horizon of romantic feeling (*mythos*). Later, this article will discuss Murdoch's use of another (but related) kind of *mythos*, that of the pagan, as her sense of *mythos* is quite expansive.

Under the sign of *logos*, the Court is the site of a fledgling attempt to establish an Anglican community of lay religious; under the sign of *mythos*, the Abbey is the site of an enclosed order of Anglican Benedictine nuns, established in a Tractarian spirit that seeks, in Gadamerian terms, to restore the *mythos* that *logos* has erased.[11] The Court and Abbey are separated by a lake, the surface of which represents the divide between ego–conscious and id–unconscious: mental structures familiar to Plato and Freud and Murdoch. The inhabitants of the Court like to listen to classical music, which Dora cannot relate to – as a primitive she prefers rhythm and blues – and they reach the Abbey by gliding across the surface of the lake. They do not swim, by which Murdoch suggests they are not in touch with the id–unconscious and therefore are not psychologically integrated. Fortunately, at least one of the nuns at the Abbey can swim – the Abbess, Mother Clare – and so she is therefore in touch with her id–unconscious. This allows her at one point to save the heroine from drowning as a woman and a trope.

The third frame in *The Bell* is within the Court itself. This frame represents the two moral prisms Anglicanism holds in tension. Murdoch gives these prisms as horizons to two authority figures dominating the Court: Michael Meade, an effete man – Murdoch refers to him as tired and weedy and unmanly – who has inherited the decaying Court from his family, and James Tayper Pace, a muscular Christian from London who has made a name for himself doing good works with the disadvantaged poor in the slums of the East End. Murdoch gives Michael a teleological horizon, which appeals to natural law and uses reason to reflect on nature in order to arrive at a sense of how 'the good life' ought to be pursued. Murdoch gives James a deontological horizon, which appeals to the law of divine command and uses reason to reflect on scriptural revelation in order to arrive at a sense of duty and obligation and commitment, also in order to arrive as a sense of how 'the good life' ought to be pursued.

The deontological horizon is preached confidently by James in a sermon at the beginning of Chapter 9, where he unequivocally asserts 'the good life' requiring one to 'live without any image of oneself' and simply to obey the deposit of the Anglican faith. The teleological horizon is preached timidly by Michael at the beginning of Chapter 16, where he equivocally proposes 'the good life' requiring one to 'have some conception of one's capacities', to 'know oneself sufficiently', and to 'study carefully how best to use such strength as one has'. Teleology's natural law is inherited from the classical Enlightenment of ancient Greece and is closely associated with the neoclassical Enlightenment that Murdoch represents in the Court as Michael's decaying inheritance (*logos*). Deontology's law of divine command is inherited from the Judaeo-Christian context of scriptural revelation Murdoch represents in the faith of James's 'muscular Christianity' (*mythos*), which he shares with the inhabitants of the Abbey. The action of the novel is dedicated to disabusing Michael of his teleological horizon; however, the novel cannot – and does not even attempt to – disabuse the deontological horizon of James and the Benedictine nuns.

The central action of *The Bell* revolves around the first and second frames – of Dora's existential dilemma and the post-Enlightenment critique of the Enlightenment – because as far as Murdoch is concerned these two frames are interdependent constituents of Dora's conscious and unconscious minds. The third frame, the tension between Michael's teleology and James's deontology, is a sub-frame within the second frame and is a way of explaining why things fall apart when Michael's horizon is used as a guiding principle for pursuing 'the good life'. There are other sub-frames as well: a fourth frame, the antithetical but symbiotic twin tropes, Catherine and Nick Fawley; a fifth frame, two bells, new and old, and the way in which the old bell is found and the new bell is lost; and, ultimately, a sixth frame, the unspoken and almost unrecognized relationship between Michael (*logos*) and Dora (*mythos*, but a very

different kind of *mythos* from James Tayper Pace and the Benedictine Abbey) and the opposing ways in which the *logos* of Michael and *mythos* of Dora influence an impressionable young man, Toby Gashe.

The fourth frame, the twin tropes of Catherine and Nick Fawley, can be understood in many dichotomous ways: good and evil, pure reason and pure feeling, conscious and unconscious, ego and id, Apollonian and Dionysian, and so forth. Catherine is a good and beautiful and saintly lay companion or oblate of the Benedictines living at the Court immediately prior to being accepted by the Abbey as a novice. She can swim but not at all well; she is afraid of water; she often dreams of drowning. When her brother sabotages her noviciate, literally and metaphorically, Catherine suddenly goes mad and enters the lake between Court and Abbey in an attempt to drown herself. Dora tries to save Catherine, but as she cannot swim she ends up nearly drowning herself; however, the two are saved by the aquatically-proficient Abbess, Mother Clare. When Catherine regains consciousness she immediately seeks comfort in the arms of Michael, where it becomes obvious to those gazing at her dripping body, and to the reader, that her vocation has been based on a sublimated desire for him. She is soon despatched to London where she is treated for schizophrenia.

Nick physically resembles Catherine but is her metaphysical opposite, being a trope for romantic evil; a troubled troublemaker whose only service to the community at the Court is using his rifle to slaughter the fauna threatening its crops. As a youth, Nick had considerable beauty, was clever and impertinent, and was always at the centre of loves and hates. At that time, as Michael's student, Nick admitted to loving his twin sister with 'a Byronic passion', and he also tried to seduce Michael with what Murdoch calls a radiant desire 'to beseech and to dominate'. Michael resolved to keep the relationship Platonic, knowing he was playing with fire, but when Nick realized their relationship was not going to develop according to the excesses of his Byronic will he went to the headmaster and 'contrived to give the impression that much more had happened than had in fact happened, and also seemed to have hinted that it was Michael who had led him unwillingly into an adventure which he did not understand and from which he had throughout been anxious to escape'. Michael's teaching career is therefore ruined by Nick.

Many years later the brooding and self-destructive Nick follows his sister Catherine to Imber, where he eventually becomes Michael's nemesis and ensures the Court's lay religious community folds before turning his rifle on himself and committing suicide. While at Imber, Nick seeks Michael's attention – mostly in an emotionally pent-up passive–aggressive manner – which Michael avoids by keeping his distance and otherwise erecting a barrier between them. Towards the end of the novel, Murdoch places the idea in Michael's consciousness that he actually 'loves' Nick, on taking note of what the Abbess has told him as his spiritual counsellor: 'all our failings are ultimately failures in love'.

Michael hopes that 'some good' might come of trying to 'love' Nick, in the *agape* sense, although for Murdoch Michael's conscious *agape* sublimates a deeper unconscious *eros* that shall be his undoing precisely because she determines it shall.

Indeed, Murdoch's literary intention is to shoot down every passing *agape* with a canon of *eros* she reserves specifically for that purpose; like any loyal Platonic Freudian she must invest any and every text with a sublimated sexual subtext. As Michael gives Nick no rational reason to destroy him again – apart from refusing to become physically or metaphysically involved with him – Nick uses another young man, the impressionable Toby Gashe, as a tool to fulfil his irrational desire to destroy Michael's dreams. Murdoch ensures Nick is successful – since the logic of her novel depends on it – and Michael ultimately realizes Nick's 'revenge', in forcing Toby to play the part Nick himself played thirteen years earlier, could not have been 'more perfect': 'Toby had been his understudy indeed. Michael had hoped to save Nick. But Nick had merely ruined him a second time and in precisely the same way'.

The fifth frame, the two bells, is a further device through which Murdoch weaves together her representation of Dora's existential dilemma and her post-Enlightenment critique of the Enlightenment. On the same day Catherine is going to be admitted to the Abbey as a novice, the Court is going to present the Abbey with a new bell among great ceremony and Episcopal blessing. The old bell, named Gabriel (God's messenger) is lost and has a legend about it: an anonymous and faithless nun once broke her vows with a young man; the Bishop of the day called on the anonymous nun to confess her infidelity; when no confession was forthcoming he put a curse on the Abbey, whereupon the bell 'flew like a bird out of the tower and fell into the lake'. As an art historian, Paul has unearthed a story about the old bell, which he has only told to Dora and to Catherine: the old bell sometimes rings at the bottom of the lake and 'if you hear it' it 'portends a death'.

Toby discovers the old bell by accident, buried at the bottom of the lake, and confides his find to Dora. Dora, who has heard the story of the bell from Paul, is 'suddenly filled with the uneasy elation of one to whom great power has been given' which she 'does not yet know how to use'. She instinctively feels recovering the old bell is important to recovering her identity, and to resolving her unease with Imber, but she cannot give a language to why or how. With Toby to help her, Dora feels she can 'do anything', as if 'by the sheer force of her own will she could make the great bell rise'; in 'her own fashion, she would fight; in 'this holy community she would play the witch'.

Under the cover of night, and with a great and almost heroic effort, Toby raises the bell for Dora, and in the process he makes an important transition from being her 'sorcerer's apprentice' to becoming a 'medieval knight' who sighs and suffers for a lady 'whom he has scarcely seen and

will never possess'. When the bell is raised, Toby and Dora are awed by its size and notice the Latin inscription on it: *Vox ego sum Amoris. Gabriel vocor* (I am the voice of love. I am called Gabriel). Toby and Dora immediately fall into a passionate embrace and, struggling together, roll into the mouth of the bell causing the clapper to strike violently against its side. Two things happen as a result: first, a muted boom is sent echoing across the lake, which has profound consequences for Dora and for Imber as the sound of a bell portends a death; second, according to Murdoch's logic, the natural influence of Dora's *mythos* rescues the impressionable Toby from the unnatural influence of Michael's *logos*.

From this point onwards, Dora moves from 'playing the witch' to feeling herself a priestess 'dedicated' to a kind of pagan 'rite'. She hatches a scheme with Toby to exchange the two bells; when the new bell is unveiled the old bell with be in its place and Imber will be given a much-needed surprise and shock. Dora is unable to carry out this plan, and instead she visits the old bell the night before new bell is due to be blessed. While gazing at the old bell, Dora realizes that while she thought herself to be its master – and able to 'make it her plaything' – it is now 'mastering her and would have its will'. Using all her strength, Dora manages to fling herself rhythmically against the old bell, with an urgent need to make it ring out: 'The thunderous noise continued, bellowing out in a voice that had been silent for centuries that some great thing was newly returning to the world'. Crowds come from miles around into the barn where the astonished pagan priestess Dora is 'almost annihilated' by the effort of her bellringing and the wondrous effect it is having.

When considered against the broader logic the novel proposes, the new bell, created under the Court's sign of *logos*, cannot be an authentic 'messenger' for the Abbey. The secular Murdoch's Spenglerian rationale suggests a pre-Enlightenment wholeness about the old bell, created under the Abbey's sign of *mythos*, which the new bell cannot match because it belongs to the neoclassical Enlightenment and must bear the full weight of the author's critique of that Enlightenment. Accordingly, Murdoch ensures Nick sabotages the causeway, across which the new bell and Catherine are due to enter the Abbey the following day. As the bell and novice process over the causeway it gives way, the new bell falls into the lake, and the postulant follows after it in her sudden narratively-convenient madness. Murdoch's image of the submerged Catherine has something of Millais' *Ophélia* about it that now seems camp and comical but perhaps the image is meant to be more serious than it is.

In Murdoch's scheme of things, Dora is also *mythos* but a very different kind from James Tayper Pace and the Abbey. The sixth frame tells the reader what kind of *mythos* Dora represents in direct contrast to Michael's *logos*. While Michael's horizon is deconstructed and found wanting, Dora's horizon is deconstructed and receives Murdoch's approbation; but then Dora is a red-haired trope and Michael is a

Platonic trope both widely present in the nineteenth and twentieth century novel that interrogates classical metaphysics.[12] For Murdoch, the *mythos* of the Abbey exists within classical metaphysics, as the *mythos* of scriptural revelation, while the *mythos* of Dora is something else; something subjugated by classical metaphysics and yet somehow symbiotically related to classical metaphysics; something primitively reflected in Dora's status as a pagan, a witch, and a priestess. Murdoch is clear, however: Dora's *mythos* is dependent on Michael's *logos* and cannot exist without it any more than the unconscious can exist without the conscious, the id can exist without the ego, the irrational (feeling) can exist without the rational (reason), the heart can exist without the mind, or the Dionysian can exist without the Apollonian.

The turning point in Dora's existential dilemma occurs at the very centre of the novel, when she flees from the combined oppression of Paul's bullying and Imber's imaginaries and travels to London where she seeks refuge in the arms of an acquaintance, Noel Spens. On arrival at Noel's 'modern' flat in Brompton Road, Dora takes a luxurious bath while Noel mixes cocktails, prepares a cosmopolitan lunch, and plays rhythm and blues records. While they are having cocktails, Noel lectures her about Paul being jealous of her 'creative powers' as he 'can't create anything himself' and therefore Paul is determined that Dora shan't. Noel's most powerful harangue, however, is reserved not for Paul but for Imber as he implores Dora to not 'give in to them' and to never forget 'what they believe just isn't true'; 'no good comes in the end of untrue beliefs'; 'there is no God'.

While Noel dashes out to buy a bottle of wine, the phone rings and Dora picks it up only to hear Paul's voice. She is silent, not wishing to admit her whereabouts, and in this silence she hears a blackbird calling in the background of Imber. The sound of the blackbird has a powerful effect on her. She puts the phone back on its receiver and realizes that here, too, in Noel's 'modern' flat, 'she was being organized' through the 'dreary apparatus' of his seduction. A newly-awakened Dora is not happy with this seduction, any more than she is with Paul's persecution, because in Murdoch's terms Noel is No + El: for the Judaeo-Christian, no God; for the ancient Greeks, no gods. Noel represents the existential alternative to there being no classical metaphysics; no *logos* of Court or *mythos* of Abbey; he wants to destroy everything they represent and hopes, after their destruction as imaginaries, Dora will leave Paul and come to him. As far as Murdoch is concerned, Dora must flee from this seduction and 'go back to Imber at once' as her 'real life' and 'real problems' are at Imber. Noel is 'no good', both literally and metaphorically.

On her way back to Imber, Dora visits the National Gallery; a place where 'the pictures were almost as familiar to her as her own face'. She feels these pictures 'belonged to her' and she 'reflected ruefully that they were about the only thing that did'. They fill her heart with love, inspired

as she is by their authority and generosity and splendour. Before them even her husband Paul is only a dream; they are 'something real outside herself, which spoke to her in kindly and yet in sovereign tones, something superior and good whose presence destroyed the dreary trance-like solipsism of her earlier mood'. Before these paintings Dora realizes 'something else' is in the world 'after all'. While she does not draw a 'explicit moral' from gazing at the paintings, she feels she 'had had a revelation' through them, and suddenly she has the desire to 'go down on her knees' before a Gainsborough and embrace it while shedding tears. The terms 'gaze' and 'solipsism' both belong to existentialist discourse, which Murdoch uses in *The Bell* and her other novels. For example, in *The Black Prince* (1973),[13] Murdoch observes art to be neither cosy nor mocked; art tells 'the only truth that ultimately matters'. Therefore, art is the only thing Dora can 'gaze' at and overcome the human tendency towards solipsism: the denial of any possible knowledge other than one's own existence.

Dora leaves the Gallery and returns to Imber, where she inspires Toby to raise the old bell; hatches the failed plot to exchange the old bell for the new bell; and, when this plot fails, makes the old bell ring, thus breaking the spell *logos* has hitherto held over Imber. Noel then arrives at Imber to do his best to save Dora and destroy Imber – through a sardonic and reprehensible act of journalism – because he can see Dora obviously can't or won't save herself. However, the Court – but not the Abbey – is imploding anyway. While Dora has been responsible for some of that implosion, she is enraged by Noel's interference because she can now see the 'good' of Imber. She does not wish to see this 'good' destroyed because she can now see it linked to her experience of art at the National Gallery, but she is powerless to control what she has put in motion.

When the lay community at the Court disbands, the Abbey remains untouched across the lake, and Dora is left alone with Michael. A 'curious dream-like peace' descends on Imber, as Dora shows a 'sudden new enthusiasm' for the classical music she once disdained, and teaches herself to swim in the lake between the Court and the Abbey; or as Murdoch camply puts it: 'The depths below affrighted her no longer'. During this time 'a curious relationship grew between Michael and Dora', both separate and autonomous but connected, which is not surprising as they are opposing aspects of the dialectic Murdoch is interrogating. By then Michael's world of *logos* has, of course, radically changed, as Murdoch has intentionally destroyed his horizon and left him with nothing but an absent God he no longer believes in. Michael, who once wanted to be a priest, now has the 'calmness of the ruined man' whose only connection with his former life is attending the Mass.

In words that could only be written by a theologically-unaware author who does not understand the Eucharist to be a scripturally-warranted sacrament of salvation, Murdoch writes: 'The Mass remained, not

consoling, not uplifting, but in some way factual. It contained for him no assurance that all would be made well that was not well. It simply existed as a kind of pure reality separate from the weaving of his own thoughts. He attended it almost as a spectator'. This is a curious observation to make, but then Michael is one of Murdoch's early attempts at describing the 'spiritual masochism' she intentionally gives to some of her characters.[14] To the Catholic and Anglican reader it is an eccentric characterization – a 'spiritual masochist' going to Mass as a spectator to experience the objective fact of a God he no longer believes in – because it denies the nature of a sacrament and empties religious belief of its vitality in order to serve the mechanistic designs of an author in thrall to Plato and Freud.

Of her own accord, Dora now seeks some 'talks' with the Abbess, as opposed to spiritual counsel. They talk on three occasions and Dora seems pleased with these talks although she is 'reticent about what was said'. Around this time, Michael suspects Dora is 'a little in love with him' but he does nothing 'to reduce the distance between them', encourages her to talk about herself, and quietly circumvents 'her clumsy efforts to make him talk about himself'. His focus is on Dora's future, which to Murdoch is more positive than his own, because he understands that, unlike Catherine, Dora 'had fed like a glutton upon the catastrophes at Imber and they had increased her substance'. Michael helps Dora obtain a small grant, which allows her to resume her studies in art. This is necessary because Dora's *mythos* is still in a sense dumb and requires the help of Michael's *logos*; even though Dora has taught herself to swim, she lacks the language or conceptual framework belonging to the horizon Michael represents: to the point of being literally unable to put pen to paper and apply for her own small grant.

Thanks to Michael, with this small grant Dora can continue her studies in art and perhaps become an artist or an art teacher who will one day mediate the truth art tells. According to Murdoch, this is the truth western religion once told, which is no longer being heard, which now needs to be told again by the artist (and of course the author). For Murdoch, this 'fresh' truth is mediated by the *mythos* of the pagan, the witch, and the priestess, not the *mythos* of the Abbey as a constituent of classical metaphysics. There are signs Dora is developing a stronger but still partial sense of her own freedom and its potential for independence. But it is important for the reader to remember that Dora is a trope in a post-metaphysical novel not a person in real life. Her existential dilemma – of not knowing who she is or who she can become – is primarily because of her lack of identify as character who is meant to be a trope not the fictional representation of a real person.

It is also important to notice the large degree of victimhood with which Dora enters the novel and the small degree of freedom with which she leaves it. Both are, like the contingencies surrounding her, completely

unrepresentative of Murdoch's own life as creature of *logos*, a teacher of philosophy, an intellectual author, a woman who controls her life and her novels. The reader needs to take this into account when considering the abstract and theoretical and curiously detached way Murdoch approaches the human condition, with her dichotomous frames within dichotomous frames, according to a post-metaphysical logic – at least in her secular representation of it – which is more mechanistic than it ought to be if it is to seriously represent life outside literature, or seriously map the individual and collective unconscious of the western mind. The human condition, and any existential dilemmas we invest it with, is surely not a neatly set out algebraic equation, and neither is the horizon of classical metaphysics. That said, the critical reader of the twenty-first century needs to be aware of the themes that informed the literary novel of the twentieth century, and *The Bell* is a very good example of those themes.

III. THE EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA IN *ROBINSON*

The post-metaphysical tradition has remained overwhelmingly secular. Authors such as Eliot and Murdoch – along with those influenced by them – take it on themselves to speak for, and sit in judgement on, characters they invest with religious horizons. As a theological author, Spark has a strong grasp of the reality of her faith and chooses to speak for herself. In doing so she claims both a 'poetic perception' and a 'synoptic vision'.[15,16] Whether that claim allows her access to the truth, any more or less than Eliot or Murdoch, has been debated ever since Plato who – believing the lies of poetry distort the truth of philosophy – banned the poet from his ideal republic.[17]

Spark believes the novel to be a form of poetry and so the novelist is a kind of poet.[18] She is not affected by Plato's quarrel because she is not Platonic; she belongs more to the Hebrews than to the Greeks even though she clearly understands the debt the Christian horizon owes to the Greek as well as the Hebrew horizons. Through this 'belonging', and the rabbinic tradition it represents, Spark's novels act as a bridge of midrash between literary prejudices that have tended to be anti-religious and religious prejudices that have tended to be anti-literary. Spark is aware of how poetic perception and synoptic vision can best be articulated through myth and metaphor; hence her implied response to Plato when answering Kermode's question about whether novelists are liars; and, if not, what kind of truth they are telling: 'I don't claim my novels are truth . . . I claim they are fiction out of which a kind of truth emerges . . . simply because one puts [truth] out as a work of fiction then one is not a liar . . . People get annoyed if you say look here *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* is a pack of lies'.[19]

While classical metaphysics is often equated with the philosophy of Plato – and through Plato with Aristotle and Aquinas and Freud – Spark reminds us it is a synthesis of revelation, reason and mystery, which owes its primary allegiance to the Jews and Christians who wrote scripture rather than to the Greeks who wrote philosophy. Where Murdoch maps consciousness to represent 'fresh truth' in metapsychological ways, Spark maps consciousness to represent scriptural truth in allegorical ways. She defends classical metaphysics from those who seek to replace it with metapsychology, while at the same time providing her own critique of classical metaphysics. As such, the reader is obliged to recognize how the theological Spark and philosophical Murdoch share a similar paradigm, or theory of mind, even though they have different secular and religious perspectives within that paradigm.

Where Murdoch turns the unconscious into a mechanistic place in which suppressed fertile natural *mythos* is dominated by oppressive infertile unnatural *logos*, Spark is more cautious. She is more respectful of *logos* and more honest about the intellectual debt both she and Murdoch owe to *logos*. She doesn't see the need to shoot down every passing *agape* with Murdoch's canon of *eros* if blowing a raspberry at *logos* will suit her purpose better. Likewise, while she has always acknowledged *mythos* – as any post-metaphysical author must – she has an astute sense of what *mythos* is and is not. Throughout her literary career she remained circumspect about the lofty claims often made on its behalf.

Like the Platonic model of the mind, which has remained powerful in literature and the arts long after losing its currency in the sciences, *logos* and *mythos* are there to be used as metaphorical devices and should not be seen as ends in themselves. This is why Spark offers a caution to the post-metaphysical author: 'The best thing is to be conscious of everything that one writes, and let the unconscious take care of itself, if it exists, which we don't know. If we knew it [exists] it wouldn't be the unconscious.[20] To read all of Spark's novels is to realize there is *logos* and *mythos*, and there is the post-metaphysical critique of classical metaphysics, with their truth and lies, but her literary purpose has always been to use *logos* and *mythos* to rearticulate theological truth in fresh ways rather than to usurp it with what Murdoch would call 'fresh truth'.

In approximating Spark's poetic perception and synoptic vision, Randisi suggests she has more affinity with the metaphysical poets of the eighteenth century than with the post-metaphysical authors of the twentieth century.[21] Spark is a 'highly analytical and complex thinker who takes her religion seriously', and like the metaphysical poets 'she chooses to express herself in ways economical yet rich in paradox'.[22] The paradox of being simultaneously metaphysical and post-metaphysical is as challenging as being theological in a secular or post-religious society, or as challenging as using deconstruction as a rabbinic mode of interpretation to reassert an unnerving ironical something called

scriptural truth. Through this paradox, Spark reconsiders the relationship between post-metaphysical thinking and classical metaphysics and reminds the reader of how their shared concerns are all present in scripture. This paradox makes Spark's novels literature as theology *par excellence*.

Spark has a different attitude towards the human condition than Murdoch. It is easy to imagine her contemplating the existential dilemma Murdoch gives to Dora with a mixture of amusement and disdain. Spark does not treat western religion as a myth, even though she uses *mythos* to interrogate the claims of its *logos*, and she deconstructs the horizons of her protagonists in religious rather than secular ways that are more allegorical than metapsychological. Her theology, which is never heterodox, is often disguised among her 'send ups' of her religion, in a pervasive acknowledgement that human folly and evil (and even error) exist as much within the Church as without it. In recognition of this paradox, Spark has earned the title 'Jane Austen of the Surrealists'.

Where Murdoch uses six frames in *The Bell* to explore her Platonic and Freudian territory, the economical Spark needs only three frames in *Robinson* to capture a much broader landscape of the western mind. Her three frames are set among the novel's four mythical backgrounds, which perfectly match the four metaphors Frye associates with the Biblical imagination and its influence on western literature: mountain, garden, cave, and furnace.[23] In *Words with Power* (1990) Frye writes four essays around these metaphors, to 'relate the Bible and literature more closely within the cultural history of the western world', and to provide 'a more intelligible account of the relation of mythology in general' to what is often vaguely described as 'the myths we live by'.[24] It is astonishing to see how Spark accomplishes this very thing in her second novel, published thirty-two years before *Words with Power* and twenty-four years before *The Great Code* (1982),[25] and it is humbling to consider how from the beginning of her long and distinguished career her novels have strongly and consistently anticipated not only Frye's work but the work of philosophers and theologians such as Derrida, Gadamer, Habermas and Ricoeur. Murdoch attempts a similar mimesis in her novels – perhaps even with equal distinction – but her results do not have the same resonance. The difference can be located in the religious Spark's theological sensibility, which is very different from the secular Murdoch's philosophical sensibility.

Using the theme of a survivor stranded on an island, taken from *Robinson Crusoe*, Spark frames the human condition and explores the existential dilemma of her heroine, January Marlow, stranded on an eponymous man-shaped island in the North Atlantic owned and occupied by a man who wants to live there as a meditative recluse. The first frame of *Robinson* is, of course, the opening and closing scenes, between which the heroine becomes a more powerful and mature version

of the already powerful and mature woman she is. This is very different from the first frame of *The Bell*, in which the heroine makes the transition from one degree of immaturity to another. In hindsight, January reflects that Robinson was 'a time and landscape of the mind'; an 'apocryphal island' where 'all things are possible'; a 'locality of childhood', both 'dangerous and lyrical'. This mental landscape is contrasted with her 'real' life in Chelsea as a single mother with a teenage son, who has recently converted to Catholicism, and who lives an otherwise unremarkable life among her two sisters and their antithetical husbands. While January is clearly not Spark there are some autobiographical elements in the heroine's character: at the time the novel is set, 1954, Spark was a single mother, with a teenage son, who had recently converted to Catholicism, and whose red hair complements the feisty intellectual character of her red-haired heroine.

The second frame of *Robinson*, as in *The Bell*, is what confronts the heroine when she enters this 'time and landscape of the mind': the forces behind or within her conscious life. While on the island, January becomes a red-haired trope for *mythos* – but the *mythos* she represents is a mixture of both the pagan Dora Greenfield and the religious Imber Abbey rather than an exclusive representative of one or the other. As *mythos*, January is set among other tropes, the most important being *logos*, Miles Robinson, who owns the island, who maintains an antithetical but nevertheless symbiotic relationship with the heroine throughout the novel, and who is an alter ego for her first brother-in-law, the misogynist and sexually impotent doctor Ian Brodie.

Within this second frame of *mythos* and *logos* there is a third frame of good and evil. Jimmy Waterford, a fellow crash-survivor, represents a contemporary good that is well-intentioned but ineffectual. Tom Wells, another crash-survivor, represents a contemporary evil that is an alter ego for January's second brother-in-law, the bookie Curly Lonsdale. To recap the allegorical scenario so far: there is a plane crash on an eponymous island owned by *logos*; only *mythos* and good and evil survive the crash; and the central action of the allegory takes place on a plateau high above the clouds where it seems that 'the whole sky' is beneath these four tropes.

Moving among the second and third frames is a child, Miguel, Robinson's son by adoption, a Lockean *tabula rasa* who each protagonist seeks to influence according to the logic of his or her horizon: whether it be *logos* or *mythos*, or good or evil. In particular, Robinson wishes to protect Miguel from the negative influences of *mythos* while January wishes to protect Miguel from the negative influences of *logos*. Miguel's closest counterpart in *The Bell* would be the impressionable Toby Gashe but, unlike Miguel, Toby is not *tabula rasa*; having recently matriculated, he is visiting Imber on retreat before going up to Oxford as an undergraduate. Also, the ways in which Toby is influenced by *logos* and *mythos* at Imber are different from the ways in which *logos* and *mythos*

seek to influence Miguel on Robinson. Like a good Platonic Freudian, Murdoch gives everything text a psychosexual subtext, with a pathology to match, while Spark has bigger allegorical fish to fry than psychology and sex. The adopted Miguel is an alter ego for January's biological son Brian but where Miguel is highly impressionable Brian is astute and knowledgeable and has an independent mind.

The novel contains many paradoxes: January dislikes Brodie but likes Robinson, dislikes Wells but likes Lonsdale, believes Wells is a bad influence over Miguel but Lonsdale is a good influence over Brian. Also, while she is attracted to Waterford he has no counterpart in her conscious, which is perhaps an admission that in the twentieth century good is harder to portray than evil: evil being much more recognizable than good. In this matrix of *mythos* and *logos*, and good and evil, with a *tabula rasa* among them, what is good in January's conscious becomes evil in her unconscious, and what is evil in her conscious becomes good in her unconscious. Like Spark's habit of exposing the lies of truth and the truth of lies, her hallmark is to give everything – whether physical or metaphysical or post-metaphysical – a Janus-face in which nothing is what it appears to be and everything metacritical is also hypocritical.

As a trope for good, Jimmie Waterford is related to Robinson to the point of being his heir. January is 'quite charmed by Jimmie' as he 'appealed to a quality' in her mind that she 'considered the most advanced' she possessed, which was also 'slightly masculine'. Jimmie's mission is to try to get Robinson to return to his 'vast properties', which are not lands but an expanding motor-scooter empire in the north of Africa. Jimmie cannot become managing director of this family empire in Robinson's absence because he has 'lost his nerve' and needs his 'head examined'. After surviving the plane crash with minor injuries, Jimmie helps Robinson bury the dead, nurse the living, and salvage their belongings, before returning to his charming and insouciant state of lost nerves. Jimmie is as attracted to January as she is to him, but although he is handsome and well-intentioned he is also weak and vulnerable and easily manipulated, which is why Robinson does not approve of their budding relationship. In spite of this, Jimmie is still Robinson's relative and, along with January, he is allowed to accompany Robinson to some of the novel's metaphorical landscapes – for example, the mountain and the furnace – but he is not allowed access to the secret–sacred place only Robinson knows about and can go to: the cave.

As a trope for evil, Tom Wells belongs to a category of tropes once *de rigueur* among self-consciously Catholic authors. For example, in *Brighton Rock* (1938),[26] Ida Arnold is Greene's attempt to describe a pagan or pre-Christian person who has no idea of, and who cares nothing for, his Manichaean worldview with its myth of exiled soul and eternal return.[27] Ida's motto is 'it's fun to be alive'; she is grounded in this life and has no sense of an afterlife apart from believing in a plane of existence

that can be accessed by spiritualism through mediums and planchettes. In a similar vein, Tom's motto is 'we're lucky to be alive', as if life is a matter of chance rather than design, and he uses a whole emporium of fake spiritualism – through plying lucky and magic and druid charms along with his magazine *Your Future* – as an elaborate confidence trick through which he blackmails the gullible. On a superficial level, Tom appears to be a kind of *mythos* with which January can identify, through their shared interest in rhythm and blues, and the dancing and drinking afforded by London's nightlife, but on a deeper level these Dionysian aspects of *mythos* do not reflect his real character – for example, he believes it is 'unnatural' to be living on the island 'alone with Nature' – and they do not mitigate his fake spiritualism or mask the reality of pagan evil he embodies in January's – and Spark's as well as Greene's – twentieth-century Catholic imagination. Because Wells is evil, Spark restricts his movements. He seldom walks 'beyond the vicinity of the house', he turns back from his only attempt to visit the mountain and furnace, and he has never been to the cave. He is occasionally found lurking in the garden, but then so is the serpent in Genesis.

As a trope for *logos*, Miles Robinson was born into a wealthy family in Gibraltar and his mother was a devout Catholic. After nearly completing seminary training he refused to be ordained, travelled through the more Latin parts of Europe and South America to observe Catholic practices, and eventually left the Church, objecting to what he believes to be its heretical and superstitious character, while still maintaining a personal belief in the Catholic faith. Robinson attributes this superstitious character to Mariology – which he cannot distinguish from the Mariolatry discouraged by Vatican II, a Council that had not yet met, or by *Lumen Gentium*, a Constitution that had not yet been promulgated – and Spark conveys a heavy irony here by giving him the middle name of Mary. His anti-Marian fervour becomes such an obsession that he writes a book about it in which Mariology is identified with earth mythology, superstition and evil. Ian Brodie, Robinson's counterpart in January's conscious life, is much less sophisticated and more lustful and rabidly contemptuous in speaking out against the 'materialistic heresy' of Marian devotion as something 'eating the Christian heart out of the Catholic faith'.

The post-metaphysical point Spark is making through her portrayal of Robinson and Brodie, and through the way January opposes them, is linked to her religious conversion and her postmodern sense of theological orthodoxy. One of the things that attracted Spark to the Catholic faith was the Church's acceptance of matter,[28] a scriptural position that has more affinity with the theology of the ancient Hebrews than the philosophy of the ancient Greeks. In the pre-Vatican II period, Spark was occasionally criticized as unorthodox and even heterodox for adopting the position that Catholicism is a continuation of Judaism,[29]

but Vatican II came to her rescue by validating the position she had been advocating in the decades preceding it, and she has remained close to the twentieth-century movement to reclaim the embodied Jewishness of the Christian religion and disclaim the disembodied aspects of Christian theology syncretized from the ancient Greeks. In this sense, whether they exist in January's conscious or unconscious minds – back in Chelsea or high above the clouds on Robinson – both Brodie and Robinson represent the distorted rationality of *logos* in its most extreme or Apollonian form, with their archetypal fear of the irrational and the material, and their obsessive and pathological desire to suppress whatever truth the irrational and material afford.[30,31]

Spark is very aware, however, of the importance of *logos*. Much to January's chagrin, Robinson turns out to be right about most things, even if her *mythos* does manage to score a few post-metaphysical points against his *logos* by the end of the novel. Also, Robinson has saved the lives of January, Jimmie and Tom, nursed them back to health, and graciously endured their invasion of his cherished privacy. As soon as January regains consciousness from the crash, Robinson can see she is intelligent and from then on he persistently encourages her to think, to describe, and above all to be reasonable – rationalism being emblematic of his *logos*. He gives her a notebook and suggests she makes a journal of her observations of the natural world around her, but he insists she should 'stick to the facts' as the 'healthiest course' and not let her imagination wander. He lets her have the run of his extensive library, and his personalized bookplate contains the motto *Nunquam minus solus quam cum solus* (Never less alone than when alone). And, ultimately, things fall apart on the island only after Robinson absents himself from the plateau unannounced. Once his presence is missed, his death is proclaimed – much like the death of God was once proclaimed – and from then on he is presumed to have been murdered. When *logos* departs *mythos* and good and evil are left to their own devices.

In some respects Robinson represents omniscience: he knows things about January, Jimmie, and Tom that they either do not know about themselves or are keeping secret from each other. Also, he is able to visit all the mythical landscapes of the island – mountain, garden, cave, and furnace – which seems only right as they belong to him. There is also a hint that Robinson represents omnipotence; for example, when he absents himself from the plateau January finds his glasses on his desk and tries them on, whereupon everything becomes surreal, a severe earthquake happens, and the earthquake only stops when she takes his glasses off. When considering Robinson's representation of omniscience and omnipotence, along with the broader implications of his 'real' presence and 'real' absence, it is tempting to enlarge the scope of Spark's allegory and read it as a theistic critique of deism; one clue being Robinson's eight-day grandfather clock, the island's only indicator of time, which he owns

and is responsible for winding as a kind of celestial clockmaker; another clue being his earthquake-inducing glasses, which make him something of an unmoved mover.

However, just as *logos* does not exhaust the fullness of God, Robinson needs to be understood as a trope limited by the boundaries of his neoclassical horizon. For example, he has a particularly casual and negligent relationship with nature that January finds unnatural because while his island is fertile his garden lies in ruins and most of his food is dried or tinned, being imported once a year from the outside world. He does not cultivate the garden, but he has planted a field of mustard next to a lake purely for the aesthetic effect, and while he does have a pomegranate orchard on part of the island it is run as a business, does not require any labour on his part, and does not provide him with fruit to eat. He encourages formality among his guests and is determined to keep control over any development that might lead to irrational behaviour. Where Ian Brodie is sexually impotent, Robinson is 'not a man for the ladies'. These are all tropological affinities invested in *logos* by the post-metaphysical author, here and in other modern and postmodern novel of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[32]

As a trope for *mythos*, January Marlow has been given several qualities meant to be contrasted with *logos*. Her moods are 'not stable at the best of times', and while her grandmother's pagan tendencies once embarrassed her as a child, as an adult on Robinson she experiences sudden longings to worship the moon as her grandmother once did. She finds this strange, as she is a Christian. While on the island her perceptions are more acute than they are in the 'real' world and she is touched by 'a pre-ancestral quality'; 'an enchantment, a primitive blood-force'. She accepts that *logos* is in charge, but this does not mean she always agrees with Robinson; in fact, her existential dilemma is not so much in voicing her disagreements with him but of the difficulties she faces when trying to put her beliefs into practice.

During the first half of the novel, Spark describes the differences between *logos* and *mythos*, along with January's spirited objection to some of the things Robinson asks her to do or not do. Robinson strongly advises January against the 'depressing habit' of 'gazing' at the sea in the hope of finding a rescue boat or plane, and he encourages her to 'stick to the facts' when writing up her journal. But there is a qualitative difference between what they both regard as factual, and Spark insists that not all facts springing from January's fertile imagination are wrong. For example, she intuitively knows, even before being told, that Robinson is neither Miguel's biological father nor a 'man for the ladies'. As she reflects: 'There is easily discernible in some men a certain indifference, not to women precisely but to the feminine element in women, which might be interpreted in a number of ways. In Robinson I had detected something more than indifference: a kind of armed neutrality. So much for his

attitude to me. And I thought it likely that he could be positively hostile to the idea of women in general'. That said, Robinson is never the misogynist Brodie is in January's conscious life, and she finds Robinson's anti-Marian fervour to be 'far more interesting' than Brodie's, admitting to herself: 'whereas I could never really dislike Robinson, I hated Ian Brodie's guts'.

When Robinson warns January to avoid Wells and his pagan charms, and quietly tries to discourage her from forming a relationship with Waterford, she doesn't understand why she ought to be prevented from either. When he discovers she is not writing up her journal regularly he encourages her to do so as a way of keeping her 'mind' off things – from letting her imagination get the better of her – she objects to being told what she should or shouldn't do and why. She has emotions and cries, but Robinson would rather she didn't cry. She wishes to wear makeup, which Robinson says 'simply and factually' isn't essential although he has no objection to it, and she is intensely superstitious about wearing clothes and using makeup taken from the salvage of the plane crash because they are possessions of the dead. As such she has constructed a kind of pagan taboo around them.

Ultimately, however, *logos* and *mythos* clash in a battle of wills over Mariology and Miguel. January lost her rosary during the plane crash but several weeks later discovers it in a drawer in Robinson's desk. She keeps it and remonstrates spiritedly with him when he admits to having taken it from her because he does not want Miguel to see or be influenced by it: 'That sort of thing can easily corrupt the Faith'. Her answer to this is: 'What bloody rot . . . What a fuss to make about a rosary'. Soon after this exchange she discovers the rosary missing again, and when she confronts him and asks him to return her property, stolen from her bedroom, he reminds her it is actually his bedroom, as she is a guest on his island, and she can have the rosary back as long as she promises not to teach Miguel how to recite it. January promises nothing and keeps demanding the return of her property; and Robinson repeats his wish that Miguel should grow up 'free from superstition', whereupon January tells him to go to hell, announcing there is nothing superstitious about the rosary: 'It's a Christian devotion, not a magic charm'.

Finally, January admits defeat and lets Robinson keep the rosary, telling him she 'can do without it'; however, she simultaneously becomes aware that in keeping the rosary he 'was not simply attempting to make small difficulties, or to exercise his authority on an island simply from a need for power, but that he was constitutionally afraid of any material manifestations of Grace'. That evening, Tom tells her his briefcase – containing his samples of lucky charms, his proofs of *Your Future*, and the articles he has been writing – has disappeared. The next morning Robinson is also found to have disappeared, along with all the superstitious objects he objects to. The only force capable of preventing

total chaos, *logos*, has departed from the plateau, and perhaps the island. From this point onwards things fall apart.

January is not immediately aware of the larger implications of Robinson's disappearance, but in the absence of his *logos* she quickly notices small things for which her *mythos* must now become responsible; for example, it occurs to her 'obscurely' that she had better wind Robinson's eight-day clock 'otherwise we would be without a time-measure on the island'. The larger implications of his absence gradually dawn on *mythos*, and on good and evil, as they discover blood-soaked garments scattered everywhere along a trail between the plateau and the mountain and furnace, which they take to be clues – whether planted or not is irrelevant – that Robinson has either met with an accident or was murdered. At the end of the novel it is revealed that neither of these conclusions is true – Robinson has simply left without telling them, and without providing a reason for doing so – but when they were searching for him they 'saw blood smeared everywhere'. The idea of murder over accident takes hold, and because they believe themselves to be alone on the island with Miguel, they conclude the murder suspect must be one of them – although it suits Tom's pagan and pseudo-spiritualist purposes to propose death by supernatural force rather than human agency.

The events of the following weeks unfold in two broad spheres: first, as *mythos*, and therefore as the 'natural' successor to *logos*, her dialectical opposite, January keeps her journal, uses her intuition and imagination to help her understand the truth of what has happened to Robinson, and endeavours to deal with the consequences of this truth; second, there is a struggle between good and evil in which evil tries to blackmail good – and nearly succeeds because in its twentieth century disguise good is proving to be weak in the face of evil. Spark is clear that *mythos*, in the absence of *logos*, is the only thing standing in the way of evil, but *mythos* can only challenge evil so far while good remains ineffective. Moving among these two spheres is Miguel's *tabula rasa*: how he is affected by Robinson's absence – and how he is influenced by *mythos* and good and evil – given he has not developed any moral faculties.

When writing up her journal, January makes several observations, all assuming Robinson has been murdered and the murderer must be among them. In arriving at these observations, January judges people by their appearances (their facial expressions). She knows judging character by appearance is misleading but: 'The misleading element, in fact, provides the essence of my satisfaction. In the course of deciphering a face, its shape, tones, lines and droops as if these were words and sentences of a message from the interior, I fix upon it a character which, though I know it to be distorted, never quite untrue, never entirely true, interests me. I am as near the mark as myth is to history, the apocrypha to the canon'. Through these means – intuition and imagination and judging by appearances – her journal becomes a 'murder dossier' through which she

moves well beyond the observable facts Robinson has asked her to stick to. While some of her observations are not factual, and indeed some of them are false, Spark knows some of them reveal a kind of truth.

January's journal becomes the vehicle through which she nearly meets her death at the hands of the blackmailer Wells. The more January ponders the murder the more she is convinced of Wells's guilt, and in the process she comes to think of Robinson as a legendary figure who has assumed near mythical proportions; a religious man who, in his desire for spiritual advancement, adopts a son as a child–disciple and leaves the world, only to have ungrateful intruders, whom he rescued and nursed, try his god-like patience and sabotage his elected solitude. As January suggests: 'That he should have met his end at the hands of one of his beneficiaries seemed the essence of his tragedy. And in this interesting light he took on the heroic character of a pagan pre-Christian victim of expiation'.

January herself increases in stature during Robinson's absence. In addition to writing up her journal, she has the presence of mind to take the key to the gun room, hide it on her person, and appropriate a pistol for protection. Also, she overcomes her superstitious fear of using salvage from the plane crash, appropriating some frocks along with a string of amber beads to make a rosary for Miguel. However, while she appears to be well on the way to full control of events – as a kind of Sigourney Weaver who, complete with red hair, gun and orphan, sets out to fight the forces of evil in *Aliens* – Tom manages to steal both her journal and the keys to the gun room. She makes an astute guess as to where he may have hidden the journal – it is under his mattress – and takes it back, resolving to hide it in one of the island's secret tunnels where he cannot find it. While she is leaving the tunnel where she has hidden the journal, Tom, who has just learnt about the existence of the tunnel from Miguel, confronts her with a knife. He intends to kill her in order to obtain the journal but she manages to escape by momentarily blinding him with torchlight and winding him in the guts. The next day she tells Jimmie what happened in the tunnel, whereupon good is finally roused into action and prepares to battle it out with evil. As the physical–metaphysical fight between good and evil begins, and the first blows between Jimmie and Tom are struck, Miguel sudden arrives and announces that Robinson has returned.

Now *logos* is again present and everything returns to a controlled normality. January makes a further transition from being a *mythos* who has explored the boundaries of her power to again being a *mythos* who is second fiddle to Robinson's *logos*. But something has changed in their relationship; something that is simply not possible in the relationship Dora and Michael develop at the end of *The Bell*. Her fury rises when he tells her he does not have to explain his disappearance: he went by his own choice; his actions are 'beyond the obvious range'; and it is not up to her

to understand but simply to accept his 'system'. Her reply is sarcastic: she tells him she 'chucked the antinomian pose' at the age of twenty; to her there is 'no such thing as a private morality'; and she believes any 'system' that does not 'allow for the unexpected and the unwelcome is a rotten one'. His final justification for his actions, which is classically Greek, is: 'Things mount up inside one, and then one has to perpetuate an outrage'.

Whenever Robinson is told of what occurred during his absence, his reply is usually: 'It was only to be expected'. January finds this phrase 'unendurable', with its implication that Robinson 'had foreseen all the consequences if his action to the last detail' and 'he more or less held the wires that made us move'. This makes her a champion of free will and a conscientious objector to the image of God as a divine puppet-master. When she tells Robinson she believes Wells to be a professional blackmailer and a criminal, he tells her she is full of suspicions and some of her suspicions have been fundamentally wrong: for example, in believing Wells murdered him. When she tells him she was 'not far wrong', as Wells had tried to kill her, his answer is again: it was only to be expected, people act in this way, human nature does not vary much. He presently gives his motives away, however, in admitting: 'It was to be expected that a man like Wells would turn a situation to his own interests. It was to be expected that a woman like you would, in the circumstances, withdraw very rapidly from a man like Jimmie'. When his true motives sink in, January expresses her outrage over those motives – his need to separate *mythos* from good and withdraw *mythos* from evil – Robinson continues to fuel her outrage by saying: 'Motives are seldom simple. I find no call upon me to go into my motives. Of course you are annoyed. It is only to be expected'.

But Spark gives the last laugh to her heroine. January tells Robinson she made Miguel a rosary and taught him how to recite it; although Miguel learnt the Latin version of the devotion so quickly that she is sure he must have heard it recited in his infancy. Robinson admits he didn't think she would do this to him, to which she replies: 'It was only to be expected . . . I see no call to tear myself to bits over motives. They are never simple. I am happy to say I have taught the child the rosary'. When he asks her 'What else have you taught him?' and notices Miguel has not been the same towards him since his return, her answer is 'You are full of suspicions'. Robinson finally admits defeat when January tells him Miguel wants to go to a Catholic school when he is sent to Portugal for his education. Robinson then announces he shall be 'glad to see the pomegranate boat' which will soon arrive to take them away from his island and leave him alone.

Spark is very clear about one thing: Robinson is kind and good and for the most part forbearing, and he always tells the truth according to the logic of his *logos*. He never lies, and at the very centre of the novel he even gives them clues as to where he would go if he should ever leave them.

January recalls these clues in hindsight but at the time they did not listen to his Scheherazade-like storytelling: 'even now I keep remembering new facts which Robinson gave us then, night after night, as if compelled to do so lest we should run amok'. Robinson told them the story of the island, of its history and legends, and even of the location of the inaccessible cave in which he would eventually leave them and hide in when he finally becomes exhausted by their presence and has had enough of them. So *logos* was the teller of the story, but *mythos* and good and evil either did not want to listen to the story or were not able to listen to the story. The reasons for this are many, one being their complex and fraught relationship with both the reality and the imagination of the twentieth century.

IV. DEGREES OF FREEDOM

On reading *The Bell* and *Robinson*, both of which were published in the same year, it becomes clear there once were – and still may be – definite themes the aspiring author had to explore in order to be considered literary. Whether these themes were consciously in the mind of the author, or were an unconscious anxiety of influence, is a matter of debate, like the debate as to whether a literary canon or a great tradition does or does not exist. However, as Murdoch and Spark have been joined by other authors in the curriculum in exploring these same themes, using the same tropes and similar backgrounds, there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate something was definitely going on in the world of post-metaphysical literature during the twentieth century, and may still be going on in the twenty-first century novel. The meta-western novel that interrogates the western story keeps returning to what is powerful in the western imagination. As much as we try, the textualities of the western metanarrative are hard to ignore.

Murdoch the philosopher remained part of an intellectual establishment where the ideas she describes and inscribes were mainstream to the point of being normative for much of the twentieth century: the long shadows cast by Plato and Freud are evidence of that. Spark maintained a studied distance from Murdoch's intellectual establishment, perhaps sensing her own theological ideas would be compromised if she tried to exist within it and accommodate them to its secular imperatives. In this way, Spark has remained loyal to a tradition that is highly aware of Plato and Freud but keeps reinventing and reinvigorating itself by retelling its theological and scriptural truth from the margins of the intellectual establishment. That said, we need to always return to the fact that both authors interrogate the same paradigm, or theory of mind, even if they have very different approaches to the philosophical and theological reality of that paradigm.

It seems to me that Spark's vision, rather than Murdoch's, is more relevant to a western imagination struggling to overcome its penchant for psychoanalytical introspection as it adapts to much larger global realities. The relationship between *logos* and *mythos* is still powerful – being both true and false at the same time – but the difference between Murdoch and Spark, especially in their early work, is that where Murdoch seems unable to think of *logos* and *mythos* beyond the master–slave dialectic at the heart of her Platonism and Freudianism, and cannot get her mind off sex, Spark thinks of *logos* and *mythos* in much broader terms. Where *The Bell* represents the victim–oppressor complex, with its ancient Greek sense of fatalism and tragedy, *Robinson* represents the ancient Hebraic sense of free will and moral agency. Spark is highly aware of the many forms that evil and immorality can take, and all her novels tell the story of fallen creation and sinful humanity where all have fallen and all are in need of redemption. In her theological world, there are no powerless victims such as Dora Greenfield because her own red-haired heroines give as good as they get.

Spark explains her rationale for this approach in a lecture given in the early nineteen-seventies.[33] In that lecture, Spark notices the spirit of her age has long since reflected a tradition of socially-conscious art: '... especially now in the arts of drama and the novel we see and hear everywhere the representation of the victim against the oppressor, we have a literature and an artistic culture, one might say almost a civilization, of depicted suffering, whether in social life or in family life ... As art this can be badly done, it can be brilliantly done. But I am going to suggest that it isn't achieving its end or illuminating our lives any more, and that a more effective technique can and should be cultivated'.[34]

For Spark, the function of literature is to carry a moral message; but that message has become commonplace and cliché and as a consequence is no longer being heard. Spark's solution to this dilemma is to propose that: '... the art and literature of sentiment and emotion, however beautiful in itself, however striking in its depiction of actuality, has to go. It cheats us into a sense of involvement with life and society, but in reality it is a segregated activity. In its place I advocate the arts of satire and of ridicule ... I see no other living art form for the future. Ridicule is the only honourable weapon we have left ... I would like to see in all forms of arts and letters ... a less impulsive generosity, a more derisive undermining of what is wrong. I would like to see less emotion and more intelligence in these efforts to impress our minds and hearts'.[35] A close reading of Spark's novels written since this lecture, and written since *Robinson*, shows how she has continually and consistently developed and extended the battle between *logos* and *mythos* – a battle as real as it is imaginary, as true as it is false – by taking it seriously and at the same time sending it up; by using it as a frame through which she represents 'a less impulsive generosity, a more derisive undermining of what is wrong'. For

Jews and Christians, that wrong is represented in the myth of the fall, the doctrine of original sin, and the pervasiveness of human (rather than ontological) evil, all of which characterize the human condition in all times and in all places.

Both Murdoch and Spark write carefully-crafted novels and both have received high imperial honours for their fiction and letters. They cover similar paradigmatic territory but arrive at difference conclusions. The existential dilemmas confronting Dora and January are telling, as are their responses to those dilemmas. Given Murdoch's power and control as an author, it is quaint that she frames the human condition around a heroine so unlike herself. It would have been better had Dora been allowed to achieve much more than leaving her husband, learning to swim, and returning to her studies in art once Michael magnanimously sought a small grant on her behalf. On the other hand, January is not always saying the rosary: she is a mother and a journalist, she teaches cats how to play ping-pong, and she blows raspberries at the tropes who seek to control her. To twenty-first century readers, that surely must make January a better and more authentic role model than Dora, both as a woman and as a trope.

Dora's dialectical relation to Michael and January's dialectical relation to Robinson each reveal a disappointment with the reigning form of *logos* in the twentieth century, which appears to make any contemporary reconciliation between *logos* and *mythos* impossible. The principle reason for this impossibility is so obvious it shouldn't need to be stated: *logos* and *mythos* must remain dialectical opposites within the paradigm, or theory of mind, that each author is interrogating. This is because if *logos* and *mythos* were to be ultimately reconciled the theory of mind as a duality of reason and feeling, conscious and unconscious, and ego and id, would disappear into the ether from which it came, taking with it most of the canonical western tradition.

At the end of *The Bell*, Michael's *logos* is still not challenged by Dora's *mythos* because Dora remains dumb and non-threatening; and that, really, is the end of Murdoch's story. Although the author has made the point that the lay community at Imber was doomed from the start as long as it was guided purely by Michael's *logos*. As important as such a point may be, it has little to do with the novel's first frame, which is Dora's development as a person and a trope, and it does not address the nature of contemporary good or the problem of contemporary evil in the way Spark does.

The dialectical relationship between *logos* and *mythos* is of a very different quality in *Robinson*, where Robinson and January come to feel more threatened by each other as the novel develops. January is far from dumb and she does challenge Robinson. In the end, rather than growing or changing once he realizes he cannot return January to a dependent position, Robinson simply withdraws into the hermitage of his

self-imposed exile, where *logos* reigns alone. For her part, January returns home and gets on with her real life in a contemporary world Robinson cannot cope with. The following spring she reads in a newspaper that Robinson's island – his kingdom of solitary *logos* – is slowly sinking into the sea and will disappear within three years because of volcanic activity. From that time on January comes to think of Robinson as 'an apocryphal island': 'It may be a trick of the mind to sink one's past fear and exasperation in the waters of memory; it may be a truth of the mind'.

This may be Spark's Kantian critique: her way of saying that the manifestation of *logos* as pure reason, in the modern or postmodern world, is intrinsically insecure and fear-based. As such it could be her post-metaphysical commentary on the twentieth century condition rather than a timeless metaphysical portrait. Still, the critique of reason and feeling has been a defining feature of the literary novel ever since Austen began the great tradition of interrogating neoclassical and romantic tropes, and we must never forget what Spark reminds us of in all her novels: *logos* and *mythos* are both true and untrue; they are as real as they are unreal; they are canonical tropes in the landscape of the western mind; and the dialogical conflict between them is never an end in itself: it is a mythological and metaphorical vehicle to be used for a higher theological reality.

Perhaps Spark is witnessing to the contemporary character of that reality, at the end of *Robinson*, for the sea – the depths of the sea – is a symbol of *mythos*. It is the place where *mythos* reigns. So, ultimately, Robinson's *logos* has nowhere to hide. It cannot escape from the contemporary world no matter how hard it tries. Where *logos* will continue to reign is another matter, for once he learned his island was sinking into the sea Robinson began making plans for evacuation, and he has every reasonable chance of establishing his isolated kingdom elsewhere.

But what, then, of good and evil? Spark is very clear here, much clearer than Murdoch ever is or could be. While *mythos* was able to take a stand against *logos* and make him feel threatened – and perhaps witness to a truth of her own that he does not wish to admit – *mythos* ultimately fails to recognize and manage the weakness of contemporary good and the problem of contemporary evil on her own. For Spark, it is precisely because he embodies *logos* that Robinson remains pre-eminent, and if Spark does not give him the final say in the dialectic – the nature of the dialectic being endlessly dialogical – she does give reason a pre-eminent position within the dialectic. Jane Austen does the same thing in all her novels. So calling Spark the 'Austen of the Surrealists' is very appropriate.

Notes

1 Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991).

2 A.S. Byatt, Introduction to Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* (London: Vintage, 1999).

3 Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.
4 Iris Murdoch, *The Bell* (New York: Viking, 1958).
5 Muriel Spark, *Robinson* (New York: Macmillan, 1958).
6 John Wilkins, Christ and Myth: A conversation with Iris Murdoch, in *Frontier* (Autumn 1965).
7 Wilkins, Christ and Myth.
8 Wilkins, Christ and Myth.
9 Byatt, Introduction to *The Bell*.
10 Hans-Georg Gadamer, The Historicity of Understanding, in Mueller-Vollmer K. (ed.), *The Hermeneutics Reader* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
11 Gadamer, The Historicity of Understanding.
12 Michael Giffin, *Introduction to Religion in the English Novel* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999).
13 Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince* (New York: Viking, 1973).
14 Byatt, Introduction to *The Bell*.
15 Muriel Spark, Introduction to *John Masefield* (London: Hutchinson, 1992).
16 Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae: An autobiography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).
17 Desmond Lee, Translation and Introduction to Plato's *The Republic* (London: Penguin, 2003).
18 Frank Kermode, Muriel Spark's House of Fiction: An interview, in Joseph Hynes (ed.), *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1992).
19 Kermode, Muriel Spark's House of Fiction.
20 Kermode, Muriel Spark's House of Fiction.
21 Jennifer Randisi, *On Her Way Rejoicing: The Fiction of Muriel Spark* (Washington DC: Catholic University Press of America, 1991).
22 Randisi, *On Her Way Rejoicing*.
23 Northrop Frye, *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990).
24 Frye, *Words with Power*.
25 Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).
26 Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (London: William Heinemann, 1938).
27 Giffin, *Introduction to Religion in the English Novel*.
28 Muriel Spark, My Conversion, in Joseph Hynes (ed.), *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1992).
29 Malcolm Muggeridge, an interview with Muriel Spark, Granada Television, transmitted 2 June 1961. Unpublished transcript referred to in Ruth Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (London: Macmillan, 1982).
30 E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1951).
31 John McCrone, *The Myth of Irrationality: The Science of the Mind from Plato to Star Trek* (London: Macmillan, 1993).
32 Giffin, *Introduction to Religion in the English Novel*.
33 Muriel Spark, The Desegregation of Art, in Joseph Hynes (ed.), *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1992).
34 Spark, The Desegregation of Art.
35 Spark, The Desegregation of Art.