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Muriel Spark's Camp Metafiction

"Calculated Irrelevance": Spark's Unserious Tone



One of the oddest moments in Muriel Spark's surpassingly odd oeuvre occurs toward the end of her 1971 novel *Not to Disturb*:

Meanwhile the lightning, which strikes the clump of elms so that the two friends huddled there are killed instantly without pain, zig-zags across the lawns, illuminating the lily-pond and the sunken rose garden like a self-stricken flash-photographer, and like a zip-fastener ripped from its garment by a sexual maniac, it is flung slapdash across Lake Lemman and back to skim the rooftops of the house, leaving intact, however, the well-insulated telephone wires which Lister, on the telephone to Geneva, has rather feared might break down.

(109)

Spark's baroquely metaphorized *deus ex machina* lightning strike might remind some readers of the death of the Marquis de Sade's Justine. Closer to hand, attentive readers will recognize in the apparently arbitrary similes—the pond lit up “like a self-stricken flash-photographer,” the lightning jaggling “like a zip-fastener ripped from its garment by a sexual maniac”—elements lifted from *Not to Disturb's* plot. In this novel, a group of servants led by Lister, the butler, murder their wealthy employers and scheme their way into inheriting fortune and property, all the while tape-recording

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and photographing their activities, which include a hastily arranged marriage between a maid and a straitjacketed aristocratic madman in the attic—the “sexual maniac” in question.

This striking passage has not gone unremarked in discussions of metafiction. For Patricia Waugh, for instance, its contamination of metaphorical levels by narrative ones alerts readers to the fact “that pure contingency in novels is always an illusion” (18). As Brian McHale observes of figurative language in the postmodern novel more generally, “[p]ostmodernist writing seeks to foreground the ontological *duality* of metaphor, its participation in two frames of reference with different ontological statuses” (134). The hilarious, unhinged transgression of ontological levels effected by the “lightning” simile interrupts the highly mannered, apparently restrained atmosphere that is *Not to Disturb*’s default. It is as if the author is saying, “Look at me! I control the metaphors!” Along with *The Driver’s Seat*, *The Abbess of Crewe*, and *The Public Image*, *Not to Disturb* belongs to the phase of Spark’s work most strongly identified with the influence of the French new novel, and especially of Alain Robbe-Grillet.¹ But Spark’s whimsicality would be hard to find in the *nouveau roman*; as a sensibility, it has more in common with American metafiction.

Though her novels are almost always whimsical, such overt self-reflexivity at the level of poetics as this passage demonstrates is not typical of Spark, whose metafictional muse is normally more understated. The other exception is her debut novel, *The Comforters* (1957), which presents, as McHale has it, “[t]he classic example” (122) of the kind of literary self-consciousness that would a little later on come to be identified with Robert Coover, Gilbert Sorrentino, and, most famously, John Barth. *The Comforters*’s protagonist, Caroline—a critic working on a study of *Form in the Modern Novel* (57)—hallucinates a typewriter tapping out the very novel she is in. Although Spark’s subsequent novels would never return to this level of explicit metafictionality, they would remain singularly preoccupied

1. Spark confirms the influence of Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman* in her 1998 interview with McQuillan: “I naturally would have a bent towards the *nouveau roman* but in fact I was very influenced by Robbe-Grillet” (216).

with those problems of literary ontology critics have long associated with the postmodern novel at its most formally experimental.²

While *Not to Disturb's* "lightning" simile marks a formal limit in Spark's writing, a parodic destabilization of the relationships among tenor, vehicle, and fictional world she was not to repeat, its arch absurdity is profoundly, symptomatically "Sparkian."³ Critics and literary journalists have responded to this quality in various ways. In a recent reconsideration of Spark's career, Parul Sehgal identifies "Spark's particular genius" as "cruelty mixed with camp, the lightness of touch, the flick of the wrist that lands the lash" (Sehgal). Malcolm Bradbury observes her penchant for "camp or high-style figures, productive of comedy" (188). Frequently accompanying identifications of Spark's humor is the anxious suggestion that, appealing though it might be, such "lightness" does not constitute the highest kind of novelistic seriousness. Patrick Parrinder notes that, for her critics, Spark is often denigrated as "a witty, graceful and highly intelligent writer who often fails to provide the emotional satisfactions and to produce the sort of intellectual conviction traditionally associated with novel-reading" (75). Of Spark's *The Bachelors*, Alan Massie writes, "Evelyn Waugh called it 'the cleverest and most elegant of all Mrs. Spark's clever and elegant books.' The adjectives are admirable. They convey the impression of the book and suggest its limitations" (123). Bernard Harrison sums up this pattern of response: "'Trivial.' The word is out" (131).

Of these various impressionistic labels for what Spark is up to, Bradbury's and Sehgal's "camp" strikes me as the most useful, conceding, as it does, "triviality" without confessing disappointment.⁴

2. For the major theoretical accounts of metafiction, see Hutcheon; Waugh; McHale; and Walsh. I will draw on all of these accounts. Waugh and McHale both identify Spark's *The Comforters* as the *locus classicus* of twentieth-century metafiction.

3. For several similar, if less extreme, instances of the blurring of metaphorical and literal levels in Spark, see Barreca, "Metaphor-into-Narrative." Barreca cites *The Comforters* and several short stories, but she does not discuss *Not to Disturb*.

4. Two other critics similarly interested in theorizing Spark's "triviality" are Gunn and Malcolm. Gunn draws on an essay of Italo Calvino's to propose a reading of Sparkian "weightlessness" (120) under the sign of what Calvino calls the "lightness of thoughtfulness" (qtd. in Gunn 122). Closer to my concerns, Malcolm's narratologically inflected essay approaches Spark in terms of the narrative devices of "ellipsis and in-

"Camp" is a form of irony saturated by highly particular historical content: a thumbnail sketch might include its relationship to the performance of sexuality and gender; to kitsch, commercialism, and "the aesthetic" as such; and to ritual and masquerade. A more specific affiliation, highly pertinent in the case of Spark, is to Catholicism.⁵ As a category of both formal and historical aesthetic analysis, "camp" can clarify the relationship between Spark's sensibility and her form.

The imbrications of sensibility and form are manifest in the operations of "tone," what Sianne Ngai calls "a literary text's affective bearing, orientation, or 'set toward' its audience and world" (*Ugly Feelings* 43). The set of concerns I am condensing under the label "camp" is, in Spark's case, yoked at every point to that nebulous ground—"tone" is one word for it—upon which sensibility and narrative technique meet up. As Harrison puts it, "[p]artly the air of inconsequentiality stems from Miss Spark's authorial tone of voice, which is characteristically cool, level and uninvolved, and occasionally enigmatically flippant" (131–32). This complex of effects can be partially elucidated with the tools of narratology. Peter Robert Brown observes that Spark's narrators are usually thought to be "'heterodiegetic,' external to the story, and 'extradiegetic,' (epistemically) superior to it" (232). Brown considers this designation a mistake: according to him, Spark's narrators are *not* truly extradiegetic insofar as their epistemic superiority is in fact partial, compromised,

consequence" (160). "Inconsequence" is defined as "a lack of logical or conventionally accepted sequence, and the presence of the seemingly irrelevant, disconnected, anomalous, and paradoxical—on the level of events, on that of individual phrases, and, occasionally, on that of narration" (Malcolm 162). Though he does not focus on figurative speech, the lightning simile from *Not to Disturb* strikes me as an instance, at the level of figuration, of precisely such "inconsequence." Neither Gunn nor Malcolm speaks of "camp," but Malcolm adduces Ronald Firbank as another important producer of novelistic "inconsequence," which suggests that this particular quality bears at least some conventional relationship to camp (171).

5. A comprehensive treatment of Catholicism's relationship to camp lies outside of the scope of this essay, but would include a discussion of Newman's Oxford movement and its influence on *fin de siècle* aestheticism. See Adams. See also McMahan, who refers to "ecclesiastical camp" (27), which he finds "in such kinky canons as Ronald Firbank, Juan Goytisolo and Chloe Poems—and especially among excommunicable exiles from the Catholic Church and misfit converts like Wilde and Beardsley and Firbank: flouting solemnity whimsically with hearsay heresy" (26).

or even nonexistent—they are more like unreliable first-person narrators recast in the third person. The tonal correlative of this narratological fact is the Sparkian narrator's penchant for occasionally passing judgment, cracking jokes, or offering evaluative comment, all without apparent motivation, haphazardly. These judgments work in tandem with Spark's famous shifts in chronology, in which, as David Lodge puts it, she "uses the privilege of authorial omniscience to 'give away' in advance the surprises and reversals of her plots, and admits into the latter a degree of what, by normal aesthetic criteria, looks like calculated irrelevance" (154). With Brown's observation about the epistemic unreliability of the apparently "omniscient" Spark narrator in mind, we can recognize that "calculated irrelevance" is a tonal feature depending on narrative means.

"Calculated irrelevance," "enigmatic flippancy"—these are yet more suggestive names for those Sparkian qualities I propose to analyze under the rubric of "camp." For Spark, "camp" entails not just an attitude—of playful cruelty, say—but a particular set of narrative techniques. The way in which Spark's narrative strategies formalize a kind of attitudinal irony has broader implications for both the cultural history of camp and the literary history of the postmodern Anglophone novel. Richard Walsh, for instance, has observed that in the sixties and after, the "necessary critical disposition" for the charged reception of metafiction was founded upon Susan Sontag's anti-hermeneutic polemics. "The apotheosis of this tendency," he writes, "was that celebration of form as an autonomous source of aesthetic pleasure described by Sontag in 'Notes on Camp'" (4).⁶ More clearly in Spark than elsewhere, we can recover the historical and formal interpenetration of metafiction and camp.

6. Walsh's larger point is that Sontag's anti-hermeneutics set the stage for the systematic misunderstanding of what metafiction (or what Walsh calls "innovative fiction") was actually up to: "Although she clearly declared her own ambivalence towards the camp sensibility, its essential features—the exclusive concentration upon questions of style, the uncritical generosity towards all details of argument, import or intent and the consequent passive relation towards contemporary consumer culture—delineated in caricature the emphases and inadequacies of an emerging trend in the criticism of innovative fiction" (4). Basically, Walsh argues that Sontag permitted critics (both proponents and opponents) of metafiction to ground their analyses in a fetishization of form. I am here only interested in the historical coincidence Walsh identifies between metafiction's emergence and the modishness of Sontag's aesthetic theories.

*Not to Disturb and The Abbess of Crewe: Camp Omniscience,
Camp Mediation*

In the years since Sontag's "Notes on Camp," the best brief account of camp's formal and ideological workings is Jack Babuscio's "The Cinema of Camp (AKA Camp and the Gay Sensibility)" (1978). Originally published as simply "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," the essay was expanded and republished as "The Cinema of Camp" with the initial title appended parenthetically. This nominal doubling reflects camp's genealogical anchoring in specifically queer aesthetic and performance practices, while also suggesting that as a discrete aesthetic modality, camp is no longer exclusively identifiable with gay life, though neither has it left this association entirely behind.⁷ Drawing on Babuscio's "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," Chuck Kleinhans outlines "four basic features of Camp":

. . . irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor. Camp irony is "any highly incongruous contrast between an individual or thing and its context or association. The most common of incongruous elements is that of masculine/feminine." . . . Aestheticism as part of Camp emerges in a practical appreciation of "style as a means of self-projection, a conveyor of meaning and an expression of emotional tone." . . . Similarly, to take life as theatre, particularly in terms of sex role playing, is fundamental to both Camp and gay consciousness. Camp humor is a strategy for reconciling conflicting emotions: it is "a means of dealing with a hostile environment and, in the process, of defining a positive identity." . . . Significantly, Babuscio argues that Camp humor relies on an involvement, strongly identifying with a situation while comically appreciating its

7. Moe Meyer polemically rejects the validity of the category "camp" as denoting anything other than the "performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity" ("Reclaiming" 5). Meyer blames Sontag for "kill[ing] off the binding referent of Camp—the Homosexual" and thereby "confus[ing] and confla[ting]" camp "with rhetorical and performative strategies such as irony, satire, burlesque, and travesty; and with cultural movements such as Pop" (7). I do not share Meyer's conviction that "camp" as a historical phenomenon is as singularly tied to homosexuality as he insists; even if it were, it does not strike me as useful to circumscribe camp's range of application in the wake of Sontag's allegedly illegitimate expansion. As an aesthetic descriptor with concrete pragmatic efficacy, the cat is out of the bag: "camp" does indeed have something to do with irony, satire, burlesque, travesty, and Pop.

contradictions. In this it is different from the detachment that facilitates mockery.

(187)⁸

Babuscio's anatomy of camp will inform my reading of Spark's campy experimentation with the novel form. Just as camp aestheticism presents "style as a means of self-projection," metafiction is marked by its narcissistic self-assertion, as Waugh observes: "While modernism pursued impersonality ('showing') . . . metafictional texts pursue Personality, the ironic flaunting of the Teller" (131). The shared commitment of both to discovering new forms for "personality" is the grounds for any understanding of metafiction as intrinsically campy. Indeed, theorists of both camp and metafiction have turned to the myth of Narcissus for a grounding logic. Gregory W. Bredbeck, for instance, finds the *locus classicus* for camp narcissism in Wilde's prose poem "The Disciple," in which the myth of Narcissus is given a dizzying twist: "And the pool answered, 'But I loved Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw my own beauty mirrored'" (qtd. in Bredbeck 54). Linda Hutcheon says that in "narcissistic narrative"—her term for metafiction—"overt diegetic narcissism seems to involve the thematizing within the story of its storytelling concerns" via "parody" and "*mise en abyme*" (53–54). By inverting or doubling the moral of the Narcissus fable, Wilde's "The Disciple" both parodically thematizes the original fable's "storytelling concerns" and sets up a variety of *mise en abyme*, as Narcissus and the pool gaze at one another's reflections in a potentially infinite regress. There is a kind of allegory, too, of textual agency: you think you are looking at it, but really *it* is looking at *you*.

In Spark's fiction, such narrative narcissism is enacted most clearly around the omniscient narrator's realization of what Dorrit Cohn calls "the singular power possessed by the novelist: creator of beings whose inner lives he can reveal at will" (4). The Narcissus figure becomes, precisely, a figure for the *author*, mesmerized, or else spooked, at the mirror of her own making. *The Comforters* establishes this problematic with theoretic precision:

8. Kleinhans quotes in this passage from Babuscio, "Camp," pages 41, 43, and 47.

A typewriter and a chorus of voices: What on earth are they up to at this time of night? Caroline wondered. But what worried her were the words they had used, coinciding so exactly with her own thoughts.

Then it began again. Tap-tappity-tap; the typewriter. And again, the voices: Caroline ran out on to the landing, for it seemed quite certain the sound came from that direction. No one was there. The chanting reached her as she returned to her room, with these words exactly:

What on earth are they up to at this time of night? Caroline wondered. But what worried her were the words they had used, coinciding so exactly with her own thoughts.

And then the typewriter again: tap-tap-tap. She was rooted. "My God!" she cried aloud. "Am I going mad?"

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As a number of critics have noted, Spark's concern with authorial mind reading and plotting in *The Comforters* reflects her interest, after her conversion to Catholicism in 1954, in problems of divine omnipotence.⁹ But subsequent novels, especially *Not to Disturb* and *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974), would go on to engage these interests less directly, by translating Caroline's hallucinated typewriter into subtler medial analogies for narrative omniscience and plot construction. Just as *Not to Disturb* foregrounds the film and audio equipment with which the murderous servants document their version of events, *The Abbess of Crewe*—a mannered satire about a power struggle in an abbey—features a network of computerized recording devices with which the titular Abbess spies on her cloistered underlings. The novel follows the conflict between Alexandra, a charismatic Abbess who recites modernist poetry, and a breakaway group of free-loving nuns led by one Sister Felicity. Abbess Alexandra seems to have the advantage, insofar as her Abbey is outfitted with sophisticated surveillance technology (the novel came out during the Watergate crisis and was inspired by it). As in *Not to Disturb*, the trappings are what might colloquially be called high

9. Discussions of Spark's interest in analogies between author and God are a commonplace in the criticism. See *inter alia* Waugh (119); Lodge (169–70); and Haddox, who aligns Spark's apparently godlike narrator with, specifically, the Calvinist God (56–57)—the narrator's cruelty thus becomes a Catholic critique of Protestantism. Nicol insists that Spark's apparently "omniscient" narrator is less analogous to God than to a flawed, partial, and possibly malevolent human being: "a small-scale, prurient, menacing entity, more like a stalker than a deity" (112–13).

camp. Both novels unfold largely through elliptical, clever dialogue in settings of ironized refinement.

Both formally and thematically, then, in these novels Spark combines aestheticism (“style as a means of self-projection”) with theatricality (“the notion of life-as-theatre, being versus role-playing, reality and appearance” [Babuscio, “Cinema of Camp” 123]), but subordinates both to that originary problem she marked out in *The Comforters*: fictionality in general, and narrative omniscience in particular. When, for instance, the murderous servants in *Not to Disturb* arrange a press conference—“The cameras flash. Microphones are thrust forward to their mouths” (114–15)—at which to retail their fiction about the death of their employers, they cannot help but invoke scenes of writing and the world of novels in their explanations to the media:

Clovis says, “. . . not on the typewriter—you wake the whole household, don’t you? What I call midnight oil literature is only done by hand. It’s an art. Yes, oh no, thanks, I intend to make other arrangements for publication.”

Irene is saying, “No, he wanted it that way, I guess, until she did a Lady Chatterley on him. . . . A Victorian novel, don’t you know it?”

(116; ellipses in original)¹⁰

Or here, the narrator of *Abbess* swerves away from a conversation between nuns to linger over the analogy between, explicitly, central intelligence and God and, implicitly, between both of these and the author:

Upstairs and far away in the control room the recorders, activated by their voices, continue to whirl. So very much elsewhere in the establishment do the walls have ears that neither Mildred nor Walburga are now conscious of them as they were when the mechanisms were first installed. It is like being told, and all the time knowing, that the Eyes of God are upon us; it means everything and therefore nothing.

(68)

10. In the novels I am discussing, media technologies are not particularly gendered, but see Apostolou’s “Seduction, Simulacra and the Feminine” for a reading of Spark’s *The Public Image* in terms of photography/film’s implication in the power dynamics of the male gaze.

Between these two passages, much of Spark's metafictional sensibility is manifested. *Not to Disturb's* Clovis responds to a press question about his written account of the events we have been reading with reference to technologies of literary composition, while Irene, somewhat confusedly, attempts to account for her employer's fate in terms of literary adultery plots. In Clovis's case, "literature" comprises the ground of meaning; in Irene's, its horizon or key. In the passage from *Abbess*, the omniscient narrator renders itself oddly conspicuous as it glides "Upstairs and far away" to settle in a control room identified—with pointed thematic relevance in this novel about nuns—with God. (As Friedrich Kittler has observed, media technologies designed to store language instantiate a process inaugurated by "the holy books": "[Writing] celebrates the storage monopoly of the God who invented it" [7–8].) Caroline Rose's hallucinated typewriter continues to inform these novels but, unlike in *The Comforters*, they do not break the ontological frame within which the fictional world is sustained.

Or they *almost* don't. But at moments of highest metafictional intensity, there is a kind of short circuit between the poetic means of narrative and the diegesis. The similes in the passage from *Not to Disturb* with which I began represent one such short circuit, playing out at the level of figurative language. In *The Abbess of Crewe*, the titular Abbess effects this short circuit by invoking the paratext of the book we are holding: "'Gertrude,' says the Abbess, 'Sister Gertrude has charmed all the kingdom with her dangerous exploits, while the Abbess of Crewe continues to perform her part in the drama of *The Abbess of Crewe*. The world is having fun and waiting for the catharsis. Is this my destiny?'" (30). This is the variety of *mise en abyme* Lucien Dällenbach calls "aporistique," in which, in Hutcheon's paraphrase, "the fragment is supposed to include the work in which it itself is included" (55–56).¹¹ As Hutcheon goes on to say, in "narcissistic works" paratextual features such as titles "bring about the *closeness* of the reader to the text"—they do not, in other words, remain firmly outside the diegetic frame (148). In *The Abbess of Crewe*, flirtation with textual boundaries is always theoretically

11. For a discussion of Spark's *Loitering with Intent* (1981) in terms of Dällenbach's theory of the *mise-en-abyme*, see Apostolou, "Textasy" 107.

recuperable at the level of the diegesis: The Abbess's reference to "the drama of *The Abbess of Crewe*" could merely be the self-dramatization of an exasperated personage with a sense of her own importance. But the very inadequacy of this recuperation is part of the joke: no reader can help but perceive the italicized appearance of "*The Abbess of Crewe*" as anything but a metaleptic violation of narrative levels.¹² Thus when, at the novel's end, the Abbess orders the "selection and orchestration of the transcripts of her tape-recordings" for presentation to the Vatican (127), we are prepared to savor the paradox by which the book we are reading both is and isn't the record of those transcripts: "Remove the verses that I have uttered. They are proper to myself alone and should not be cast before the public. Put 'Poetry deleted.' Sedulously expurgate all such trivial fond records, and entitle the compilation *The Abbess of Crewe*" (128). *The Abbess of Crewe*—the novel we are holding—retains the Abbess's copious quoted verse. Perhaps the Abbess's underlings decided against expurgation.

Such games are by now a familiar part of the history of both English and American postwar fiction, and even tend to seem rather dated. But with a handful of exceptions, the Anglophone metafiction of the sixties, seventies, and eighties—those usual suspects including *Lost in the Funhouse*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and *Willie Masters Lonesome Wife*—was by male authors, and there is, *The Comforters* notwithstanding, a general sense that the overtly "experimental" fiction of the period is inextricably bound up with a kind of literary machismo.¹³ In contrast, Spark's style and sensibility—having inherited something of Firbank's barbed indirection, something of Compton-Burnett's sinister wit—partakes recognizably of queer and of feminine literary precedents, as Sehgal sees: "Spark is now regarded as a bit of a curiosity, the chronicler of kinky nuns and schoolgirl intrigue, exemplar of the 'dykily psychotic, crippled, creepish' women's writing that Norman Mailer derided." "A bit of a curiosity" is yet another formulation for Spark's quality of camp,

12. For a useful account of metalepsis and its relationship to female subjectivity in Spark, see Bailey.

13. All exceptions admitted, including, in England, Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* (1973) and Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* (1969), itself an extremely campy text.

which we should understand as in part an effect of a particular British prose tradition with highly gendered associations.¹⁴

This tradition is not, in fact, one exclusively of “women’s writing,” as William McBrien perceives when he attempts to resolve the problem of Spark’s oddity by placing her in the tradition of “the novelist as dandy”: “That she is a woman may delay us in recognising her style as the manifestation, mostly an incidence among males until the mid-twentieth century, called *dandyism*” (153). Rodney Stenning Edgecombe gives formal point to this general “dandyism” when he claims that “Spark’s novels are best viewed as extended epigrams” (4)—the epigram being the verbal signature *par excellence* of the dandy. The gender ideology underlying dandyism’s literary manifestations and receptions is complex, but, after the Wilde trials at least, it would become permanently associated with male homosexuality understood as effeminate.¹⁵ Sehgal’s astute ascription of Mailer’s category of abjected “women’s writing” to Spark points toward a late-Victorian and modernist prehistory, in which dandiacal style is a compound of (male) effeminacy, wit, and aestheticism. High camp inherits much from dandyism—it is, in Sontag’s words, the recipe for “how to be a dandy in the age of

14. Hodgkins identifies in Spark a “monumental trivialism” compatible, to my mind, with camp (131). For Hodgkins, Spark’s brand of “trivialism” represents a distinctly female variant on the larger postwar trend in British fiction toward minoriness (as represented especially by *The Movement*). Malcolm, similarly, locates Spark’s “inconsequentiality” as part of a broader trend with gendered associations; other authors practicing such “inconsequentiality” include Penelope Fitzgerald and Jane Bowles. Spark, Malcolm observes, “may also be seen . . . within a particular quirky and challenging line of women’s writing that is difficult, contestatory, and provocative” (177). His “quirky” provides yet another option in the long list of impressionistically registered aesthetic effects (*zany*, etc.) which I am condensing under “camp.” Perhaps most directly pertinent to my claims about the gendered dimensions of Spark’s style, Barreca reads Spark’s strategy of “metaphor-into-narrative” as partaking of a distinctly female approach to comedy: “by attaching a buried, literal meaning to what is intended to be inert and meaningless, women writers subvert the paradigmatic gesture of relief that is seen to characterize comedy” (244). In a manner not unrelated to camp’s subversive queer *détournement* of dominant paradigms, Barreca finds that “[w]omen’s use of metaphor, as well as their use of comedy, is disruptive in its refusal to accept the conventions which propagate the language of the father” (253).

15. See Sinfield. For the most important early statement of the traits proper to the dandy, see Baudelaire, for whom “the dandy aspires to insensitivity,” as opposed to the otherwise related figure of the *flâneur*, who is rather a “passionate spectator” (9).

mass culture" (288)—but it names a more diffuse phenomenon, less closely tethered to the fantasized figure of the British aristocrat. As Sontag saw, camp's predominant "tone" is essentially imported wholesale from dandyism: it is dandyism subjected to the pressures of postwar commercialism.

It is to something like dandyism that Edgecombe refers when he writes of Spark's "disconcerting zaniness" (97); a number of other critics have reached, somewhat impressionistically, for the same descriptor, which might seem yet another filiation of those suspiciously trivial aesthetic terms related to camp.¹⁶ In her account of the "zany" as a postmodern mode—an account which relies almost exclusively on the zany's performative (theatrical and filmic) instantiations—Ngai suggests that contemporary zaniness is the aesthetic distillate of a particular relation between gender and affective labor, specifically "domestic work" and "the labor of teachers, artists, and information workers" (*Our Aesthetic Categories* 189). As with camp—and, one might add, as with that historically antecedent dandyism preoccupied with the busy *imitation* of the postures of leisure imagined to be proper to the aristocracy—"zaniness" turns on its charged ambivalence about gender. As Ngai puts it, "gender clearly matters to, and becomes an issue for, this contemporary aesthetic about work, even if the question of the style's own gender is never resolved" (221–22). This might sound a lot like camp, but in Ngai's usage they are distinct: whereas "camp . . . converts the pain of failure and loss into victory and enjoyment, zaniness highlights its own inability to do this" (12). Zaniness is an art of failure, while camp resolves and redeems.

Ngai's distinction between "camp" and "zaniness" is compelling within the terms of her discussion, rooted in the longer performance history of the "zany" as a theatrical type. But the distinction does not reflect critical usage history, in which the (often colloquial, at best only semi-theorized) terms "zany" and "camp" cover a great deal of overlapping territory. Nor need Ngai's insistence that "zaniness" always indicates an aesthetic of failure be taken as normative—not necessarily in the case of character, and certainly not in the case of

16. Kemp, for instance, writes of *The Hothouse by the East River* that "Mrs. Spark is sarcastically and deliberately out-zanying the zany" ("Future Conditional" 200).

tone. In any event, *The Abbess of Crewe's* generally zany atmosphere, as well as Alexandra's characterologically zany attempts at maintaining her idiosyncratic brand of Catholicism and her tenuous hold over the life of the abbey, can be usefully elucidated with reference to Ngai's theory of the labor/gender complex undergirding a certain kind of wackily comedic aesthetic surface—call it “camp” or “zany”—without conceding that such a surface necessarily reflects “the unhappily striving wannabe, poser, or arriviste” (*Our Aesthetic Categories* 189).

Like a number of other Spark novels, including *The Girls of Slender Means* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The Abbess of Crewe* involves an insular, all-female society; unlike those novels, though, its cast of characters have a profession in common. We might think of the occupation of “nun” as the limit case of what Ngai identifies as the feminized worker involved in a form of labor whose production is definitively “immaterial” (*Our Aesthetic Categories* 189).¹⁷ Accordingly, what Alexandra ultimately produces in her zaniest performance is not piety but social prestige. Challenged by Felicity for the title of Abbess, Alexandra dissuades a faction of nuns from supporting Felicity by tarring her opposition to Alexandra's surveillance state as the mark of a mere “bourgeois,” implying that real “ladies” (all of the nuns aspire to aristocratic lineage) will stick with Alexandra. The heritage of the dandy's snobbish hope that performative elegance might dissolve the stigma of the bourgeoisie finds campy expression in Alexandra's speech, which encourages an ironically inappropriate contest for distinction among the members of a religious institute:

“A Lady recognises in the scientific methods of surveillance, such as electronics, a valuable and discreet auxiliary to her natural capacity for

17. Nuns make for easy comedy, as films like *Nuns on the Run* (1990) and *Sister Act* (1992) recognize. (Indeed, the zany premise of *Nuns on the Run*, in which a couple of male criminals have to disguise themselves as nuns in order to evade capture, shares the theme of men donning drag in order to penetrate typically female spheres of labor which Ngai reads as “zany” in *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *The Toy*, in which, respectively, Robin Williams and Richard Pryor pose as nannies [182, 210].) This easy comedy has a countervailing tendency in a tradition of films, from *Black Narcissus* (1947) to *Ida* (2013), in which nuns are a source of psychological high seriousness.

inquisitiveness; but a Bourgeoise regards such innovations in the light of demonology and considers it more refined to sit and sew.

“A Lady may or may not commit the Cardinal Sins; but a Bourgeoise dabbles in low crimes and safe demeanours.

“A Lady bears with fortitude that *Agenbite of Inwit*, celebrated in the treatise of that name in Anglo-Saxon by my ancestor Michel of Northgate in the year 1340; but a Bourgeoise suffers from the miserable common guilty conscience.”

(89–90)

This is Alexandra at her most strategically successful. “Zaniness,” in Ngai’s words, involves “the unhappily striving wannabe,” but Alexandra’s is an entirely *successful* aspirational performance. This success is both rhetorical (Felicity’s supporters switch their allegiance to Alexandra) and poetic: Alexandra’s ostentatious learning and her balanced isocolonic antitheses produce a monologue that is mannered, witty, acerbic, preposterous, and plausibly but not indisputably self-mocking—in other words, campy. (Recall Kleinhans on camp’s habit of “strongly identifying with a situation while comically appreciating its contradictions.”) Alexandra’s charismatic self-presentation is “triumphant” (as Ngai describes camp) because it is a successful act of aristocratic self-fashioning, however ironized.¹⁸

The novel’s central topical conceit—the analogy between Alexandra’s and President Nixon’s surveillance apparatuses—depends for its satiric force on the highly gendered bathos generated by the correspondence between the nunnery and the masculine trappings of the State. But in a 1987 interview, Spark downplayed the Watergate scandal, and her refusal to condemn Nixon’s enthusiasm for illicit surveillance reflects the ambivalence with which implicit authorial judgment operates throughout *The Abbess of Crewe* and in Spark’s third-person fictions more generally.¹⁹ “It is almost impos-

18. It is also an entirely fraudulent one, as Edgecombe points out, since Alexandra “claim[s] to be nobly descended from St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, in fact the daughter of a notary” (109).

19. “The Americans created a big national thing of it,” Spark says in the interview, “and I thought, well, if they lived in Europe and knew about corruption—all governments are corrupt—they would realize that it was like a nun’s quarrel over a thimble” (qtd. in Edgecombe 91). However odd this partial apology for Nixon might seem, it presents something like a recipe for campy satire of the machinations of the state: reduce

sible," Edgecombe observes of one of the Abbess's ironic defenses of monastic archaism, "to disentangle the skeins of sympathy and mockery in the tone" (97). Such impossibility is general in Spark. The ambiguity of implicit authorial judgment—the uncertainty between sympathy and distanciation—gives rise to textures of tart, even sadistic, irony constitutive of Spark's camp—Sehgal's "the flick of the wrist that lands the lash."

Spark's flickering between sympathy and judgment plays out at the level of narrative technique. Cohn distinguishes between two poles of free indirect discourse's "tonal range," the "ironic" and the "sympathetic": at the "ironic" pole, the implicit author passes judgment on a character, whereas at the "sympathetic" pole the implicit author enters warmly into a character's feelings (116–19).²⁰ The "ironic" pole is consonant with what Wayne Booth calls "stable irony"; it refers to a clear difference between a character's thoughts and an implicit authorial intention in conveying those thoughts. Spark's irony toward her characters, as expressed in free indirect discourse, in quoted monologues, and in narrative description, is, rather, densely complex: it is very often the case that approval, sympathy, distaste, and a certain cold remove seem all to coexist at the level of implicit authorial judgment. This multifaceted ambivalence, very hard to describe formally but quite recognizable, makes for those qualities of "zaniness" and "camp" which readers of Spark often resort to observing without theorizing. Consider the concluding passage of the novel, which describes the Abbess setting sail to Rome to defend herself against excommunication:

Our revels now are ended. Be still, be watchful. She sails indeed on the fine day of her desire into waters exceptionally smooth, and stands on the upper deck, straight as a white ship's funnel, marvelling how the wide sea billows from shore to shore like that cornfield of sublimity which never should be reaped nor was ever sown, orient and immortal wheat.

(128)

The opening allusion to Prospero strikes an unostentatious metafictional note, as well as introducing an aura of quotation which perme-

the self-important machismo of state power by translating it into exaggeratedly feminine terms.

20. Cohn prefers the term "narrated monologue" to free indirect discourse (13).

ates the remainder of the paragraph.²¹ “Be still, be watchful” is not a quotation, though in both syntax and import it mimics an italicized passage of Alexandra’s internal monologue from a few pages earlier, itself a modified quotation from the King James translation of 1 Peter 5:8: “Sisters, be sober, be vigilant, for the devil goeth about as a raging lion seeking whom he may devour” (115). The passage’s concluding comparison is attributed to the Abbess herself, who “marvel[s] how” the sea is “like that cornfield of sublimity . . . orient and immortal wheat.” Readers, cued both by the deictic “that” and the elevated, archaic diction, will likely suspect that the language is allusive, though only a very specialized reader will recognize that these lines are, as Judy Little points out, lifted from the seventeenth-century Anglican poet Thomas Traherne’s *Centuries*, in which Traherne “describe[s] the glowing aura which people and natural objects seemed to have when the poet was a child” (168).²²

The Abbess of Crewe’s zany citational profligacy has implications for readings of both authorial tone and character. Ngai notes that zaniness has particular characterological relevance, which, given its rootedness in a character type—the Zany in sixteenth-century *com-media dell’arte*—is perhaps unsurprising. Although a person or character *can* be a “camp” in a way that is grammatically analogous to a “zany,” this designation has almost disappeared from actual usage. We are more likely to call a character “campy,” but “campiness” can also reside at the level of narration—that is, an implied author or an omniscient narrator might assume a campy tone, where “tone” is understood as an “affective bearing” based on narrative techniques. In the concluding passage of Spark’s novel, the omniscient narrator’s tonal register is very close to the Abbess’s own, a proximity underscored by the fact that the reported internal speech—signaled by the *inquit* phrase “marvelled”—is, like the third-person narration preceding it, a quotation from a Renaissance text. At a general level, this is an instance of what Cohn, borrowing the phrase from Leo Spitzer, calls “stylistic contagion,” in which “a reporting syn-

21. Waugh observes that Spark’s use of a “Prospero figure” in *Not to Disturb* is an instance of what amounts to a topos in metafiction—she also cites John Fowles’s *The Magus* (113).

22. The Traherne runs, “The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown” (qtd. in Little 168).

tax is maintained, but where the idiom is strongly affected (or infected) with the mental idiom of the mind it renders" (33). In this case, everything up until "marvelling" represents a narrative syntax stained by the Abbess's style of consciousness; everything after it (the Traherne quotation) is reported thought. But what does this tissue of quotations, each with a different narratological status, suggest about the implicit authorial judgment of Alexandra? For Little, the Traherne quotation must be ironic, in Cohn's sense of indicating a discrepancy between the judgment of an implied author and the feelings of a character: "Such imagery is moving and beautiful when it describes a poet's childhood in Traherne's *Centuries*, but it is shocking and ironic—though still beautiful—when it is applied to the magnificent corruption of the abbess" (168). I am not certain that we can read the irony so straightforwardly. The highly indeterminate quality of this concluding paragraph—what makes it so zany, what makes it camp—inheres in its rhetorical blurring of the line between omniscient narrator and Alexandra, and the consequent collapse of the boundaries between narrative levels necessary to the deduction of an implicit authorial attitude.

This destabilization begins with the paragraph's first two sentences, which are neither unambiguously narrative reports nor reported figural speech or thought. "Our revels now are ended" could, just barely, be a snippet of what Cohn calls psycho-monologue, a thought attributable to the Abbess—so fond of quoting English poetry—with application to the anticipated end of her tenure in the Church; more plausibly, it is a metafictional address from narrator to reader, announcing the conclusion of the story. (That, as metafictional address, it partakes of the Abbess's mental idiom is a classic case of "stylistic contagion.") But "Be still, be watchful" is harder to make sense of. It might be an imperative addressed to the reader, though it is an ostentatiously strange one—what does it mean for a reader to be still and watchful? (As opposed, say, to a more conventional appeal to a reader's attention: "Bear with me just a little longer," for instance.) It might be a free indirect representation of the Abbess's thoughts, but it doesn't really read like it, and the fact that it is preceded by what appears to be a second-person imperative to the reader and followed by a third-person narrative report reduces further the possibility that this is some kind of self-address on the

Abbess's part. What *encourages* such a reading, though, is that the syntax and the import mimic an earlier instance of Alexandra's reported thought, "*be sober, be vigilant.*"

This aura of quotation is a signal feature of camp, which, as Sontag famously said, "sees everything in quotation marks" (280). In this, camp partakes of a broader tendency in modernism proper, in which, as Louis Menand writes of T. S. Eliot, "the literary quotation marks of imitation and allusion" serve to "neutralize" the risk that one's literary expressions are emotionally fraudulent (17). The postmodern tradition to which figures like Barth, Bartheleme, and Fowles belong thickens the quotation marks around any given literary text. Indeed, the amplified citational frame is one of the most salient features of metafiction, which is, of course, fiction about fiction, or fiction about the conditions, including the literary-historical conditions, of its own possibility. These truisms are worth rehearsing here because they are not normally invoked in discussions of camp, although camp's own obsessive citationality—both its citation of earlier forms and the air quotes with which it frames itself—shares a great deal, formally and historically, with mid-century metafiction.

We might think of camp as bringing to completion—or else to crisis point—a distinctively modern trajectory of literary allusiveness beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Menand sketches a two-part history, from Tennyson to Eliot, in which the allusiveness that "tested the bounds of literary honesty in 1850 [in *In Memoriam*] transgressed them in 1910 [in Eliot's early verse], and it was precisely the aura of insincerity that was eventually understood to cling to the allusion that enabled Eliot to convert it" into a new, modernist idiom (25). In imbricated ways, camp and metafiction offer a third stage in this process of mounting insincerity. In camp metafiction, the necessarily derivative nature of literary feeling is no longer to be—as it was for Eliot—the occasion for postures of modernist alienation, for taking the measure of one's own multifarious inadequacies, but, rather, for the ironic celebration of literary form's perverse plenitude.

Ironic celebration of citationality as such leads to unresolvable ambiguities about both the locus and the ontological status of a given allusion. I would suggest that, just as the third-person narrator in *Not to Disturb* redeploys material from the diegesis in a pointedly

zany simile (“like a zip-fastener ripped from its garment by a sexual maniac”), such semi-quotations as “[b]e still, be watchful” redeploy earlier scraps of text (“*be sober, be vigilant*”) metaleptically, dislodging them from the narrative logic by which a fictional world can appear self-contained. A textual short circuit prevents us from assigning these quotations and semi-quotations to their proper level—and exposes the novel as, potentially, a kind of self-quotational machine. In *The Abbess of Crewe*, with its centralized recording studio, the possibility of such uncanny auto-citation is internalized at the level of theme and plot.

Camp, Techno-Reflexivity, and Queer Mediators

Along with *Not to Disturb*, *The Abbess of Crewe* is an unlikely instance of what Mark McGurl calls “technomodernism,” “a tweaking of the term ‘postmodernism’ [that] emphasizes the all-important engagement of postmodern literature with information technology” (32). In this context, the eloquent, allusive strains of the novel’s final paragraph, with its Renaissance archaisms and seriocomic high diction, are the ironic counterpoint to the abbey’s damning audio transcripts, from which, after all, Gertrude insists Alexandra “[d]elete the English poetry” (125). *The Abbess of Crewe* is, at one level, nothing but the record of those transcripts. In this novel’s self-reflexive plotting, Alexandra’s ubiquitous recording devices—sordid at best and totalitarian at worst—might be redeemed by the aesthetic. Having determined to “make selected transcripts of my tapes and publish them,” the Abbess explains, “I am become an object of art, the end of which is to give pleasure.” There are, she assures us, “many film and stage offers.” Instead, we might infer, these tapes have been transmuted into the novel we are reading. The preoccupation with the process of transformation by which raw recorded material, such as undifferentiated, indiscriminating audio transcripts, might be converted into something with aesthetic purchase—“the end of which is to give pleasure”—occupies a tradition of literary experimentation beginning (at least) with *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958) and continuing to the present.

In this tradition, “media is (and always has been) a central aspect of experimental literature and the strategy of making it new,” as Jessica Pressman says of “digital modernism” (5).²³ Canonical post-war prose works in which audio recording technology is explicitly or implicitly invoked include Andy Warhol’s *a, A Novel* (450 pages of the transcriptions from a series of tape-recorded conversations); Ronald Sukenick’s “Roast Beef: A Slice of Life,” a transcribed tape recording of a couple discussing lunch; and, of course, Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice*. From Beckett to Barth, such experiments use the tape recorder as what Pressman calls a “reading machine,” a “mechanized device that stores and presents literature” (57). All are fairly unsubtle instances of what Pressman calls “techno-reflexivity.”

Going back to *Tristram Shandy*’s experiments with blank and blackened pages—in which the technologies at issue are ink, page, codex—techno-reflexivity and metafiction are a natural fit. From the eighteenth century to the present, such techno-reflexive metafiction tends to deploy a repertoire of aggressive disruptions of a narrative world. Spark is unusual not for her means but for the unostentatious way she handles them. Even in *The Comforters*, in which typewriter and tape recorder form a kind of paired writing/reading machine, the centering of technology does not occasion an unambiguous metaleptic transgression, an overt violation of the fourth wall. *The Abbess of Crewe*’s techno-reflexivity is subtler still. That Alexandra is “become an object of art” via the aesthetic shaping of her audio tapes into a drama called *The Abbess of Crewe* is as neat and undeniable an ontological Möbius strip as anything in Barth, Coover, or Sukenick, but it does not advertise its reflexivity as bluntly as American metafictionalists tend to do.

Michael Trask finds that camp shares with other, broader postwar cultural formations a tendency toward that “[r]eflexivity [which] forces us to be participant-observers of our own modernity” (6). In *Not to Disturb*, such camp reflexivity has its specific locus in pre-

23. Despite this label, there is nothing exclusively “digital” about twentieth-century experimental literature’s foregrounding of mediality—indeed, as Pressman later acknowledges, the “analog” versions of this foregrounding are arguably just as important (57).

cisely the techno-reflexive mechanical devices Pressman associates with modernist and postmodernist experimental literature: here, the tape recorder and the camera. By emblemizing a completed narrated event in which—as in a novel—what seems to be unfolding has, from another point of view, already happened (just flip to the end of the book), these recording devices in Spark's plots manifest her concern with plotting as such. In *Not to Disturb*, the primary metafictional formal device is the unstable play with tenses by which the servants indicate that their masters, locked in the bedroom and not to be disturbed, are already dead. (Lister, while the masters are in fact still living: "He was a very fine man in his way. The whole of Geneva got a great surprise.' 'Will get a surprise,' Eleanor says" [4].) "Let us," as Lister says, "not strain after vulgar chronology" (49)—an arch statement that might be taken as a motto for Spark's brand of camp metafiction. *Not to Disturb's* servants have plotted not just the deaths of their masters but also the conversion of those deaths into a media event, and a number of critics have discovered here a critique of television news and the popular press.²⁴ But to reduce Spark's interest in recording media to a banal critique of "the media" is to miss what is most radical about these novels. The most interesting thing about Lister's tape recorder is not that it is a symbol for the mass media, but that it stands for the conditions of narrative production as such. Peter Kemp approaches this reading when he observes, of *Not to Disturb's* indebtedness to Jacobean tragedy, that "its narrative technique . . . brings it close to a transcript of something occurring on a stage" (*Muriel Spark* 132). The key point here is not that the novel imitates drama, but that it imitates a *transcript*, a record documenting an event. Just as in *The Comforters*—in which Caroline uses a tape recorder to try to capture the narrating voices she is hearing—Spark's emphasis in *Not to Disturb* falls on the uncanny fact of mediation itself, here, as in *The Abbess of Crewe*, realized in the suggestion that the novel we are reading is itself the transcription of a technologically produced (taped or photographed) record described in its diegesis.

24. For Page, for instance, *Not to Disturb* offers a "sardonic exposure of the power of the mass media in the contemporary world" (81).

In *Not to Disturb*, the emphasis on technological mediation, on the storage of narrative in recording devices from which it can be retrieved at any point, is reflected in the servants' habit of referring to future events in the past tense. "'Let us not split hairs,' says Lister, 'between the past, present and future tenses'" (4). But while the tenses are fluid, *Not to Disturb* might be said to have a master grammatical mood: the subjunctive. This is because Lister, in his role as author, can shape the narrative to new requirements should they arise. As Lister says of the servant Heloise's assertion that she is pregnant by another servant, Pablo: "I wouldn't be so sure of that. . . . And neither would you" (5). Such assertive subjunctivity is a part of the novel's overall campiness. Trask observes that camp derives its aura of ontological instability, its "antiessentialism" (5), from "the queer's provisional or subjunctive attitude," since, "for the duration of the history of homosexuality, the queer stands between reality and unreality as between gender essences" (9).²⁵ As a direction for the novel, camp metafiction depends for its cultural possibility on the homology between ontological and sexual intermediacy.

For Spark, a camp tone would appear a very natural one for metafictional experimentation. But where are the actual queer characters? In fact, gay men are present in positions of what one might call charged marginality beginning with *The Comforters*, in which, as Haddox notes, "[Caroline's] favorite fellow Catholic is her Uncle Ernest, a gay man who, like her, has renounced sexual relationships" (59). Trask argues that American novelists such as Patricia Highsmith and Mary McCarthy "can 'take on' the camp sensibility either by surrogating camp archness . . . displacing its gay stakeholders . . . or outmaneuvering them in the game of bitchy putdowns" (13–14). All of these strategies might apply to Spark, but her "displacement" of the gay men with whom camp is most immediately associated happens, as it were, in plain view. If, in *The Comforters*, the gay male is relegated to the status of marginalized avuncularity, then by *The Bachelors* (1960) Spark would experiment with a variation of gay villainy in which continuities between queerness and authorship

25. In context at this point in his argument, Trask uses "antiessentialism" to refer not to camp but to "the liberal personality," but his broader argument is that postwar liberalism shares unacknowledged territory with camp.

are proposed.²⁶ In the character of Mike, *The Bachelors* establishes an equivalence between mediumistic clairvoyance—one of Spark’s many negative figures for authorship—and male homosexuality. Under the tutelage of the older Father Socket, Mike discovers both his sexuality and his psychic powers: “Father Socket cited the classics and André Gide, and although Mike did not actually read them, he understood, for the first time in his life, that the world contained scriptures to support his homosexuality. . . . Mike gave up his job as a waiter and went into training as a clairvoyant” (165). Mike’s sexuality is revealed to one distressed character through his use of women’s make-up: “Elsie clutched her handbag, indignant and very put out, especially by Mike’s lipstick” (135).

In *The Bachelors*, cross-dressing is a figure for fictional authorship and the mind reading it entails; by *Not to Disturb* it has become something like the sign of fictionality itself. Victor Passerat, the Baron and Baroness’s secretary (and a planned victim of Lister’s plot), has been driven to the chateau by “two girls in a car.” The “girls” insist on waiting for Passerat to return, a contingency Lister has not planned for. “They don’t,” as he says, “come into the story” (38). These “girls,” we later learn, are in fact a woman, Anne, and a man in drag, Alex, “his square bony face framed in a silk head-scarf and his eyes pleadingly laden with make-up under finely shaped eyebrows” (40). The pair’s attempts at either getting into the chateau or driving away are repeatedly thwarted by the servants. How will Lister contain this threat to his plot? As it turns out, he does not have to:

“It’s still stormy,” says Hadrian as a flash of lightning stands for a second in the square pane of the window. A clap of thunder follows it. “There must be trees felled in the park,” he says.

“I shall arrange for them,” says Heloise, “to be swept up some time tomorrow.”

(87)

26. The cultural and literary history of the gay villain lies outside of my purview here, but for an early analysis of the phenomenon see Norman Mailer’s 1955 essay “The Homosexual Villain” (published in the gay liberation journal *One* [Mailer, *Mind* 595] and collected in *Advertisements for Myself*). Pertinent theoretical treatments include Leo Bersani’s chapter on Jean Genet’s *Funeral Rites* in *Homos* (1995) and Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2005).

The way Heloise's line of dialogue is broken up by her speech tag introduces a suggestive ambiguity: not that Heloise will arrange for the trees to be swept up, but, rather, that she will arrange for them to be felled in the first place. A little later, Mr. Samuels, Lister's hired cinematographer (he is assisted by McGuire, a sound engineer), advises the extremely disconsolate Alex and Anne to "[t]ake a stroll in the grounds" (106). They do, and, in the passage with which I began, are caught in the rain and killed by lightning striking the elms under which they have taken shelter. We might suspect that Lister, with the help of Samuels and McGuire, his technicians, has introduced this storm into the tapes. Certainly he can sound like a magician: "Lister raises a finger and the discs of the machine begin to spin" (64). Perhaps the servants never needed to worry about Alex and Anne at all. As Mr. Samuels says, "Forget them. . . . They're only extras" (108).

Anne and Alex, the masseuse and the drag queen, have introduced a "problem" for Lister's plot which can only be solved by the narrative's abandonment of its commitment to a sustained, self-consistent fictional world. Despite—or because of—their forced disappearance, they are also the symbols of the possibility of this abandonment, queerly standing, as Trask has it, "between reality and unreality as between gender essences." Without the lightning strike called up as if in answer to Lister's wishes, it would be possible to read *Not to Disturb's* plotting servants as operating according to the same rules that govern our reality. They speak of their masters' projected deaths in the past tense because to do so affirms their commitment to their evil actions. They employ a filmmaker and sound engineer to document their activities in order to produce evidence for their version of events. They conspire with the news media for the same reason, and to turn a profit off the sensationalistic story they have come up with in place of what "really happened." But the death of Alex and Anne introduces a wrinkle into the self-consistency of this world. The filmmaker and sound engineer are not documenting fraudulent events but constructing real ones. In doing so they are allied with the novelist. If a storm is needed, a storm can be summoned. The tape recorder and camera are not the symbols of a degraded mass media but of the weird technology of narrative in-

vention as such, in which persons can flicker in and out of existence according to an author's whim, in which ontology is only rhetoric, in which "intermediacy," to recur to Trask's term, is the ground of existence. These metafictional preoccupations share a cultural logic with camp as a tonality and social repertoire, and Spark exploits this common ground. The wandering drag queen struck by lightning "like a self-stricken flash-photographer," "like a zip-fastener ripped from its garment by a sexual maniac," might stand as an emblem of camp metafiction, his very disappearance fabulously shattering fiction's fourth wall.

I have suggested that the Anne and Alex disappearance plot offers an allegory of metafiction's camp queerness. In his final interview with the news media, Hadrian bolsters this reading: "Hadrian is saying, 'The flight of the homosexuals . . . ' to which his questioner, not having caught this comment through the noise, responds ' . . . the flight of the bumble-bee?'" (115; ellipses in original). As the era most conventionally associated with high postmodern aesthetics recedes, the social contours of the period's formal experiments are becoming clearer. Camp, as I have argued here, occupies a central place in that landscape. *Not to Disturb* and *The Abbess of Crewe* are among Muriel Spark's most eccentric productions. They are, from any point of view, specialized works, unlikely ever to appeal to a very large audience or to appear as major documents in the history of the postwar Anglophone novel. But their very oddity permits them to openly test affiliations—between metafiction and camp, between formal radicalism and queer social types—otherwise left largely implicit in the experimental work of the period. And, unlike much of the metafiction of the 1970s, their wit remains untarnished.

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