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How Final is Finality?
Apocalyptic Closure in Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*

1. Introduction

"Death," as J. Hillis Miller argued some time ago, "is the most enigmatic, the most open-ended ending of all. It is the best dramatization of the way an ending, in the sense of a clarifying telos, law of the ground of the whole story, always recedes, escapes, vanishes" (1978, 6). This ambiguous quality of death as a fictional ending is especially prominent in Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* (1970). In this novel, an enigmatic young woman, called Lise, travels to a southern European country in order to find a man to be her murderer. At first, her search is unsuccessful and she discards several males, who she claims are not her "type." But finally she finds Richard Fiedke, a convicted sex offender sent home from prison and a clinic to begin a new life. Soon after Richard has killed her, he is caught by the police. The novel ends with the policemen hearing his unbelievable yet truthful story, hiding behind their uniforms "to protect them from the indecent exposure of fear and pity, pity and fear" (DS, 106). As if this plot was not bizarre enough, during her whole journey Lise disperses pieces of information about her identity "to be followed by Interpol and elaborated upon with due art by the journalists of Europe for the few days it takes for her identity to be established" (DS, 51).

The way this narrative ends also fits Miller's further elaboration on death as an "enigmatic ending": it is not a satisfactory ending, exactly because death "always leaves behind some musing or bewildered survivor, reader of the inscription on a gravestone" (1978, 6). This observation is also true of *The Driver's Seat*, which ends with a focus on the puzzled and worried policemen listening to Richard's confession and statement of the case. Mirroring their puzzlement, the reader proper is also always left with the task, or rather demand, to decipher the "inscription," i.e. to make sense of the work s/he has just finished reading. *The Driver's Seat* can be read as a crime or detective story that frustratingly lacks a proper victim, murderer and crime. Furthermore, the novel creates even more uneasiness through the fact that Lise's death is revealed at an early point in the novel. After less than twenty pages the narrative voice bluntly states in a prolepsis that "[s]he will be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab-wounds, her wrists bound with a silk scarf and her ankles bound with a man's necktie, in the grounds of an empty villa, in a park of the foreign city to which she is travelling on the flight now boarding at Gate 14" (DS, 25). Thus having taken away the ending after just a couple of pages, the ending proper neither explains the crime nor Lise's motivation to organise it. Also, Richard's function as perpetrator is paradoxically entangled with his status as victim of Lise's absolute will to realise her plot. Is Lise then merely one of those Sparkian "one-eyed writer's manqués [...] who mistakenly think that their myth-fictions can determine reality" (Cheyette 2002, 96)? Lise's arrogation of the right to determine her death can thus be seen as her

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1 This expression is first mentioned on page 31 in a casual way ("He wasn't your type"), but develops a theme-like quality and is repeated throughout the novel to refer to the murderer that Lise searches for.
failure, because "[s]uch end-directed characters clearly demean the variety and openness of life" (96). But does this also mean the failure of the novel as such?

As Marianna Torgovnick writes, the urge to read on is satisfied through the "end" of a book. This ending, however, consists not just of both the last lines on the final page, but also, harder to grasp, "the 'goal' of reading, the finish-line toward which our bookmarks aim" (1981, 3). The ending of The Driver's Seat is unsatisfactory, because it does not provide any reasons for Lise's motives or any other explication of the horror we have witnessed. The goal of this narrative, on the other hand, seems to consist in Lise's drive to write her own death story and take control over powers that she illegitimately takes from both author and God. We should, however, not content ourselves simply with either celebrating Lise for her "total mastery" (Bradbury 1992, 191) over her environment or denounce her as "satanic" (Randisi 1991, 27) because of this mastery. There is, I argue, a more moral goal in this novel to aim at. It is necessary therefore to remind ourselves that closure is not simply achieved by the ending but has to be seen as "the process by which a novel reaches an adequate and appropriate conclusion, or at least, what the author hopes or believes is an adequate, appropriate conclusion" (Torgovnick 1981, 6; my emphasis). It is with this focus on the dynamic character of reading in mind that I would like to analyse Muriel Spark's The Driver's Seat with the help of Frank Kermode's concept of the apocalypse. In his conception of the term, apocalypse constitutes a narrative that is not only end-directed but also incorporates the sense of an ending throughout. Thus, while Lise's murderous plan can be read as apocalyptic in the sense that she strives for an ending, the sense-making of the novel as such is transferred backwards to the development of the novel right from the beginning. Whereas Lise the plot-maker is unsuccessful because she becomes the victim of fictionalisation that is out of her reach, apocalypse can also be seen as an analytical tool with which Muriel Spark's The Driver's Seat deconstructs the concepts of fictional ending and linear closure. From this point of view, closure paradoxically consists of the process of reading and re-evaluating the characters of the novel in terms of their humanity, which is rendered visible through pity and fear as recurring values of the narrative.

2. Apocalypse: The End is Imminent and Immanent

Although Frank Kermode (1985, 84) warned of an all too crude usage of the term apocalypse, I would like to use it here as a heuristic tool for a conceptualisation of closure in Spark's novel. According to Kermode, apocalypse is a mode and a form in which human thinking and writing has explained and structured its existence in passing time (1967, 7-8). In spite of the vagueness of this definition, there are three major aspects that can be extrapolated from it: "The Terrors and Decadence are two of the recurring elements in the apocalyptic pattern; Decadence is usually associated with the hope of renovation" (Kermode 1967, 9). Thus apocalypse is not only terrible: it is a necessary terror to reach a more positive state. This framework seems to me appropriate to apply to The Driver's Seat because this novel is obviously characterised by several forms of crisis and apocalyptic order-making. It is the last aspect, renovation or sense-making, which interests me most in apocalypse, since it can be seen as analogous to the process of narrative closure.

While decadence, terror and renovation are recurring features of apocalypse, its function can be divided into two directions: it is a mode of understanding the problems of the present, but at the same time, this way of structuring reality establishes a
relationship between the present, the past and, most importantly, an envisioned future (Kermode 1967, 8). In this respect, apocalypse is partaking of a characteristic of any narrative, namely to give order and thus meaning to human experience. Kermode, however, emphasises the relationship of the present to an endpoint of history from where a possibly better future emerges; in narratological terms this is the relationship of texts to their endings and the meaning that they bring forth. Thus both in life and in narrative, the ending is ascribed a prominent status, which he explains through the analogy of the sounds of a clock and the meaning we attribute to them:

The fact that we call the second of the two related sounds *tock* is evidence that we use fictions to enable the end to confer organization and form on the temporal structure. The interval between the two sounds, between *tick* and *tock* is now charged with significant duration. The clock's *tick-tock* I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form. (1967, 45)

It is crucial for the period in between that there is always "a lively expectation of *tock*, and a sense that however remote *tock* may be, all that happens [...] happens as if *tock* were certainly following" (1967, 46). What this reasoning shows is that ending is a necessary boundary to our temporal understanding of ourselves. While death and aging in our society seem to be taboos, as can be seen in the profusion of plastic surgery and medical discourses on youth, this sense of the present and of youth is only possible because we know of the limitations of life that death sets. Life as such becomes only meaningful through death:

All such plotting presupposes and requires that an end will bestow upon the whole duration and meaning. To put it another way, the interval must be purged of simple chronicity, of the emptiness of *tick-tick*, humanly uninteresting successiveness. It is required to be a significant season, *kairos* posed between beginning and end. (Kermode 1967, 46)

The aim of such structuration of time is to give the present (or the text) significance; the linearity of events as they happen in time is thereby transfigured into a logical sequence, aiming towards an envisioned ending. It is worth emphasising that only through this ending the in-between (*kairos*) becomes meaningful; it is "a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end" (1967, 47).

Despite the fact that this thinking has stressed the importance of endings, it would be wrong to pose an absolute hierarchy of limits and boundaries for the sense-making process – whether in fiction or reality. As Kermode argues, one of the important functions of *kairos* in real life, and plot in texts, is that it "establishes concord with origins as well as ends" (1967, 48). Consequently, for the analysis of narrative this means that although the ending has a necessary function as limiting the narrative, we cannot expect the ending alone to make sense of the whole work. What Kermode terms "concord" in his study can be applied to narrative closure, which can be identified with "the honesty and the appropriateness of the endings's relationship to beginning and middle, not the degree of finality or resolution achieved by the ending" (Torgovnick 1981, 6). Beginnings and middles of narratives are set in relation to each other in hindsight after reading, and they possibly achieve new significance in a second or consecutive reading.

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2 The idea that narrative is a genuinely human technique to make sense of reality is elaborated on by J. Hillis Miller (1990) and, famously, by Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot* (1984).
Despite Miller's assertion cited above that death, as well as any boundary, is prone to be resolved by its own deconstruction, it cannot be denied that those limits function as structuring devices regardless of whether they are realised as boundaries or not. The atomic bomb might be seen as the most drastic example here. Although luckily never dropped during the cold war, it functioned as the ultimate boundary of life on this planet, as the hypothetical, yet never actualised, ending of the narrative of the nuclear age. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that this mode of sense-making becomes especially pertinent in times of crisis, because here the end is a necessary prerequisite for a new beginning.

Renovation, and the hope for a more positive future, are therefore important factors in apocalyptic thinking in the 20th century: "It is common-place that our times do in fact suffer a more rapid rate of change technologically, and consequently in the increase of social mobility, than any before us. There is nothing fictive about that, and its implications are clear in our own day-to-day lives" (Kermode 1967, 101). This sense of crisis in western culture in the mid-20th century will serve as a starting point for my analysis of The Driver's Seat. Read as an apocalyptic narrative, Spark's novel not only depicts a decadent world where the end seems imminent, in Lise's end-directed plotting we can also distinguish the attempt to make this end immanent.

3. Living the Decadence, Writing the Apocalypse

Muriel Spark herself mentioned how important the general political climate was to the background of her novel: "You can't be non-political, not unless you are really empty-headed [...] it's there [i.e. the political dimension]; you can't ignore it" (cited in McQuillan 2002, 221). In hindsight this statement seems to prove right those critics who read The Driver's Seat as Spark's indictment of a "modernity [...] which has many features that are disappointing, bathetic or actively unwelcome" (Lanchester 2006, x). Symptoms of crisis, it seems, abound in this fatalistic depiction of postmodern decadence. For instance, the novel depicts political turmoil represented by the coup that has thrown a sheik from "his throne or whatever it is he sits on" (DS, 88) and a student demonstration that the police violently dissolve by using tear gas. Both events, however, are not depicted in serious detail or bear any direct significance. The politics behind the coup in the unnamed country play no role whatsoever, and the revolutionaries are merely dismissed as "[d]amn rotters" (DS, 88); bystanders seeing the sheikh are more concerned about whether the stock exchange will be affected than about his country's fate: "The last time there was a coup my shares regressed so I nearly had a breakdown." (DS, 84). This superficiality is also visible in a lady Lise meets at the airport who buys books not for their content but for the colour of the dust jacket so that they fit with the colour of the room she displays them in (DS, 21). A further detail of this decadent age is Lise's apartment, which is designed so that everything might fold away and nothing irregular or individualised can be identified. This theme of superficiality and streamlined anti-individualism is also taken up in a minute description of the "mid-morning compromise snack" (DS, 31) that Lise eats on the plane; significantly this snack is accompanied by a "sterilized knife, fork and spoon," expressing the sterility and

3 For an overview of criticism concerned with the nuclear apocalypse refer to "nuclear criticism" in Michael Payne's A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory (1996).
4 For the idea of the immanent see Kermode (1967, 102ff.).
emptiness of this meal (DS, 32; cf. Bradbury 1992, 190). But sterility is also apparent in spiritual matters. The character Bill, representing a bizarre new age cult based on a strict diet and the hedonistic pursuit of emotionless sex, shows that transcendence in this world has become a farce. Also Mrs Fiedke, herself a "Jehova's Witness" (DS, 62), underlines the inflated nature of religion by stating her preference for airlines from Scandinavian countries because you can "never trust the airlines from those countries where the pilots believe in the afterlife. You are safer when they don't" (DS, 68). Nothing, it seems, has a genuine core anymore in this world.

This abundance of symptoms of crisis and decadence has led critics to read the novel as Spark's exhibition of an "overt hostility […] directed at contemporary liberalism" (Parrinder 1992, 77), which criticises "the absurdness and contingent quality of the modern world" (Whittaker 1982, 8). Lise, from this point of view, writes her apocalyptic plot because in the world surrounding her all the grand narratives have lost content and authenticity (Bradbury 1992, 190-191). This might explain why Lise does not commit suicide but orchestrates her murder by both writing the script for a crime and playing the lead role in it. She plays out Kermode's observation about the apocalyptic "that in 'making sense' of the world we still feel a need, harder than ever to satisfy because of an accumulated scepticism, to experience that concordance of beginning, middle, and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions […]" (1967, 35-36). Given this unstructured, loose and desolate condition of modern life, it is not surprising that Lise chooses an apocalyptic plot to provide meaning. After all, and this is Kermode's central argument in The Sense of an Ending, "[t]here is a necessary relation between the fictions by which we order our world and the increasing complexity of what we take to be the 'real' history of the world" (Kermode 1967, 67). Thus by writing and performing the story of her murder, Lise, in Sartre's words, is narrating her "own obituary" (cited in Brooks 1984, 22) in order to achieve a final sense of authenticity.

4. The Fissures in Lise's Apocalypse

If authenticity is at stake in Lise's plotting, who can say if her crisis is authentic at all? Is this elaborated plot, where Lise has planned every detail of her own murder-story and manages to give clues for readers to follow, a valid means to achieve authenticity? Peter Brooks has emphasised that "it is in essence the desire to be heard, recognized, understood, which, never wholly satisfied or indeed satisfiable, continues to generate the desire to tell, the effort to enunciate a significant version of the life story in order to captivate a possible listener" (1984, 54). It is a death story instead of a life story that Lise creates through her plan. As Apostolou points out, this aim to be heard and understood can be seen as the underlying theme of Lise's story (2001, 45). After all, the text again and again proleptically explains that all other characters, which Lise meets and baffles through her odd behaviour, will be witnesses to her story after she is found dead. These prolepses occur at the end of scenes every now and then as if to remind us of Lise's death. For example, after giving an extraordinary tip to a waiter the text explains that: "He, too, will give his small piece of evidence to the police on the following day, as will also the toilet attendant, trembling at the event which has touched upon her life without the asking" (DS, 87). It seems, then, that the goal is not to be understood by the readers of her story but quite the opposite: to induce fear and horror due to the inexplicability of her behaviour which results in her death.
Accordingly, her resolve to write her apocalyptic narrative is rather a will to power over a world that has become contingent and boundless. The notion of her will opposing the contingency of life is raised quite early in the text. Her first instance of strange behaviour occurs when she is offered a dress made of fabric that does not hold stains. She unmistakably expresses her disgust at something that is apparently all surface and not capable of taking the marks of life. After putting the salesgirl into her place Lise leaves the shop with "absolute purpose" (DS, 8) and later shows "a look of satisfaction at her own dominance over the situation" (DS, 9). As we realise later, it is her absolute purpose to find her murderer, and the dress can be seen as unwelcome because it will not hold the bloodstains that need to be visible on a proper murder victim (Lanchester 2006, x). Accordingly, when Richard, her prospective murderer, eludes her on the plane where they first meet, Lise seems to experience "a sense of defeat or physical incapacity. She might be about to cry or protest against a pitiless frustration of her will" (DS, 28). These hints in the text, although impossible to grasp fully in a first reading, prepare the reader for the ending of the novel where she is actually murdered.

Her final goal is flawed, however, because Richard, the "sex maniac" (DS, 103) she selects for her murder, also rapes her, which is a significant deviation from her plan: "I don't want any sex," she shouts. "You can have it afterwards. Tie my feet and kill, that's all. They will come and sweep it up in the morning. All the same, he plunges into her, with the knife poised high" (DS, 106). The significance of sexual violence as a refutation of her plan lies in the fact that throughout the book Lise has avoided sex with men that she first thought might be her type. The garage owner Carlo, for instance, considers her an "unforeseen, exotic, intellectual, yet clearly available treasure" (DS, 78) and a "temptress in the old-fashioned style" (DS, 79). When he rudely tries to seduce her, she explains quite rationally: "I don't want sex with you. I'm not interested in sex, I've got other interests and as a matter of fact I've got something on my mind that's got to be done" (DS, 80). In another scene Bill, who proclaims that a "daily orgasm" is "an essential part" in his macrobiotic diet (DS, 94), is told by Lise unambiguously: "If you think you're going to have sex with me [...] you're very much mistaken. I have no time for sex [...] Sex is no use to me, I assure you" (DS, 94). The fact that Richard rapes Lise before he kills her can thus be seen as a final spoiling of her plot (Page 1990, 79; Cheyette 2000, 78). Murder victim is the role that Lise has chosen, a role in which sex has no place and no useful function, and thus "ultimately she has been unable, as we all are, to control her own destiny, to write the script of her own life and death" (Page 1990, 79).

While the enactment of her script appears to be spoiled by the involvement of sex, a far greater flaw is that her death story will not be a liberation but again an imprisonment. "The writing of her murder gives her the power to escape imprisonment and, what is more, to surpass the rules that the writings of others have imposed upon her" (Apostolou 2001, 43). However, after she is killed, her story is too fantastic for the policemen to believe, and her laying out proof becomes a "pastiche of formulaic detective fiction" (Cheyette 2000, 77). What is worst though is that her fate will become the topic of sensationalist journalism rather than of high art: in this novel, "death remains untransformed and is turned into a second-rate story which can be sensationalized in the mass media. No longer is there a conversionist transformation of life into art or of death into truth" (Cheyette 2000, 77). The seriousness that she tried to impose through her plot thus becomes a cheap story that is no longer her own.
Furthermore, although adamantly insisting on her version of the story by selecting its elements like the dress and the absence of sex, after the murder her story is open to interpretation:

If after death her body will mean different things to different people (she says she doesn't mind the murderer using her body sexually once she's dead), her story, her identity, will signify something to the extent of getting on European television news, even if in a Baudrillardian reading [...] she will become mere simulacrum and mean not very much. (Idle 2002, 151)

Ironically, through the fact "that others will appropriate her image" (Apostolou 2001, 52) she produces exactly the contingency that she attempted to overcome in the first place. Her "own obituary" is thus taken out of her hands; if it was ever her plan to be in control, to force her narrative on the world, she clearly failed. Eventually, we can say that the translation of her will into discourse is disowned by that very process. It is for these reasons that Lise's response to her decadent environment fails to be adequate. The problem of The Driver's Seat as narrative, however, lies in the lack of overall closure to the novel. In order to investigate why closure is suspended and how the text nevertheless achieves meaning we now turn to the novel's ending, as the stock, which, according to Kermode, enables the sense-making process.

5. Closure through Re-Reading

As we have already seen, Lise's death is revealed after just a couple of pages into the novel. The answer to the question of what happened becomes thus less relevant than of the question of how it happened (Nicol 2010, 122). This issue, however, is explicitly avoided in the ending:

He runs to the car, taking his chance and knowing that he will at last be taken, and seeing already as he drives away from the Pavilion and away, the sad little office where the police clank in and out and the typewriter ticks out his unnerving statement: 'She told me to kill her and I killed her. She spoke in many languages but she was telling me to kill her all the time. She told me precisely what to do. I was hoping to start a new life.'

He sees already the gleaming buttons of the policemen's uniforms, hears the cold and the confiding, the hot and the barking voices, sees already the holsters and epaulets and all those trappings devised to protect them from the indecent exposure of fear and pity, pity and fear. (DS, 107)

The ending thus explains literally nothing and, in Kermode's terminology, also apparently does not establish a "concord" with the prior narration. Everything that Richard tells the police we know already: that she instructed him, that she was in charge. In retrospect, the whole novel thus becomes an "unnerving statement," because it leaves the reader puzzled. The attentive reader recognises this scene from a scene earlier in the novel. When Lise and Richard meet for the first time on a plane, a narrative prolepsis transports us into the police office witnessing this interrogation, without however revealing at this point that Richard is the murderer (DS, 27-28). Indeed as readers we are as puzzled as the police. When going back to earlier scenes we also share the interest in putting together pieces of the mystery, not to find out Lise's identity as the police and newspaper journalists do, but to read these clues in a desperate attempt to make sense of her plot (Page 1990, 70; Kemp 2010, 178). After

5 For readings stressing her failure, see Cheyette (2000) and Apostolou (2001).
all, closure has to be seen as a process that is established during reading and does not emerge all of a sudden at the end. It consists of "the satisfaction of expectations and the answer of questions raised over the course of any narrative" (Abbot 2005, 65-66). With this definition in mind it can be justly said that *The Driver's Seat* is simply more extreme than more conventional narratives in that it defers the answers and the questions from the ending to the middle of the book.

The problem can be elucidated with reference to the critical terminology that Marianna Torgovnick has developed for the understanding of closure in novels. Regarding forms, Torgovnick differentiates between "scenes" and "epilogues;" a scene takes the form of a last dialogue while the epilogue consists of an authorial comment. As Torgovnick mentions, it is sometimes difficult to draw a clear line between the two (1981, 11-12), and in *The Driver's Seat* both merge into one another. While the beginning of the paragraph can be said to be scenic, directly part of the action of the plot, it gradually merges into an epilogue-like ending, which enigmatically stresses a pseudo-Aristotelian reference to pity and fear.

This merging becomes significant when taking into consideration the next category of closure. Under the topic "shape" Torgovnick discusses the "relationship of ending to beginning and middle" (1981, 13). A "tangential" shape introduces a new topic that leaves some questions unanswered and raises new ones, and it seems that the stress of pity and fear does exactly that. This is, however, only apparently so: while the shape of this ending seems to be tangential it is really "parallel," i.e. taking up a recurring pattern that has been established in the course of the novel, which will become visible through a re-reading. That this is not immediately visible is due to the "author's and reader's viewpoint on the novel's character and major action at the novel's end" (1981, 14). In a characteristic "close-up ending" (1981, 15), the ending is so abrupt that it might not be seen as an ending at all. In effect, as Torgovnick argues, "[f]irst-time readers may not even understand why the ending is the ending, or may be at a loss for what the ending implies about meaning" (1981, 15; original emphasis). Accordingly, a second or third reading is necessary to fulfil the closural process begun with this close-up. Thereby readers will be able to "discover both the appropriateness of the ending and its implications for meaning through retrospective analysis and through perception of the pattern that controls the ending (circularity, parallelism, and so on)" (1981, 15).

Before we begin to trace this pattern it should be asked why the novel highlights pity and fear at all. Given that the novel can be read as an apocalyptic narrative, "[t]he last lines [...] suggest how inadequate modern society is in its inhumanity" (Richmond 1984, 117). While this interpretation cannot be said to be off the point, it does not account for the intertextual quality of the phrase "pity and fear" (Apostolou 2001, 51). After all, the novel has so far toyed with several genres including cheap love story, detective or crime novel and the quest narrative (Page 1990, 70; cf. Nicol 2010, 120-121). Still, as Page also maintains, so far all genres or intertextual allusions have been inverted or parodied, and it is therefore legitimate to ask "what was tragic about a wholly external and dispassionate account of a woman who (apparently) set out to find someone to rape and murder her" (Parrinder 1992, 75)? Catharsis for the reader is therefore not an issue, because the tragic mode is rendered absurd: we are exposed to "the possibilities of these Aristotelian modes of prescribed feeling, although the deadpan narration discourages them. Spark frequently does provide 'representations of (potentially) tragic loss,' even if farce persistently haunts these
tragedies" (Idle 2002, 148). By twisting tragedy and explicitly creating a rather bathetic climate instead of high order, the text even seems to mock at the idea of catharsis. Thus, as Apostolou argues, Spark even "deprives the reader of his/her right to pity and fear" (2001, 51). On the other hand, as the phrase "those trappings devised to protect them from the indecent exposure of fear and pity, pity and fear" (my emphasis) indicates, those emotions might be seen as more than just empty references and parody. After all, Norman Page points out that besides its skilful techniques, the novel "also has a fundamental seriousness that coexists with the absurdism or black comedy of its surface" (1990, 80).

Indeed, as the reader lacks any protective devices, I argue it is pity and fear that the reader is constantly exposed to in a second reading of the novel. Menakhem Perry theorised the reading process as built upon what are called the primacy and recency effects. The sense-making process is built around either of these: either some initial situation is built up, on which the reader develops a model into which s/he integrates all the rest of the narration; or, contrarily, rather recent parts of meaning affect his or her model, which then overrides earlier hypotheses. I would argue that the closural process in *The Driver's Seat* is cyclical and that therefore recency and primacy effects fall together. The initial strangeness of Lise's behaviour is coupled with the horror of her murder plot as effects released on the reader, but they find no resolution, and thus no closure. Pity and fear, established in the ending, can be seen as what one might call guiding principles along which we re-read and re-evaluate the characters and situations all along. Fear in this scenario is the constant factor involved, with Lise's murder hovering over all events, while pity, strange as it might seem at first, is what we are forced to recognise in the human insignificance of the characters.

6. No Nonentities: Pity and Fear as Guiding Principles of Characterisation

The character Bill is most exemplary of the novel's odd mixing of pity and fear. At first, this claim seems rather surprising as he emerges as anything but fearful or worthy of pity at the beginning of the novel. When he and Lise meet on a plane he begins flirting in the most enervating manner. His strong belief that they would "hit it off together" (*DS*, 31) creates the image of someone self-confident to the point of delusion, and his continued efforts to touch her in a casual way do not help to make him any more sympathetic. His ideas about his religious cult based on a macrobiotic diet render him even more pathetic. This diet, for which he is always equipped with a bag of "unpolished rice" (*DS*, 33), is not just a way of nutrition but also one of sexual health. Thus a "daily orgasm" is the basic credo that he tries to live for himself and teach "the young Neapolitans" (*DS*, 94), for whom he intends to establish a kind of learning centre. Given these eccentricities, Bill's claim that his diet and sexual regime will have a cleansing effect constitutes a sarcastic, and thus mocking, reference to the concept of catharsis. Bill apparently personifies the apocalyptic theme of a decadent culture, a world of crisis that is befitting for an apocalyptic narrative, where both spirituality and sexuality have become nonsensical and hedonistic ends in themselves.

His antics, however, also exhibit a vaguely threatening quality. This is suggested when Lise looks for another passenger, Richard Fiedke, as we later realise, while Bill explains to her the benefits of his diet and cult. While Lise is searching for Richard

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6 For an elaboration of Perry's ideas see Rimmon-Kenan (2002, 120-123).
7 The importance of second readings has also been stressed by Torgovnick (1981, 8).
and thus seemingly not paying due attention, Bill "pulls[es]" her roughly back into her seat (DS, 32), apparently because he does not tolerate her lack of interest and seriousness about macrobiotics. Later on, when Lise leads him to the place where she will bring Richard to murder her, Bill is totally ignorant to her heightened emotional state: "You are getting morbid, dear [...] You've been eating toxic foods and neglecting the fact that there are two forces in the world, centrifugal which is Yin and centripetal which is Yang. Orgasms are Yang" (DS, 96). Consequently he tries to force her to have sex with him to satisfy the needs of his diet, because "if he misses his daily orgasm he has to fit in two the next day" (DS, 97).

While this is certainly a fearful situation, the effect is rather farcical, and consequently Bill cannot be really taken seriously. Lise escapes the situation, but instead of conveying a sense of danger, the mood is rather light and comical. The darkness of Bill's character is thus light-heartedly balanced. But while Spark makes sure that he is not to be feared, what is even more significant is how the narrator finally removes him from the plot. Bill is simply taken out of Lise's path and embedded into the future after her death; thereby he is afforded a kind of cosmic insignificance in the face of her dreadful plot: "They take Bill into custody anyway, mercifully for him as it turns out, since in the hours logically possible for the murder of Lise on that spot Bill is safely in a police cell, equally beyond suspicion and the exercise of his diet" (DS, 99).

This is the end of Bill's personal involvement in the narrative, and with the driest possible humour the narrative voice eliminates him from the plot, linking Bill's most ridiculous diet with his undeserved luck in escaping allegations of Lise's murder. While Bill is thus rendered rather comical in his ambitions and the danger that originates from him, Richard Fiedke is constructed as both frightening and pathetic through his interaction with Lise and the background knowledge we get from his aunt Mrs Fiedke. The peculiar mixture of both emotions is, however, rather different from Bill's case, which has a different effect on the reader. To begin with, it is not really clear who is the victim and who is the perpetrator in his relation with Lise. As critics have observed the role reversal in the final scenes of the novel is absolute, and Richard is completely subordinated to Lise's plot (Page, 1990, 72; cf. Randisi 1991, 26). This gains tragic significance considering that he had a different plot of his own, namely "hoping to start a new life" after the years in prison and the clinic (DS, 107). The role reversal, however, is not as absolute as it seems at first. A close reading shows that reactions rather vacillate between both pity for his helplessness and fear of what he is capable of. Driving to the place Lise has chosen for the murder, she explains why she chose Richard for her plan while he desperately attempts to prove that he is healed: "You're a sex maniac.' 'No, no,' he says. 'That's all over and past. Not anymore.' [...] 'Sex is normal [...] I'm cured. Sex is all right'" (DS, 103). The almost childlike way in which he repeats what he has supposedly been taught in therapy makes him absolutely helpless against Lise who sets things straight: "It's all right at the time and it's all right before, [...] but the problem is afterwards. That is, if you aren't just an animal. Most of the time, afterwards is pretty sad" (DS, 103).

Richard's inferior role is further emphasised by Lise's uncanny knowledge about him. His name and that he was in a clinic she knows, quite plausibly, because his aunt Mrs Fiedke told her. But then she displays her detailed knowledge about the colour of the interior of the clinic ("pale green") and the routine of the guardian, and she knowingly refers to his shaking as the "madhouse tremble" (DS, 102). Even more
disturbingly she has guessed from Mrs Fiedke’s vague allusions that Richard was in prison before and accordingly inquires after the method of assault (“Did you strangle or stab?” *DS*, 102). After all, she knew him for what he was the very first time she saw him, as she says (*DS*, 103) and as she also announced to Mrs Fiedke before: “The one I’m looking for will recognize me right away for the woman I am, have no fear of that” (*DS*, 65). All this knowledge establishes Richard as rather ambiguous. On the one hand, he is still a victim of her obsession to control; on the other hand, what she reveals about him is actually rather frightening and balances his victim-role with an immense potential of violence.

This potential is actualised when Richard's restraint and mental stability begin to veer: "Don't go too far" (*DS*, 104), he warns her. In a provocative reply to Richard's assertion that "[a] lot of women get killed," Lise reveals the truth about her case: "Yes of course. It's because they want to be. […] Yes, I know, they look for it" (*DS*, 104). As if speaking out on behalf of the indignant reader, Richard almost desperately fights with his imminent relapse: "No, they don't want to be killed. They struggle. I know that. But I've never killed a woman. Never" (*DS*,104). But while he struggles, Lise is still in the driver's seat and events take their way. In effect the text combines pity and fear in these final moments of Lise's life. Both protagonists are in a way pathetic, albeit in different ways. As the ending arranges fear and pity, pity and fear in a chiasmus, Lise and Richard reinforce their tragic and horrific characteristics. While he is believably trying to resist her control, Richard is still a rapist and murderer. Lise, on the other hand, mercilessly enforces her power over him, but at the same time we wonder how desperate she must be to go that far.

With pity and fear thus developed, we experience the two protagonists' first encounter on the plane in a completely new way. Both scenes are structurally linked by the fact that in both Spark uses a significant prolepsis. The precise usage of this anticipation, however, shows the difference between the two and also how closure is achieved retrogressively, so to say. In both prolepses we are brought into the police office and witness Richard's interrogation by the police. The difference is, however, that at the earlier stage we do not know that he will be Lise's murderer, while at the later stage we do.

“What was your conversation on the plane?” "Nothing. I moved my seat. I was afraid.” "Afraid?" "Yes, frightened. I moved to another seat, away from her.” "What frightened you?” "I don't know.” “Why did you move your seat at that time?” “I don't know. I must have sensed something.” “What did she say to you?” “Nothing much…” (*DS*, 28)

The emphasis at this moment is on fear, which is here associated with an apparently inconspicuous character – a so-called heterodiegetic prolepsis in Gérard Genette’s terminology (*Rimmon-Kenan* 2002, 49). The second prolepsis, however, can be seen as focussing on Richard as an essential part of the plot (homodiegetic prolepsis), a shift of focus that in a second reading backfires on the perception of the earlier prolepsis. While the first-time the reader cannot understand what Richard is afraid of, in a second reading his fear becomes more strongly relevant. When in this earlier scene "he stares, as if recognizing her [. . . .], staring at her as if she is someone he has known and forgotten and now sees again" this recognition gains new meaning (*DS*, 27). Although he does not recognise Lise as a person, he recognises the essentialised apocalypse that she represents. Thus when the narrative voice says that he "heaves a deep breath as if he had escaped from death by a small margin" (*DS*, 29),
the second reading proves this to be correct and points towards the fearfulness and pity that is mutual in both characters.

Pity and fear accordingly emerge as structuring the perception of the characters in the novel in ambiguous ways. Spark shows that both are mutual aspects of being human. As she stated in a late interview, despite all proximity to the nouveau roman it is character that she found most interesting in The Driver’s Seat: "It’s got interesting characters. All the characters have something; there are no subsidiary nonentities. There’s always something about them one way or another. I think it’s probably my best novel to date and it’s the creepiest" (cited in McQuillan 2002, 229). And it is this "something about them" that, I think, is key to understanding how closure works in this novel. Established at the ending of the book, and seemingly opening up a new theme, pity and fear can be identified as a recurring pattern of characterisation throughout the novel. All characters, and not only the major protagonist, evoke our pity and at the same time are surrounded by a certain fearfulness, which can be exemplified by such a minor character as the hippy girl that Lise and Mrs Fiedke observe dancing in a department store:

The disc comes to an end. A girl with long brown pigtails is hopping about in front of Lise, continuing the rhythm with her elbows, her blue-jeans and apparently her mind, as a newly beheaded chicken continues for a brief time, now squawklessly, its panic career. Mrs Fiedke comes up behind Lise and touches her arm. Lise says, turning to smile at her, “Look at this idiot girl. She can’t stop dancing.” (DS, 61)

The term "idiot girl" seems pretty harsh, but the simile comparing her with the beheaded chicken combines macabre, caustic criticism with a creepy foreshadowing of what is to come. In a first reading the simile is grotesque and seems to spread a vague sense of gloom. But in a second reading the violent beheading gains a new significance due to the violence that will actually finalise Lise’s plot. And it is in the face of Lise’s terrible death that the hippy girl is endowed with an insignificant but nevertheless human quality. The humility that is human is stressed through the pity that we afford the girl in the face of Lise’s death, while at the same time we fear this humility because we realise that in Lise’s master plot no one has real significance. Thus, I argue, the Aristotelian reference is not simply a cheap instance of intertextuality or even a red herring. Instead, I agree with Page that the ending of the novel has often not been paid due attention:

There have not been many previous references to human emotions: indeed, the narrative has shown them mainly in a debased form (love being presented by the lust of Bill and Carlo, family affection by Lise’s pathetic purchase of gifts for non-existent relatives, social and political concern by the street riots), but the novel closes by asserting the importance of what makes us human. (Page 1990, 79)

Pity and fear do not necessarily make us human, but, Muriel Spark seems to suggest, they are part of human life and should be acknowledged as such. Thus, when Lise explains that she is "afraid of the traffic" because "[y]ou never know what crackpot’s going to be at the wheel of another car" (DS, 55), we realise that we are all crackpots to some extent because we never know who is in the driver’s seat.
7. Conclusion

My argument that the end in *The Driver’s Seat* is really the beginning for a re-reading gives a fresh view on the common critical proposition that Spark's novel belongs to a series of end-directed narratives. Malcolm Bradbury set the tone for this critical tradition in an article contemporary to the publication of *The Driver’s Seat* when he wrote that "no author could be surer about where things are going. From her novels the beginning, which creates expectation and freedom, and the middle, which substantiates and qualifies it, seems absent. Her people arise at the last, from the last; what has withered is a world of motive, purpose, aspiration" (1992, 190). From what I have argued in the preceding pages, the ending only achieves its significance through the middle and vice versa: the ending necessitates a new estimation of the middle. Thus Spark's humanism, even if it may be called naive, refutes Kermode's claim that apocalyptic literature looks for and finds its counterpart in "authoritarian politics" (1967, 108), which finally seeks to establish "the fantasy of an elect which will end the hegemony of bourgeois or of Massenmensch […]" (1967, 111).

Still, it has to be conceded, *The Driver’s Seat* is no *roman à clef*. Pity and fear, although essential to understanding how closure works in the novel, are not the keys to a didactic lesson that Spark wants to teach us. As John Lanchester states, it is one of her recurrent techniques that "Spark supplies our hunger for plot and at the same time shows us the shortcoming of such things as plots – the extent of the human stuff that they ignore and the troubling persistence of the questions they leave unasked" (2006, vii). Just as Bill vehemently argues that orgasms are Yang but still he ends up in a prison cell (which is supposedly Ying), the reader has to decide whether it is pity or fear (or both) that he accepts from the novel. Although both can be seen as indicators of a parallel theme that provides closure throughout the work, it is for the reader to negotiate them in his or her reading. Whether a cathartic effect can be expected or not remains open: Lise, for her part, throws away Bill's bag of rice, the foundation of his cleansing diet.

Works Cited


