

Tijana Parezanović, Alfa BK University, Serbia - Maja Ćuk, Alfa BK University, Serbia

Perforated Narrative Space in Muriel Spark's The Girls of Slender Means

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Abstract

This article deals with the spatial aspect of texts about World War II and the post-war period, analyzing Muriel Spark's 1963 novella *The Girls of Slender Means* as an example. It observes the novella as a realistic work narrated in the fantastic mode, and the analysis is primarily informed by Patricia García's concepts of the fantastic of space and the fantastic hole. The article argues that the temporal disruption made by World War II is reflected in texts about the war as spatial perforation. As *The Girls of Slender Means* is carefully structured around the firmly ordered and intact space of the May of Teck Club, the one location that triggers the major event of the novella is a hole in the building's structure, the heterotopic perforation conceived as fantastic because it is hidden from sight in the otherwise shattered landscape of post-war London. This location is simultaneously a spatial emblem of the cultural and social circumstances of the era since it creates a temporal loop which bring the present, past, and future together into a comprehensible whole, which can be seen in the parallelism of the novella's two timelines (1945 and 1960s). Additionally, the analysis results in the implications of the given concepts of spatiality to the narrative method, showing that spatial perforations also cause a perforated story and narrative gaps, thus leaving for the reader to infer the meaning of the unnarrated.

Keywords: Muriel Spark, *The Girls of Slender Means*, post-war London, the fantastic of space, the fantastic hole, narrative gap.

1. Mapping Post-war Urban Space

Regardless of whether we refer to the England of World War II relying on Churchill's rhetoric of the finest hour or on the imagery of the dark hours of the Blitz, it certainly goes without saying that the wartime marked one of the most important hours of the twentieth century. In many ways, it marked a disruption of the social, political, economic, and cultural order and in all of these spheres caused great changes such as the dissolution of the British Empire, increased class and gender equality, or the rise of the media and popular culture (Morgan 45-78; Miller). On a more relatable scale, the disruption was felt in the altered state of everyday life caused by the threat of bombs, loss of friends and relatives, rationing, housing problems, etc. This disruption in the course of historical time that World War II was, with the preceding years and its immediate aftermath, is in the cultural objects^[1] that represent this period reflected through a disordering of the spatial syntax. In other words, images of transformed, defamiliarized, broken, or in any other way shattered space, especially space of a city, in different works of fiction and other cultural objects serve as a channel for representing the experience of the war.^[2] It is in this context of expressing historical disruption through spatial imagery, and more particularly, the fantastic mode of spatial representation, that this paper aims to explore Muriel Spark's 1963 novella *The Girls of Slender Means*.

The Girls of Slender Means is set in the year 1945, at the very end of the war, in a London boarding house called the May of Teck Club, which for a reasonable amount of money provides lodging to those girls (below the age of thirty) who work in London and are separated from their families. The May of Teck Club stands among the wartime ruins as "the site of utopian investment in the novel, a community 'outside the family' and the focal point of post-war hopes for a 'new future' and a 'new order of things'" (Arden 37).^[3] The story follows the lives of a number of residents and their regular visitors and friends during the spring and summer of 1945 and is occasionally interspersed with fragments of the present, 1960s perspective, which progressively reveal the horrible event that occurred at the Club on 27 July 1945, the explosion of a World War II bomb hidden in the garden. The explosion caused a great fire, the demolition of the house, and the death of Joanna Childe, one of the residents, a deeply religious daughter of a country rector. The perspective of the early 1960s relates the death of Nicholas Farrington, a former poet and

misguided anarchist who was back in 1945 a regular visitor of the girls at the Club, infatuated with the general idea of youth and beauty he recognized in all the resident girls, especially Selina Redwood, with whom he conducted an affair. Nicholas dies by being “martyred in Haiti” (Spark 10), where he went after the horror caused by the bomb explosion converted him to Anglican High Church. The novella, therefore, has a complex narrative structure, especially as regards the temporal dimension of the narrative. The death of Joanna Childe takes place before the starting point of the first narrative (which is the distribution of the news of Nicholas Farringdon’s death to the girls who used to reside at the May of Teck Club) but at a later stage joins it, thus forming a gap “which is not felt as such until it is filled-in in retrospect.” (Rimmon-Kenan 50) While aware of some horrible event that takes place in the 1945 timeline, the reader only learns about Joanna Childe’s death at a later stage of the narrative, when already informed about what happened to Nicholas Farringdon in the 1960s timeline. The two deaths are nearly merged and thus a narrative parallelism is formed,^[4] in which gaps in either timeline are filled with information from the other. Narrative gaps are crucial to the present analysis as they reflect the space of the World War II London in which the story is set, the space filled with voids, holes, or blank spaces – which, for the sake of convenience, this article shall refer to as ‘perforations’. In presenting the fictional London of Spark’s novella, this article is based on the premise that spatiality, that is, certain distinctive features of the given spatial organization have the specific function of making visible and explicit the “infernal supernaturalness,” as Hélène Cixous put it (206), which lurks beneath the seemingly ordinary words and the equally ordinary worlds constructed by each of the characters. These distinctive features of spatiality are conceived as perforations in space, and the fact that they contain, once revealed, the horrors of the (post-war) world, is reflected in the ruptures and voids in the narrative, which show the impossibility to fully verbalize these horrors.

The theoretical framework used for the analysis is provided by Patricia García’s concept of the ‘fantastic hole’. The concept refers to literary or cinematic presentations of certain places which evade maps of urban areas and can never be found in them; moreover, if miraculously found by a careful observer of the cityscape, they soon simply vanish, as “the metaphor of a physical structure that disappears, an unexpected hole in material space” (García 40). This is precisely the case in *The Girls of Slender Means*, whose narration focuses precisely on a proper hole in the wall and the

sudden demolition of a building.^[5] The fantastic hole is “a heterotopic^[6] form in that it is the physical form of the non-empirically perceptible or rationalized; that which does not fit within a given sociocultural frame,” and “a liminal space that transgresses binaries, articulating absence and presence, oscillating between lack and excess of meaning.” (García 39). The very idea of such a place discredits “the reliability of maps to represent reality” (García 38), as they prove unable to capture every single corner of urban spaces,^[7] and implies that reality is not in fact what we perceive it to be on the surface. This is particularly useful for the analysis of *The Girls of Slender Means*, where the perforations in the fictional map of London reveal the city not as a place of postwar utopian hopes, but equally dangerous as during the wartime.

The fantastic hole is the concept emblematic of the ‘fantastic of space’ (opposed to the fantastic of place), a narrative mode in which space causes the fantastic transgression into the realm of the real (García 21) – it gives insight into reality as it is, we might say – by crumbling, dissipating, wilting, disintegrating (García 38). The idea of the fantastic here corresponds to Rosemary Jackson’s description of fantasy as a narrative mode, which relies heavily on “doors, apertures, which open into another region found in the spaces of the familiar and the known” (44): “[u]nlike marvelous secondary world, which construct alternative realities, the shady worlds of the fantastic construct nothing ... far from fulfilling desire, these spaces perpetuate desire by insisting upon absence, lack, the non-seen, the unseeable” (Jackson 45). This also reflects in Spark’s novella through a broader consideration of the promises of postwar era, since the fantastic spaces with its perforations “embodies an ontological and epistemic uncertainty: it is a blank space, a domain that has not been codified yet” and that “reveals the inconsistencies of a (supposedly) coherent and solid structure” (García 38). While presenting a spatial perforation in a fictional world that is similar to our own, the fantastic hole is also “perforation of human reason,” which allows it to introduce the fantastic into the realm of everydayness (García 40), which is a feature commonly found in Spark’s work.

The idea of spatial perforations implies that any attempt at providing a detailed map of urban space (and consequently urban life) proves futile, because space is not homogeneous and it contains numerous uncharted and unchartable places that resist easy categorization or definition, which renders them open to various individual discoveries and interpretations. Any individual discovery of

such a place entails a form of transgression from the spatial boundaries of one's everyday existence into certain otherness. It is through the quality of otherness that perforations are theoretically instructed by Michel Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia', a site which, while it is physically real and locatable, has "the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites ... in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect." (Foucault 24) Heterotopias which in Spark's novella appear in the form of fantastic holes or perforations, as this analysis will try to show, have the ability to suspect or invert the set of spatial relations they reflect, and they thus succeed in laying bare the hellish horror that underlies the text but remains almost too extreme to be narratively presented.

2. Oscillating between the Realistic and the Supernatural

In her 2010 Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London, Sara Wasson relates the literary imagery of the wartime London as hallucinatory, claustrophobic, and labyrinthine to the Gothic mode of writing, one of the main characteristics of which is preoccupation with space (2).^[8] The Gothic mode can be embodied in realistic descriptions as well as in those of the supernatural: "the metropolis," in her words, "evokes the horrors of human violence and corruption, terrifying enough without necessarily needing a supernatural edge" (Wasson 3). Wartime metropolis is especially evocative of the Gothic horrors. On the one hand, "Gothic tropes become literal" with people buried alive in their homes, or else taking refuge in open coffins, and banshee-like sirens and bombs wailing (Wasson 4), while on the other hand the defamiliarized space of the damaged city offers prospects of apocalyptic future, in which evil, mostly likely in an entirely human form, will be lurking in the well-known mundane spaces – or, more precisely, from the hidden invisible corners of mundane spaces. *The Girls of Slender Means* is accordingly pervaded with all too realistic details of post-war poverty and rationing, yet the unsettling, terror-inducing effect is like a ticking bomb present from the very first pages – and so is the real bomb, of which neither the reader nor characters are aware at the beginning. Hélène Cixous wrote back in 1968 of Muriel Spark as one of the rare authors "whose work aims to assess the existence of evil in the world," whereby she "makes evil her province and hell her everyday concern," since in Spark's universe "ordinary things coexist with supernatural ones in hideous harmony [and] life is like a story told by a devil" (205).

Joanna Childe is one of the few characters (probably the only one apart from Nicholas Farrington) of Spark's novella who really understands this. For instance, as a trainee teacher of elocution and a lover of classical poetry, she fills the pages of the novella with quotes and verses of different provenances, and the very first quote she offers to the reader, commenting on a notice board post from the May of Teck Club management, is from the Book of Revelation – “He rageth, and again he rageth, because he knows his time is short” – to which the narrator remarks that “[i]t was not known to many [girls] that this was a reference to the Devil” (Spark 12). In other words, Joanna Childe recognizes the workings of the devil in contemporary everydayness, and the recognition is what eventually causes her death, as the following analysis will show.

Hélène Cixous further contends that the unsettling effect of the novels Spark wrote after her conversion to Catholicism in 1954, with a particular reference to *The Girls of Slender Means*, arises from the contrast between the false innocence of the tone and the underlying savagery of the presented world. What seems to be a realistic representation is in fact “a mask of death, and the world is a metaphor for hell”:

Under the cover of insignificant words lurks a great, infernal supernaturalness. Spark makes use of the imagery of hell and all of its attributes (spirits, ghosts, fire), and yet she pretends to take them as literary references while hell gapes beneath her transparent language. (Cixous 206)

While numerous critics have, not unlike Cixous, tended to attribute any references to the supernatural in Spark's fiction to the author's conversion, Spark's vision of hell has in fact more to do with social reality than with religious spirituality,^[9] and this social reality is temporally and spatially delineated by the 1945 timeline set between V.E. day (8 May 1945) and V.J. day (15 August 1945) and the carefully ordered space of the May of Teck Club. At its beginning, the novella features a description of the mass celebration of the victory over Germany. The joy at the thought of the promise of a brighter future is precipitate, the state in which immediately “everyone began to consider where they personally stood in the new order of things” (Spark 17) being in stark contrast with the city still suffering the tangible consequences of the Blitz:

The streets ... were lined with buildings in bad repair or no repair at all, bomb-sites piled with stony rubble, houses like giant teeth in which decay had been drilled out, leaving only the cavity. Some bomb-ripped buildings looked like the ruins of ancient castles until, at a closer view, the wallpapers of various quite normal rooms would be visible, room above room, exposed, as on a stage, with one wall missing; sometimes a lavatory chain would dangle over nothing from a fourth- or fifth-floor ceiling; most of all the staircases survived, like a new art-form, leading up and up to an unspecified destination that made unusual demands on the mind's eye. (Spark 7)

The given description oscillates between the realistic and the supernatural, exemplifying how the Gothic tropes (such as the gloomy castle-like setting or buildings resembling monsters) are applied to the post-war spatial reality and how they defamiliarize it. The description is also filled with the imagery of perforations (cavities, craters, missing walls and stairs, empty spaces), which corroborate the damaging effects of the war while they link the war as a set of social, cultural, and political circumstances and consequences with the Gothic, or, more precisely – the fantastic.^[10] The fantastic, as the literary mode which lingers between the realistic and the supernatural in that it presents the latter only to refute it as impossible within “a textual reality similar to ours” (García 16), is inseparable from real life and its social and cultural contexts. The fire that consumes the May of Teck Club by the end of the novella evokes the imagery of hell, especially with its victim or martyr Joanna Childe reciting the evening psalter of Day 27 as she dies with the collapsing building; similarly, the recording of her voice reciting G.M. Hopkins's *The Wreck of the Deutschland* is ghost-like and, though erased from the tape in accordance with the post-war logic of rationing resources, still manages to intrude into the text of the novella as if from another world (Spark 131). While nevertheless creating the effect of the fantastic, neither occurrence resonates with the idea of the loss of faith or spirituality in modern world, but rather with the vision of post-war consumer and liberalist society and its violent means. The fantastic is an expression of desire “which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss” (Jackson 3). Much of what motivates the 1945 timeline in the novella is focused on the Elsa Schiaparelli dress that all the girls at the Club wear on special occasions as it represents the single luxurious clothing item they all share,^[11] and it is this dress that initiates the shock which changes the course of Nicholas Farrington's life. As the symbol of

the utopian promise of a better post-war future, the dress expresses the girls' desire for such a future, for a social change for the better – but this desire is “a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity” and therefore often “traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent.’” (Jackson 3-4)

This symbolic Schiaparelli dress thus functions within the narrative in correlation with its spatial representation, that is, with the invisible spaces, which are conceived as perforations. While the map of London presented in the above quoted passage (Spark 7) exposes gaping wounds in bomb-ripped buildings – cavities in teeth-like houses, missing walls, the nothingness of open spaces, the May of Teck Club remains intact on the map filled with ruins. Its solid structure singles it out from the otherwise broken city and makes it attractive not only to its residents, but to their numerous visitors. However, the Club also contains a spatial perforation, a hole in its structure – this one entirely hidden from the eye of the casual observer. This particular location inside the well-structured and ordered building marks the place of the girls' desire and embodies the utopian escapism from the wartime reality. The location is therefore fantastic in the context of Rosemary Jackson's explanation of the concept, and this quality is revealed at its best and most vicious in the scene of the explosion and subsequent fire, during which the single possession saved from the house is the Elsa Schiaparelli dress, which Selina Redwood, the slenderest of all girls, collects from the infernal flames whereas several girls remain trapped in them. Thus the dress, the projection of the social desire and aspiration, penetrates through the unseen perforation in the structure of the Club into a seemingly promising future, which is revealed as not so bright after all in the V.J. day celebration scene. Additionally, the reflection of the historical and social context (wartime poverty, victory, and the expected prosperity) follows the development of the fantastic narrative, from the expression of desire (through the dress exchanged among the girls) to the expulsion of desire as “the impossible attempt to realize desire, to make visible the invisible and to discover absence” (Jackson 4), perceived first in the disappearance of the entire May of Teck Club building, and later in the V.J. day celebration, which is to be discussed later.

3. Perforations in Spatial Structure

There is a clear order inside the May of Teck Club, with different floors reflecting the strata of society and status of the residents. The ground floor contains offices, the dining-room, the recreation room, the drawing-room – it is administrative and shared space. The first floor, formerly a large ballroom, when the Club still possessed its Victorian glory, is now a large dormitory for the youngest of girls, obviously the most affordable and uncomfortable accommodation inside the Club. The second floor contains shared bedrooms for those who can afford them, the third floor contains single bedrooms for those of even more considerable means, and the fourth floor is where “the most attractive, sophisticated and lively girls ha[ve] their rooms.” (Spark 30) Such a firm structure makes it difficult to discern any underlying chaos and, significantly, only the two “martyred” characters, Joanna Childe and Nicholas Farrington, manage to intuit and give expression to it. The single chaotic thing in this spatial structure could be the residents themselves, the savage girls, with some exceptions: Joanna, “who ... would henceforth vote conservative in the elections, which at that time in the May of Teck Club was associated with a desirable order of life that none of the members was old enough to remember” (Spark 12) and Collie, Greggie, and Jarvie, three residents in their fifties who have been members of the Club since before World War I, having mysteriously managed to flout the foundational rule of the Club to accommodate only those girls under thirty. While Collie, Greggie, and Jarvie somewhat disturb the social structure of the Club, they nevertheless function as preservers of the ordered world that the Club used to be in the past and which still keeps its building from crumbling down amidst the surrounding ruins. Greggie, though, seems to be the only one aware of an unexploded bomb in the back garden of the Club – when this bomb fell and where it lies goes unnoticed by either the authorities or the other members of the Club. Greggie is thus aware, at least intuitively, of a source of chaos or evil which, while lurking at the root of the impeccable structure of the building, gets to be manifested at an unexpected location within the building.

Above the top floor of the Club, where the most sophisticated girls reside, lies nothing but the rooftop, the access to which through the usual skylight is prohibited, because the door was bricked up after someone broke into the Club via the roof. All the girls are eager to get access to the roof, whose flat part they consider perfect for sunbathing. Gradually a clandestine solution is found: a narrow window in the top floor lavatory, made even narrower when the wall it is set in was

subdivided so that another room could be made use of. This narrow slit is seven by fourteen inches and only the slimmest of the girls can, if they are very careful, use it to make their escape to the roof. Thirty-six and a quarter inches the maximum for hips, under the condition that flesh and muscles are flexible enough for squeezing through the hole (Spark 123).

This spatial perforation in the form of a window is a completely unknown about, invisible (were it visible, the Club administration would prohibit its use) literal hole in the structure, and through its invisibility it conceptualizes the fantastic, which is only defined “by negative terms according to the categories of realism” (Jackson 21). The window thus embodies the fantastic hole, the prototype of the fantastic of space, and the space in question, the window of opportunity for the Girls of Slender Means, is heterotopic in every respect. Certain gestures have to be made as rituals of entrance (Foucault 26) – girls have to climb the lavatory seat and then wriggle sideways out through the window and onto the roof. Selina Redwood goes out through this window and onto the roof every night to sleep with Nicholas, which initially makes this heterotopia, in Foucault’s words, an “effectively enacted utopia” (24). A description follows: it is “beyond the slit window, where throughout the summer Selina had lain with Nicholas, wrapped in rugs, under the Plough, which constituted the only view in Greater London that remained altogether intact.” (Spark 121) In the described world of post-war ruins this hidden heterotopic space provides an altogether different otherness, a zone where freedom and insouciance become the norm, no social rules apply, and no hell or horror can pose a threat. Its function, however, changes over time (Foucault 25) – it comes to be transformed into an emergency exit. On 27 July 1945, an explosion of the bomb buried in the Club garden, which Reggie has been warning about, shatters the entire building, demolishes the fire-escape, and damages a gas-main, which results in a fire that swiftly engulfs the stairs. This leaves fourteen girls trapped on the top floor. Four of them manage to squeeze out through the window, while the firemen immediately start working on opening the bricked-up skylight. The fact that the explosion comes from the space established as firmly structured and one of the few remaining untarnished spots of London, the intact Club with its garden and a pure rooftop view of the city, successfully conveys the sense that nowhere is safe (Spark 125), and what Joanna Childe has sensed throughout the narrative becomes obvious – that the world is a hellish place which no effectively enacted utopia can redeem. The perforation thus creates a space of illusion which

exposes every other real space as still more illusory (Foucault 27), and what is exposed as illusory is the intact London or, in terms of the social context, the promise of safety in the wake of the war, and the promise of freedom given in the opening image of the celebration of Victory in Europe.

Joanna Childe's reaction to the fire is exemplary of this exposure. As it becomes apparent that the house will collapse any minute and the escape to safety becomes uncertain with the works on opening up the skylight proceeding too slowly, Joanna

stood as one hypnotized into the strange utterances of Day 27 in the Anglican order, held to be applicable to all sorts and conditions of human life in the world at that particular moment ...

Joanna's skin ... seemed to [Nicholas] to have become suddenly covered with large freckles as if fear had acted on it like the sun (Spark 126-27).

It is a reaction of horror, which "describes the movement of contraction and recoil ... at the imminence and unavoidability of the threat"; of the horror that paralyses and sees the dissolution of boundaries (Botting 6). As Joanna compulsively repeats the words of the psalm, "Except the Lord build the house ... Except the Lord keep the city" (Spark 128), it is perhaps easy for her to see the man-made house she is trapped in and the war-devastated city in which the house is located as the opposite of divine creation – as hell itself, with infernal flames already swallowing the building and herself with it. Her paralysis is thus after some time superseded by terror, "the subjective elevation" that "excludes the object of fear" as she tries to reconstitute her identity against otherness and loss (Botting 6) – her identity being based on the firm decision made prior to settling in the May of Teck Club, "to enter maimed into the Kingdom of Heaven" (Spark 25), and its otherness the hell that gapes beneath her. She does not reconstitute her identity soon enough, though, and falls victim to the heterotopic space that occasionally demands certain sacrifices to be made. As a heterotopic system, the perforation which leads to safety is not only a slit in space, but also a slice in time (Foucault 26). It opens and closes: as the house becomes a heap of rubble, no unseen and unknown locations are left in it and all its cavities become publicly exposed to the reader as well as to the crowds celebrating Victory over Japan. This reveals the purpose of the fantastic hole: in the setting such as the one featured in the novella, of a war-torn city, spatial perforations are needed so that the entire city would not be revealed as, conditionally speaking,

hell – which it eventually proves to be. The knowledge of it, however, remains enclosed within the slice of time that devours those who grasp it and silenced in the narrative where no voice is allowed to successfully express it.

4. Temporal Loops in the Narrative

Foucault describes a certain type of heterotopias that begin “to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time” (26) as ‘heterochronies’^[12] Time and space, as “two interrelated coordinates in our experience of reality” are in fantastic texts “often disrupted simultaneously,” as for instance “in the motif of the loop into the past or the future” which results from a spatial displacement (García 32). In the present case of *The Girls of Slender Means*, the opening of the invisible perforation in the structure of the Club signifies an ending for Joanna Childe, while at the same time it marks a beginning for Nicholas Farrington and also anticipates his own ending – whereby the loop is created which indicates that their deaths have similar reasons, and that the reasons originate in the event of 27 July 1945.

At the moment of the explosion, the narrative comes to a standstill: “Jane’s blood flowed from somewhere in a trickle, while some sort of time passed silently by.” (Spark 114; emphasis added)^[13]

As the fire quickly spreads and fourteen girls are trapped in the bathroom, with Nicholas on the other, roof-side of the window,

[t]ime, which was an immediate onward-rushing enemy to the onlookers in the street and the firemen on the roof, was only a small far-forgotten event to the girls; for they were stunned not only by the force of the explosion, but, when they recovered and looked round, still more by the sudden dislocation of all familiar appearances. A chunk of the back wall of the house gaped to the sky. There, in 1945, they were as far removed from the small fact of time as weightless occupants of a space-rocket. (Spark 117-18; emphasis added)

The girls who conform to the poverty-induced slimness standards of the time manage to squeeze themselves through the window, that fantastic heterotopic hole in the structure, and into some kind of future. The others await in panic or stupor for rescue to come, with Joanna as the only one who

attempts to resort to (futile) reason and order, holding a tape-measure and trying, in the form of a scientific ritual, to measure the remaining girls (Spark 123). Selina Redwood is certainly among the first who find salvation on the other side of the hole, but from this position of safety she soon re-enters the burning building and disappears in its interior. Nicholas immediately suspects that she intends to rescue one of the girls, but moments later Selina reappears, carrying something long and limp, like a human body, carefully in her arms – the Schiaparelli dress. This is for Nicholas a “lightning scene” (Spark 125), the crucial moment in which he witnesses “that action of savagery so extreme that it force[s] him involuntarily to make an entirely unaccustomed gesture, the signing of the cross upon himself” (Spark 60). In this moment, Nicholas Farrington, like Joanna Childe, understands the evil or rather the savagery of the world – not of spiritual and religious provenance, not even born of the exploding bombs, but rather constitutive of human nature – and it is probably in this moment that he decides to become a Catholic missionary. In another comparison to Joanna Childe, religious conversion is not an efficient antidote to the chaotic and violent ways of the world, and Nicholas Farrington dies years later precisely for deciding, like Joanna, to enter the Kingdom of Heaven maimed.

Nicholas Farrington’s disillusionment is not simply caused by a cruelty on behalf of the woman he loves – the cold-bloodedness with which Selina rescues (or steals) the Schiaparelli dress destroys his vision of the perfect society he recognizes in the May of Teck Club (Arden). He perceives the Club as “a microcosmic ideal society” (Spark 65), “a miniature expression of a free society” (84), “a community held together by the graceful attributes of common poverty” (85). As spatial perforations work to ultimately destroy the structure of buildings, so individuals undermine the common causes of society, making it porous and gradually revealing through these pores the “hell” that lies beneath. As already mentioned, perforations in the structure, either social or spatial, do exist so that the entire space or society would not be revealed as evil, which it essentially is. This is the knowledge both Joanna and Nicholas come to grasp, and it is transposed from the structure of the Club onto the whole post-war society, as can be read from the V.J. day celebration, which frames the ending of the 1945 timeline. The temporal loop created on 27 July, therefore, does not only encompass the lives of the involved actors, but also the collective post-war spirit of victory.

Whereas the V.E. day celebration is filled with unleashed joy and sexual freedom (Spark 16-18), the V.J. day celebration, while being as carnivalesque, reveals the violent perforations in the crowd gathered in front of the Buckingham Palace, where a

seaman, observed only by Nicholas, slid a knife silently between the ribs of a woman who was with him. ... The stabbed woman did not scream, but sagged immediately. Someone else screamed through the hush, a woman, many yards away, some other victim. ... The seaman was shouting accusations at his limp woman, who was still kept upright by the crowd. These private demonstrations faded in the general pandemonium. (Spark 141; emphasis added)

The perforated space and the disruption of socio-historical order seem to have opened the question of time (Spark 121) and created, instead of an escape route to a better future, a loop in which the horrors of previous wars are repeated over and over again, in one form or another, and in places ranging from London to Haiti and Japan.

5. What is Left Unspoken

The story of *The Girls of Slender Means* clearly revolves around the invisible, hidden bomb. What the bomb produces effectuates in its horror the fantastically ordinary world of post-war era, and the evil it reveals is shocking enough. The real shock, though, strikes the reader only after Joanna Childe's death. In the days between 27 July and 6 August, Nicholas Farrington talks with Joanna's father not merely about her doom but also about the general sense of hell one tends to develop living in a big city (Spark 133-34), and a brief casual remark is made during their conversation, regarding "this new bomb" (134). "It leaves one breathless with horror," Nicholas replies, "They'll have to make an armistice if it's true" (134-35), though, of course, as the contemporary (either 1960s or 2020s) reader knows, no armistice is made before the atomic bomb hits Hiroshima. The described V.J. day actually celebrates the atomic bomb, and violence also continues, as Martin Stannard has noticed, in the form of the Cold War, which escalated in the early 1960s (295).

What is interesting, however, is the way in which the narrative treats this information in presenting it to the reader. The atomic bomb is never explicitly mentioned in the novella; it is left to the reader

to intuit what “this new bomb” refers to. Much is left unsaid as regards other parts of the story, too – the way in which Nicholas dies in Haiti, for instance, is narrated through a “rotten” telephone line, filled with phrases devoid of context and interspersed with dots: “‘...a hut...’ ... ‘...in a valley...’ ... ‘...in a clump of palms ... deserted ... it was market day, everyone had gone to market.’” (Spark 69) The story of Nicholas’s death is entirely lost on another listener, who cannot seem to remember Nicholas at all (Spark 85). And, to go back to the image of the woman stabbed during the V.J. day celebration, hers is a story that remains completely unnarrated while her sagging figure leaves only an empty spot in the riotous crowd. Such motionless bodies, silent voices, lost memories, dots in punctuation, these gaping holes in the narrative, also indicate perforations, which have now transcended the spatial aspect of the novella, as well as its social dimension, and become relevant to how the story is told. In terms of the narrative, a gap is an unwritten implication, an element of the story which is not explicated but rather left for the reader to construe (Iser, *The Implied Reader*). As Wolfgang Iser has claimed, “no tale can ever be told in its entirety” and “it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism” (“*The Reading Process*,” 284). Hence the death of Nicholas Farrington is not narrated in any comprehensible way, but this hole is filled with the very detailed account of Joanna Childe’s death, and it is left for the active and creative reader to “weave connections between loose ends and also elaborate causal relationships silenced in the text” (García 44), and to conclude that the cause of death is in both cases the same. We might wonder whether today’s reader, situated well into the twenty-first century, perhaps manages to close the gaps and comprehend the unfamiliar simply because the world, society and its mores, are not that different altogether than they used to be more than half a century ago. It has ever since 1945 been post-war.

As Spark’s novella shows, as one of the examples of wartime/post-war fiction with a strong focus on war-devastated urban spaces, narrating a story is not unlike mapping a bombed street. While lingering between wartime realism and supernatural imagery, the spatial aspect comes to be defined through the fantastic mode, emblematically represented by not just any perforation in space but particularly the hidden, invisible one. Such perforations cause fantastic occurrences and contain the essence of the described world to an equal degree – and, being conceived as heterotopias in the Foucauldian sense, they also invert and disrupt the apparent spatial syntax,

revealing the chaos which underlies it. These gaping perforations are reflected in parallel narrative gaps, which show the inability to express the truly horrible events clearly and unambiguously, whereby the imagery of perforated space in itself indicates that some stories are too violent for words and had better be left unspoken.

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[1] According to Wendy Griswold's *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*, cultural objects are socially meaningful expressions embodied in various forms, which can be articulated and tell a story (11).

[2] Such spatial representation of the historical event is indeed rooted in the reality of the Blitz, which changed the appearance of English towns and cities, even causing the disappearance of entire streets or blocks, as well as in the related British manipulations of the space, including blackouts or the removal of street signs in order to make cities unmappable and thus unknowable and impenetrable to the enemy. Literary examples can be found in Elizabeth Bowen's short fiction: her "Mysterious Kôr," in which the moonlight transforms central London into an unreal city and allows for an imaginary escape from the actual troubled place, or "Demon Lover," in which an empty house in a deserted street is depicted as an eerie meeting point of the past and present war, personal traumas and historical memory. It is not only the shattered space of London and other English cities that is prone to such cultural representation: similar imagery of Vienna beneath the surface can be found in Graham Greene's *The Third Man* (and Greene offers yet another example of the war-broken spaces of London in *The End of the Affair*), and Lawrence Durrell's *Clea* of *The Alexandria Quartet* presents the dishevelled city and its inhabitants under amphibious siege.

[3] *The Club* is also anachronistic, being located in a once lavish Victorian house, now part of the landscape of modern ruins. This anachronism, however, is not inconsistent with the utopianism of the building since it suggests "a functional and collective repurposing of a space of nineteenth-century wealth and decadence" (Arden 39). In other words, the future repurposing of space is seen as reflection or repetition of the glorious past, with the current wartime/post-war circumstances merely a disruption in this course.

[4] This parallelism also evokes the idea of time as "repetition within irreversible change" (Rimmon-Kenan 46), which is in turn compared to Borgesian circular time or Eliade's eternal return. Both concepts explore repetition as a reflection of the imaginative process of (re)creating history, and it is largely what *The Girls of Slender Means* is about: the repetition of a similar event in a different decade, which is imaginatively and narratively shaped in such a way as to offer universal

symbolism. The history it (re)creates and also anticipates is, however, not one of prosperity and renewal but rather a bleak vision of the late 20th century and beyond.

[5] What is in this literary-theoretical context specific about *The Girls of Slender Means* as well as other works by Muriel Spark (e.g. *The Comforters*, 1957, or *A Far Cry from Kensington*, 1988) is its attitude towards the fantastic. Namely, however improbable and unrealistic some of the events may seem (perhaps even magical in certain cases), the characters and narrators never for an instance question their veracity and realism. It is as if the reality of the world is so thoroughly permeated with the fantastic (unknown, unbelievable, etc.) that simply anything can happen and be taken as ordinary.

[6] Heterotopic qualities of the concept and their application to the analysis are elaborated in subsequent segments of this article.

[7] As a literary motif, maps which fail to represent these hidden places are referred to by Patricia García as ‘pierced maps’ (40).

[8] Sara Wasson refers to the wartime literary texts as fractured narratives – yet another indication of the importance of disruptions/gaps/lacunae, etc. in the symbolical and cultural representation of World War II.

[9] As Spark herself put it in the novella, “few people at the time were more delightful, more ingenious, more movingly lovely, and, as it might happen, more savage, than the girls of slender means” (9; emphasis added in reference to Hélène Cixous’s commentary on Spark’s work). While she lived in many places around the world (Scotland, South Africa, America, Italy), Muriel Spark (1918-2006) spent the years between 1944 and 1962 in London, so even from the biographical perspective, her vision of the world as evil is as possibly influenced by the post-war urban and social politics as by her religious beliefs.

[10] The Gothic inevitably relies on supernatural motifs (e.g. ghosts, witches, etc.) as its key elements, which can be explained away rationally or left unexplained. The fantastic always presents the supernatural element as impossible since fantastic texts “must rely on the assumption of a ‘real’ world” and one of the most prolific literary devices in conveying the authenticity of the

presented world is “the use of spatial markers in descriptions and of real spatial referents.” (García 16)

[11] It is also worth mentioning that the surrealist fashion of Elsa Schiaparelli is itself imbued with the fantastic.

[12] Certain heterotopias, such as libraries or museums, accumulate time (Foucault 26), and the May of Teck Club in Spark’s novella can be understood as such, since it testifies to the Victorian era as much as to World War I and II.

[13] Jane Wright seems in fact to be the protagonist: she is the one who introduces Nicholas Farrington to the May of Teck Club and the one who years later informs all its former residents about Nicholas’s death. In 1945, Jane works for a publishing house; in the 1960s, she is a journalist, and it is perhaps not too far fetched to regard this character as Muriel Spark’s alter ego. Her fiction frequently features similar protagonists, for instance, Caroline Rose in *The Comforters*, or Fleur Talbot in *Loitering with Intent* (1981).



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