

Anna Walczuk

Jagiellonian University, Cracow

DIVINE AND HUMAN: GOD IN THE 20TH-CENTURY ENGLISH NOVEL

1. Putting God into words and mimetic tradition in the secular age

There is a widespread tendency, especially prevalent in English literature since the 19th century till the present times, to think of the novel in mimetic terms:¹ as representing man, the world, history and society. The novel seems to be a particularly suitable medium to mirror the conditions of life, socio-cultural changes, impenetrable depths of the human mind and the intricacies of collective and individual memory. Its primary task and its greatest challenge lie in reflecting everything that is visible and observable, all that can be measured, tested or at least guessed by means of subtle instruments of psychological examination and analysis. The medium of the novel has been researched, stretched, revised and reshaped to serve that purpose which can be most naturally achieved through the realistic mode. The same mimetic goal is also inscribed into two literary tendencies predominant in the 20th century: modernism and postmodernism. Modernism, with its preoccupation with epistemological experience of mental reality, and postmodernism, with its quest for some kind of ontological principles on the perceivable surface of life, both contribute to generating narrative fiction which acts as a mirror, reflecting what human beings and their social structures reveal as well as that which human consciousness hides.

Material realism, always subjugated to the rule of subjectivity and relativity, greatly contributed to the process of secularisation of the novel, and in consequence pushed God out of its range of interest and caused a detachment of imaginative writing from preoccupation with the Transcendent and the Sacred where, according to Eliade, things truly acquire their reality: "the *sacred* is equivalent to a *power*, and, in the last analysis, to *reality*" (1957: 12). T.S. Eliot deplores that process in his essay significantly entitled

“Religion and Literature”: “What I wish to affirm is that the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism, that it is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life” (1935: 40). Eliot is deeply convinced that the value of literature cannot be determined solely by aesthetic criteria. Therefore, he postulates what looks like a marriage of imaginative accomplishment with literary merit and religious sense, claiming that “literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint” (31).

Graham Greene voices a similar opinion when in his essay on François Mauriac; he bemoans the loss of religious sense in the novel and mentions in that context Virginia Woolf who seems to be a particularly suitable example for she may be regarded as one of the main exponents of the secular ideology of *Modernism* (1969: 91). *Virginia Woolf takes the attitude of indifference or even hostility to religion when in a letter to her sister Vanessa Bell bitterly complains about the conversion of T.S. Eliot: “I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse seem to me more credible than he is. I mean there is something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God”* (Nicholson – Trautmann 1977: 457–8).

Despite all the tendencies of secular modernity aiming at pushing God out of literary interests, the novel, nevertheless, demonstrates a persisting urge to free itself from the bonds of secularism. Accordingly, it leaves behind what might appear as its prime domain rooted in material and psychological realism and endeavours to reach out towards the metaphysical and transcendent. In doing so it comes closer to poetry, and relies more heavily on the poetic strategies of metaphor, symbol, myth or ambiguity, finding in them a proper means to incorporate the Sacred into its fabric, and to express the inexpressible Divine through its multifarious prose forms. In order to render the paradigms of the transcendent the novel also manoeuvres the narrative into the area of irony and paradox, for they both underlie the formula of life, where the human clashes with the Divine, the temporal coexists with the eternal, and the worldly intertwines with the spiritual. Thus the novel, originally powered by the mimetic impulse, gets involved in the dialogue between the secular and the holy. It becomes an important agent in the dialectic of the opposites as it attempts to do justice to the full scope of the world where, as Mircea Eliade notices, the Sacred, as a wholly valid mode of being, is contiguous with the profane.²

Most of the time, however, with the exception of the so-called sacred texts, such as the narratives of the Bible, the realm of God has been

traditionally reserved for poetry which, even in its narrative form, is more reflective in character and shows more intimate affiliation with the ineffable and the sublime. But the 20th century (and after) manifests a great impetus to blur otherwise recognised boundaries, and to do away with formal distinctions between genres. The tactics and territories of narrative prose often combine with poetry in an urge to render the unutterable. Not surprisingly, when the novel is dedicated to the task of rendering the Sacred, and at the same time dissatisfied with its proper means of expression, it enters into the province of poetry.³ Moreover, when among secular tendencies of the times it searches for God's presence in the world of human affairs and listens to the reverberations of the Divine in the midst of worldly profane sounds, paradoxically, it becomes a peculiar sacred text for the ungodly present centuries.

The following discussion proposes to look closer at three examples of the 20th century English fiction in order to analyse the way how it tries to come to grips with the exceedingly difficult task of embedding God into imaginative narrative or, in other words, inscribing the Sacred into the body, i.e. form and content, of the novel. The three case studies of novels which will be taken under scrutiny are: G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908), Muriel Spark's *The Comforters* (1957) and C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces* (1956). The order in which they are presented is not intended to be strictly chronological, but rather to reflect a certain direction, or shape, in the English literary history of the 20th century. Gilbert Keith Chesterton and Muriel Spark embody the opposite poles in twentieth-century English literature: the non-modern or, considering Chesterton's hostility to modernism, even anti-modern tendency of the first decades of the century, on the one hand, and the post-modern, but rooted in and nourished by modernism, inclination of the second half of the century, on the other hand. Clive Staples Lewis, in turn, represents what may be regarded as ideologically neutral position of story-telling and adhering to the archetype of narrative as such, which falls back upon inexhaustible resources and potential of myth. The three novelists in question were all gifted with what might be described as a religious sense, and a religious dimension played an important role in their lives as all of them were converts: G.K. Chesterton and Muriel Spark to Roman Catholicism, and C.S. Lewis to Anglo-Catholicism.

2. Religious issues and rendition of the Sacred in the novel

At the beginning, it is necessary to make an important distinction: writing God into narrative texts of imaginative literature and writing what is

sometimes labelled as Catholic, or more broadly, Christian novel, are two different things. Sometimes these concepts may overlap, but by no means should be treated as homogenous or identical.

Graham Greene, for example, in some of his novels, unanimously termed as Catholic and classified under the category which may be provisionally called 'religion in imaginative literature', addresses some of crucial issues of Christian religion, especially Roman Catholicism, such as God's real presence or the reality and active power of sacraments, as well as some essential moral questions, such as sin, crime, lie, adultery and sacrilege. The whisky priest in the *Power and the Glory*, in spite of all his mediocrity, deficiency and despicable behaviour, is a dignified bearer and defender of priesthood. Scobie, in *The Heart of the Matter*, in spite of the heavy weight of his mortal sin of the sacrilegious communion and premeditated suicide entailing eternal damnation, is still a faithful Christian loving God and man. Though such novels bring the awareness of God into the art of fiction and certainly pose an invitation to discuss and reflect upon central questions of religious doctrine and morality, it seems that it is not their foremost objective to write God into the structure, imagery, tone and voice of the novel.

Even *The End of the Affair*, where Sarah experiences a mystical encounter with God, which radically changes her life, does not present any attempt to really render the Sacred. God in *The End of the Affair* is portrayed as a suppressed character who is merely the addressee of Sarah's letters. And the central question of the novel concerning divine intervention in saving the life of Bendrix in response to Sarah's ardent prayer, remains unresolved, for Providence and divine grace in the human world merge with pure operation of coincidence. Although the novel touches upon the question of miracle which is the prerogative of the Divine, its main focus is still upon human beings and their relation to God, rather than upon God as such, with all the mystery and inexpressibility encompassing the Deity.

Undoubtedly the specific historical context of English literature justifies the use of the term "Catholic novel" and makes that term remarkably significant because it underscores the relationship of literary art to Christianity in general, and to the Roman Catholic Church and religious doctrine in particular. Definitions of Christian/Catholic literature are neither easy, nor unequivocal, but basically refer to declared Faith of the author and thematic content of the *oeuvre* which is expected to be related to the professed religion. Hence religious faith, which is always a faith in God, becomes the hallmark of a considerable body of imaginative works and related literary criticism termed as Christian or Catholic.⁴ But although the adjective Christian/Catholic, when it is applied to the novel, may be revealing, it also has its shortcomings. On closer examination it turns out that the term is inadequate to cover a much broader scope of fiction which is

not directly concerned with issues of doctrine or morality, but it nevertheless narrates the presence of the Divine, and represents sacred time and space in the profane world which has fallen victim of impoverishing processes of secularisation.

3. God in the distorting mirror of the grotesque

The novel which writes the sense of God into the narrative addressing *mysterium tremendum* of the God Who Is the essence of all Being, and does it without any overt framing of religious allegiance, is Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*. Although it seems unlikely from a casual glance at its plot, the novel was inspired by a strong autobiographical impulse. It is noteworthy that Chesterton wrote *The Man Who Was Thursday*, subtitled *A Nightmare*, as a reaction to a personal crisis which, in his own words, was connected with all the maladies of modernity, involving different forms of agnosticism, scepticism, nihilism and solipsism. It is also worth stressing that the novel was written in keeping with Chesterton's strongest conviction that literary art creates a miniature or a working model of the universe: "Art means diminution. [...] Art exists solely in order to create a miniature universe, a working model of the universe, a toy universe which we can play with as a child plays with a toy theatre" (1953: 148). Chesterton's toy universe of fiction reflects and intimates the universe where the existential drama of the human and the Divine is taking place. The novelist as a maker of such miniature universe presupposes the existence of a sacred space which is invested with the presence of God, and accordingly he attempts to render it by means of literary art. In *The Man Who Was Thursday* Chesterton ventures to do precisely that which in his essay "The Middleman in Poetry" he sums up as the essence of artistic creativity and the main function of literature:

The poet, like the priest, should bear the ancient title of the builder of the bridge. His claim is exactly that he can really cross the chasm between the world of the unspoken and seemingly unspeakable truths to the world of spoken words. His triumph is when the bridge is completed and the word is spoken; above all when it is heard (1932: 209).

In *The Man Who Was Thursday* such bridge is provided by a dream convention used as a framing device. The novel, which professes to follow the pattern of a nightmare, can be also read as an elaborate grotesque, and on the imaginative plane it functions in the same way, similar to medieval gargoyles, which magnify the ugliness and highlight the deformity of the profane in order to point and lead to the invisible and the Sacred. The subtitle of the novel captures the nightmarish ambience of the world at the

beginning of the 20th century, where nothing is what it seems or pretends to be; chaos and confusion define the nature of existence, and nowhere can one find clear and objective points of reference. The world portrayed lives in the shadow of some undefined but dangerous conspiracy that presents a serious threat to civilisation as it intends to install the rule of anarchy and to abolish “all those arbitrary distinctions of vice and virtue, honour and treachery,” and eventually it means “[t]o abolish God!” (23). The mood and the setting of the novel provide a perfect description of what Eliade perceives as the profane, and which points to all those compartments of life space, where everything is meaningless because it is detached from the transcendent Sacred that contains all reality and houses all meaning.

That meaning, as the narrative gradually discloses, gets compressed into the character of Sunday, the President of the Central Anarchist Council and the chief officer of the Secret Police Service in one person, who, in the midst of general unknowing, is posited as the only one to provide explanation. But at the same time, paradoxically, Sunday is also the greatest enigma and one of the most puzzling actors in the evolving dream, in whom converge all the opposites and contradictions which the novel presents. However, in keeping with the general character of nightmare, that convergence does not produce elucidation, but on the contrary, it increases mystification.

The plot of the novel mostly consists of a chase, running away and a number of surrealist adventures of seven members of the Central Anarchist Council who, for reasons of security, are called by the names of the days of the week. In the end all the anarchists turn out to be detectives, under secret command of Sunday, the chief police officer. The entire narrative is underpinned by what Chesterton calls “the sacramental principle” (1953: 69) that underscores the spiritual significance of all visible reality, which not only represents the supernatural, but, more importantly, contains it in the same way as the sign of the sacrament contains the reality which it signifies. Such belief in the sacramental nature of being links *The Man Who Was Thursday* with Chesterton’s juvenile short story “A Picture of Tuesday,” a literary exercise of the budding writer who moves an ordinary experience of successive weekdays onto a transcendent plane, and proposes to look upon the seven days of the week as “the colossal epic of creation.”⁵

The tendency started in the youthful work is continued in Chesterton’s mature fiction, and so the adventures of the conspirators / detectives become an epic of human quest for the meaning of everything, which in effect is the quest for the Sacred that contains all meaning. *The Man Who Was Thursday* through dream convention and with the instruments of the grotesque probes into the very heart of Being which includes the Divine. The novel portrays existence, where the Sacred and the profane lie side by side, or even overlap. It is not accidental that the most insightful detective, Syme, or the eponymous

Thursday, who next to the enigmatic Sunday is the main character in the novel, is a poet. It is a suggestive hint about literary art which is closest to grasping and representing the sense of the transcendent in obscure and complicated paradigms of worldly affairs.

Even when the confused identities are finally revealed and most of the tangled threads of the plot get disentangled, still the question about meaning remains unresolved because at the heart of it lies the mystery of Sunday.

But above all these matters of detail which could be explained rose the central mountain of the matter that they could not explain. What did it all mean? If they were all harmless officers, what was Sunday? If he had not seized the world, what on earth had he been up to? (151).

And so if the narrative, or the whole series of most fantastic and uncanny adventures, generate or imply any meaning, it becomes obvious that the meaning of everything is dependent upon the meaning of Sunday, just as the biblical consecutive days of Creation can be put in the proper perspective only when they are related to the seventh day of rest. The sense of the profound dependence of all meaning upon the meaning of Sunday is reflected in the conversation of the detectives going to a meeting with the enigmatic President:

'This is more cheerful,' said Dr Bull; 'we are six men going to ask one man what he means.' 'I think it is a bit queerer than that,' said Syme. 'I think it is six men going to ask one man what they mean' (153).

The question about meaning is intertwined in the plot of the novel and highlights the entire pursuit of Sunday. When the Secretary of the Anarchist Council spells it out, it resounds with existential overtones of the mankind's perennial query seeking understanding of human plight spanned between the absurd and the holy.

We have come to know what all this means. Who are you? What are you? Why did you get us all here? Do you know who and what we are? Are you a half-witted man playing the conspirator, or are you a clever man playing the fool? Answer me, I tell you (154).

The farcical adventures reach their climax in the dancing masquerade in Sunday's garden, where all common objects and living creatures reveal their true nature which is most intimately connected with their spiritual reality. So paradoxically, in the fancy dress ball the costume and disguise do not conceal, but rather expose and best express the true selves: "If Syme had been able to see himself, he would have realized that he, too, seemed to be for the first time himself and no one else" (176). The masquerade, however, does not

disclose the true character of Sunday, and it does not show his true face. What is more, in the nightmarish patterning of the novel Sunday is presented as if he were faceless, for it is his “broad back” (25) that is continually put in the foreground of the narrative. The first impression of Sunday which Syme gets when he goes to breakfast with the secret council of anarchists is a glimpse of Sunday’s back:

As Syme continued to stare at them, he saw something that he had not seen before. He had not seen it literally because it was too large to see. At the nearest end of the balcony, blocking up a great part of the perspective, was the back of a great mountain of man! When Syme had seen him, his first thought was that the weight of him must break down the balcony of stone [...] His head, crowned with white hair, as seen from behind looked bigger than a head ought to be. [...] He was enlarged terribly to scale; and this sense of size was so staggering, that when Syme saw him all the other figures seemed suddenly to dwindle and become dwarfish (55).

The philosophical and conceptual gloss to the artistic rendition of the character of Sunday can be found in Chesterton’s book on a Victorian symbolist painter and sculptor, George Frederick Watts, where Chesterton speaks of the back as “the most awful and mysterious thing in the universe: [something that] touches the oldest nerve of awe,” and he further alludes to “the dark scriptures of a nomad people” that describe Moses’ encounter with “the immense Creator of all things” who shows his back to the prophet, but forbids to look at his face (see Chesterton 1904: 136–9). The heightened poetic sensitivity of Syme helps him to see the world in terms of a curious interplay of the back side of things hiding their true face.

‘Listen to me,’ cried Syme with extraordinary emphasis. ‘Shall I tell you the secret of the whole world? It is that we have known only the back of the world. We see everything from behind, and it looks brutal. That is not a tree, but the back of a tree. That is not a cloud, but the back of a cloud. Cannot you see that everything is stooping and hiding a face? If we could only get round in front –’ (170).

Sunday is always seen in semidarkness, “I am the man in the dark room” (155), and his appearance is difficult to describe because he is full of mutually contradictory characteristics:

[...] he was so fat and so light. Just like a balloon. We always think of fat people as heavy, but he could have danced against a sylph. [...] Moderate strength is shown in violence, supreme strength in levity. It was like the old speculation – what would happen if an elephant could leap up in the sky like a grasshopper? (165).

The detectives' perception of Sunday is blurred to the effect that the inscrutable President is portrayed as having no particular features, as if the particular were removed to make room for something that transcends all specific distinctions:

Each man of you finds Sunday quite different, yet each man of you can only find one thing to compare him to – the universe itself. [...] I think of Sunday as I think of the whole world (168).

There is something terrifying, but at the same time something likeable about Sunday, as one of the chasers puts it:

I can't help liking old Sunday. No, it's not admiration of force, or any silly thing like that. There is a kind of gaiety in the thing, as if he were bursting with some good news. Haven't you sometimes felt it on a spring day? I never read the Bible myself, but that part they laugh at is literal truth, "Why leap ye, ye high hills?" The hills do leap – at least, they try to [...] Why do I like Sunday? [...] how can I tell you? [...] because he's such a bounder (165).

There is no clear one-to-one allegorical correspondence between Sunday and God. However, there are too many analogies and similarities between the sense of the Divine, especially arising from the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the character of the enigmatic President of the Anarchists and chief Police Officer simultaneously, to be ignored, or even completely discarded.⁶ Sunday definitely possesses some of the divine attributes like omniscience and omnipotence. The power and the capital he holds make the detectives speak of "Sunday's universe" (125). He reads through Syme who, before the eyes of the President is "as if he were made of glass" (62). Similarly, in the presence of the President the six detectives feel "as if they were watched out of heaven by a hundred eyes" (153). When Sunday takes the central seat at the fancy dress ball, the faces of the dancers change as if "heaven had opened behind his head" (178). Sometimes Sunday speaks with the playfulness of a jester and plays tricks on confounded detectives, as when he drops for them apparently silly and nonsensical messages. At other times the President adopts the solemnity of biblical diction: "who am I to quarrel with the wild fruits upon the Tree of Life?" (154). All that is perfectly consistent with the grotesque convention which intentionally deforms and mixes the preposterous with the sublime. And when eventually Sunday speaks out to answer all questions and doubts, he sounds like the Old Testament God from the Book of Job, condescending to explain to the innocent sufferer something that is beyond cognitive faculties of a human being, and at the same time joking good-heartedly about man's ignorance and limitations.

'What am I?' roared the President, and he rose slowly to an incredible height, like some enormous wave about to arch above them and break. 'You want to know what I am, do you? Bull you are a man of science. Grub in the roots of those trees and find out the truth about them. Syme, you are a poet. Stare at those morning clouds. But I tell you this, that you will have found out the truth of the last tree and the topmost cloud before the truth about me. You will understand the sea, and I shall be still a riddle; you shall know what the stars are, and not know what I am. Since the beginning of the world all men have hunted me like a wolf – kings and sages, and poets and law-givers, all the churches, and all the philosophers. But I have never been caught yet, and the skies will fall in the time I turn to bay. I have given them a good run for their money, and I will now' (154–5).

Although Sunday is not an allegorical image of God, he implies Being in which God is present. And into the world of chaos, doubt and destructive pessimism, he brings joy and hope. He enacts the sacramental nature of existence saturated with a religious sense, where the commonplace is very close to the numinous, and where the profane is redeemed by the Sacred. The juxtaposition of the Sacred and the profane in the novel is reflected in the oxymoronic imagery which underlies its artistic design. Already at the beginning Syme is invited to a poorly looking "obscure public house" (19), where he is royally treated to lobster and champagne. Later he is shown into a room "the abrupt blackness of which startled him like a blaze of light" (48).

The dream vision culminates in what seems to be the merging of the back with the face. The climax reinforces earlier biblical overtones, and it points to a warped connection between Sunday and the Deity, deformed by the mode of the grotesque:

the great face grew to an awful size, grew larger than the colossal mask of Memnon, which had made him scream as a child. It grew larger and larger, filling the whole sky; then everything went black. Only in the blackness before it entirely destroyed his brain he seemed to hear a distant voice saying a commonplace text that he had heard somewhere, 'Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?' (183).

When Syme wakes up, his mental state contradicts the usual after-effects of a nightmare. On the contrary, it approximates the radically different state of mystical elation.

Syme could only feel an unnatural buoyancy in his body and a crystal simplicity in his mind that seemed to be superior to everything that he said or did. He felt he was in possession of some impossible good news, which made every other thing a triviality, but an adorable triviality (184).

Thus Sunday, viewed from a vantage point of Syme's "nightmare" becomes a literary grotesque approximation of God who speaks from the Bible, and whose baffling presence is continually felt in the world, and experienced in the life of the individual.

4. God in the authorial perspective constructing human narratives

The intimation of God's presence in the narrative of human life as well as its literary portrayal figure out conspicuously in Muriel Spark's first novel, *The Comforters* (1957). Like in the case of Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, a strong autobiographical impulse also lies behind *The Comforters*. It seems that in its theme and general artistic design the novel reflects and, in a sense, also accounts for two important biographical facts in Muriel Spark's life. Firstly, it marks her debut as a novelist, in spite of an earlier reserve, and even distrust of the genre of the novel. It is remarkable that for quite a long time the novel was not Muriel Spark's most esteemed genre. In an interview given to Philip Toynbee she speaks of the superiority of poetry as the "best way of saying things" (1971: 73-4). Spark retains that special feeling for poetry all throughout her life, and in effect she remains a poet in her novelistic art, admitting in her autobiography that "the novel as an art form [is] essentially a variation of a poem" (1992: 206). Secondly, the writing of *The Comforters* coincided with Spark's conversion to Roman Catholicism:⁷ an important step she took, no less for introducing a religious dimension into personal life than in view of finding her proper identity as an artist. In a short autobiographical piece, published five years after her conversion, she explicitly acknowledges the profound link between her acceptance of the religious viewpoint and her writing fiction: "I think there is a connection between my writing and my conversion, but I don't want to be too dogmatic about it. Certainly all my best work has come since then [...] I find I speak far more with my own voice as a Catholic and I think I could prove it with my stuff" (see Spark 1961: 58-63).

The religious sense, or in other words the awareness of the Sacred, is usually contiguous, if not always analogous, with the perception of God in the experienced reality and in the observable world. For Muriel Spark, even before her embracing Faith in the form of Roman Catholicism, such perception assumes the shape of a quest and desire for truth, as opposed to all kinds of distortion, falsity and illusion. Consequently Muriel Spark looks upon fiction as a path that leads to truth. Already at the beginning of her writing career she professes her interest in absolute truth and declares, accordingly, that lies in fiction can be used as a means of reaching truth. Furthermore she admits that such lies can be treated as an "imaginative

extension of the truth” (see Kermode 1963: 61–82). Such views form her creed, and will remain one of the buttresses of her artistic activity as a fully-fledged novelist. Muriel Spark cogently stresses both her search for truth and her being a Catholic. Therefore it is consistent with her ideological stance that God, as the absolute repository of all values, including truth, cannot be left out of her fictitious world, but must be put into words and incorporated into the body of the novel.

The protagonist of *The Comforters*, Caroline Rose, bears a close resemblance to Muriel Spark herself. Like the author of the novel, Caroline is a young woman writer who is writing a book on twentieth-century literature, significantly entitled “Form in the Modern Novel”. She is also a recent Roman Catholic convert who has been suffering from a mild nervous disorder. While working on her book Caroline begins to hear strange and inexplicable sounds of a typewriter and gradually realises that another author is simultaneously typing the story of her own life. The entire plot of *The Comforters* is organised around that central dialectic between the human agent, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the transcendent presence of the mysterious typist who is relentlessly writing the script of the human writer’s life: “as if a writer on another plane of existence was writing a story about us” (63). Such dialectic gives rise to many tensions, so the whole array of emotional attitudes, ranging from anxiety to open revolt, is evoked in the narrative: they are not unlike those found in the Bible when a human being is confronted with the overpowering and puzzling presence of God.

Those emotions are lodged in the figure of the woman writer who has a double function in the novel: she lives her own ‘real’ life within the portrayed world of Sparkian fiction, and at the same time, she is a character written into somebody else’s script and, in consequence, is overwhelmed with “this fabulous idea of themselves and their friends being used as characters in a novel” (95). Observing her own life as it runs according to what looks like a premeditated design of the disturbing typing voice, Caroline never ceases to assert her own personal integrity and freedom for she does not want to be part of the mysterious typist’s scenario.

I refuse to have my thoughts and actions controlled by some unknown, possibly sinister being. I intend to subject him to reason. I happen to be a Christian. [...] I won’t be involved in this fictional plot if I can help it. In fact, I’d like to spoil it. If I had my way I’d hold up the action of the novel. [...] I intend to stand aside and see if the novel has any real form apart from this artificial plot. I happen to be a Christian (105).

It is worthwhile to note how many times in the relatively short passage Caroline refers to her being a Christian, as if the supposed rationality of

belief were a safeguard against the incomprehensible and inscrutable transcendent that impinges upon the profane act of living one's life or writing a book. It is also significant to see how many Catholics in Muriel Spark's fictitious world do not possess the slightest religious sense: Georgina Hogg, "that [obnoxious] gargoyle" (156) may serve as an example.

In Muriel Spark's novels it is usually difficult to number and clearly define a specific range of themes, which proves the richness and enormous potential of her novelistic art, and *The Comforters* well demonstrate that quality of Sparkian fiction. *The Comforters* have been often read as a self-reflexive novel about writing fiction. Its metafictional inclination has encouraged readers and critics to speculate about God-like position of the omniscient and omnipotent author with regard to the created world of text, and contemplate the freedom of fictitious character that may either contest or succumb to the authorial control.⁸ However, it may be also read as a novel which from the vantage point of postmodernism addresses a religious question of God and divine presence in people's lives.

Furthermore *The Comforters*, as the novel both about writing a novel and about the disembodied typing voice which accompanies?/reflects?/controls?/directs? the life of the main character, in a provocative way addresses one of the main issues of postmodernism, namely its refusal to accept something outside or beyond the text, and its rejection of any external referents to the string of words on page. If postmodernism eliminates the transcendent dimension from the realm of experience and, in consequence, from the domain of fiction, the mysterious typing voice in *The Comforters* forcefully challenges such assumption. Caroline is perfectly sane and lucid, yet she keeps hearing the disturbing sound of the typewriter and engages in a dialogue of internal strife with the mysterious writer who operates on "another plane of existence" (63).

Like Chesterton's Sunday, the disembodied typing voice in Spark's novel possesses divine attributes and God-like prerogatives, such as omniscience, or being simultaneously involved in and detached from human life. That is why Caroline's attempts to oppose the alien script's intrusion upon the course of events are futile and doomed to failure. Moreover the mysterious plotter seems to mock Caroline, so when she desperately tries to exert full control over her life and ignore the typist's scenario, she falls victim of her own efforts to uphold her freedom and independence. Before the car crash, which later causes much of mental and physical pain: "being written into a novel was painful" (181), Caroline decides to go by train in order to outwit the phantom author in whose narrative she goes by car. However, eventually she acts according to the unsettling typescript, and chooses to go by car with her fiancé Laurence. Interestingly, the reason for her choice is her religious duty as a Catholic to attend a Mass on a holiday of obligation.

It was very well for Caroline to hold out what she wanted and what she didn't want in the way of a plot. All very well for her to resolve upon holding up the action. Easy enough for her to criticise. Laurence speeded up and touched seventy before they skidded and crashed (106).

The Comforters through the metafictional implications and by means of various artistic strategies, such as e.g. irony, convey a recognition of the interplay between different planes of being: in Eliade's terminology they would be called the profane and the Sacred; in the philosophical idiom – the material and metaphysical; in the language of religion – human and Divine. Similarly to *The Man Who Was Thursday* in Muriel Spark's novel things are not what they appear, or they represent more than catches the eye. Laurence's grandmother, Louisa Jepp, is not merely an elderly pensioner, but also a powerful leader of a gang of diamond robbers. Her guests and friends alike hide their true identities and occupations under misleading guises.

Mr Webster with his white hair, white moustache and dark nautical jacket is not easy to identify with his early-morning appearance – the tradesman in a sandy-brown overall who calls with the bread (18).

The double status of things, which often assumes the form of a discrepancy between reality and appearance, is introduced already in the title of the novel and is sustained in the narrative with a slight tinge of irony. The "comforters" evoke the biblical friends and well-wishers from the *Book of Job* who do everything but bring comfort. Undoubtedly the *Book of Job* had a great appeal for Muriel Spark, as demonstrated by *The Only Problem* (1984), the novel explicitly designed upon the paradigm of Job's predicament. The allusion to the *Book of Job* also has a deeper significance, for it points to Job's discourse with God, and his anxious endeavour to understand the unfathomable decrees of the Deity. And the Divine, as also suggested by the speeches of Chesterton's Sunday, can only be hinted at, but by no means can be contained within the closures of narrow realism and rigidity of human reasoning.

Chesterton resorts to surrealist dream convention to present a larger concept of reality that would encompass God. Muriel Spark does a similar thing making use of various implications of metafiction and turning to the supernatural to demonstrate her scorn for "stark" realism which in her fiction often gets subjected to the process of artistic subversion. In a 1987 interview Spark rejects the popular idea of realism on the grounds that it does not mean 'the real'. When asked about the type of novels she writes, Spark answers: "It's certainly not realistic, you would never say that they were

realistic novels, although I do try to get an accurate background. Realism has come to mean something rather stark, anyway it's a category of literature that doesn't really mean 'the real'" (Frankel 1987: 443–57). Hence most of her novels abound in unrealistic characters and supernatural events. For instance, Mrs Georgina Hogg keeps disappearing in an inexplicable way, be it from the back seat of Lady Manders's car or from her own room.

Muriel Spark conceives of reality as something richer and more complex than mere surface and façade of phenomena. Her conception of truth is similar in that it involves different planes of cognition and does not offer simple solutions. Therefore, in *The Comforters* the mysterious presence of the disembodied author and his role in Caroline's life remain an unresolved puzzle. Nevertheless the novel gets closer to absolute truth because it postulates a broader notion of truth, comprising more than that which is strictly verifiable. It seems that for Spark, at least in her early novels, truth lies somewhere in the region of the Sacred, and it can be approached only if intellectual faculties are accompanied by faith which presupposes the existence of God.

5. God revealed through myth as the archetypal narrative

The detectives in Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* desperately try to find out "what all this means" (154), and come across the enigma of Sunday. Caroline in *The Comforters* is intrigued by the disembodied author who is typing the script of her life, and gradually comes to accept the fact that the typing voice is not a delusion but belongs to "another plane of existence" (63), and manifests God-like attributes. The heroine of C.S. Lewis's novel defies the gods as she seeks understanding of the ways in which the Divine deals with the human.

C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces* was rather underestimated by many of his critics, though it occupied a very special position for Lewis himself. Peter Schakel calls it Lewis's "fictional autobiography" because it "lived in the author's mind" since his undergraduate years, and in a sense Lewis "worked at it most of his life" (see Schakel 1984: 160). The novel is subtitled "A Myth Retold", for it represents a 20th century re-working of the ancient story of Cupid and Psyche, derived from *Metamorphoses* by a late Latin writer, Apuleius. At this point it should be emphasized that for Lewis, like for Chesterton, myth offers all that which Muriel Spark finds in the lies of fiction, i.e. the surest and most comprehensive way to grasp the truth about reality. Accordingly, he perceives myths as special kind of stories, anchored in absolute truth and ultimately pointing to the transcendent. Lewis sees in them "a real, though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human

imagination" (1947: 161), and therefore a foretaste of the Sacred which is positioned next to the profane.

What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always about something, but reality is that about which truth is), and, therefore, every myth becomes father of innumerable truths on the abstract level. Myth is the mountain whence all the different streams arise which become truths down here in the valley; in hac valle abstractionis (Lewis 1971: 42).

In his reworking of the ancient myth, however, Lewis introduces some very important alterations to the old story. First of all, in the foreground of his narrative, instead of Psyche, he puts her ugly and elder sister Orual, who is eventually made the Queen of Glome. Orual as a character in the story, or a figure in the myth, is given great depth and complexity. She is presented as an ugly woman capable of intense feeling, passionately dedicated to her sister, a loyal follower of her Greek teacher, the slave nicknamed Fox, and his perfect disciple whose intellectual abilities very soon equal those of her mentor. She is also a daring rebel against Ungit, the faceless goddess of the land and the embodiment of all the enigmas of the Divine and the supernatural. In *Till We Have Faces* Orual becomes the narrator not only of the story of Psyche, but also of her own difficult relationship with her younger sister, where adoring love mixes with egoism, and her readiness to sacrifice everything for the sake of Psyche goes hand in hand with destructive possessiveness and emotional tyranny.

Secondly, in Lewis's retelling of the myth Orual, apart from being the protagonist and the focalizer of the story, is also significantly represented as the author of a book. The writing of the book underlies the entire narrative providing a conceptual foundation for the novel, and the book itself functions metonymically in the sense of literary art. Additionally, the closing paragraph hints at Orual's book as a sacred text, which the High Priest of Glome consigns to a trustworthy traveller to be taken to Greece. Orual begins to write her book already as an old woman who has much achieved and experienced in life. She is by then free from the fear of the anger of gods and, therefore, her crucial motive for writing the book is to state her case against the gods, which she does boldly and openly: "The case against them should be written" (254).

Orual's book is meant as an audacious complaint against the divine unfairness. She accuses the gods of depriving her of everything she cherished, and giving nothing instead, not even a small sign to guide her amidst confusion. She blames the gods for staying in darkness, talking to mortals only in riddles and refusing to give clear answers to their existential doubts and queries. There is a certain burning urgency in Orual's determination to

put her case in words and present it as a book of accusation and protest against the offensive silence and utter obscurity of the Divine. It becomes obvious that she cannot find peace until she has written her charge against the gods: "I was with book, as a woman is with child" (256). This simile constitutes one of the most significant symbolic figures organising the discourse of the novel. Another is to be found at the end of the narrative, when Orual enters the world of visions where she is called before the judge on the supernatural plane, or what Caroline Rose, Muriel Spark's *alter ego*, names "another plane of existence" (63), and there she is made to read her charge. But before she begins, she has been stripped of all her clothes and the veil she has been wearing for all her mature life has been torn off her face. So she stands there, before the divine authority, completely naked, holding only her written scroll: "No thread to cover me, no bowl in my hand to hold the water of death; only my book" (300). The last phrase: "only my book," deserves special emphasis.

The book mostly concerns putting into words her case against the gods. Orual, however, does not lose from sight the reader and witness of her spelled out grievance, and so she pleads desperately: "And now, you who read, give judgement" (142), "You, who read my book, judge" (182). Furthermore she identifies the reader of her profound confession and her bold address to the gods as the Greek: "You, the Greek for whom I write" (228). Therefore the Greek becomes another significant metonymy in the novel. The target "Greek" corresponds to all the world of learning, philosophy, rationality; it represents the reliance on logic and universal laws, which can be studied, as well as natural causes, which can be explained. The Fox, Orual's mentor and foster father, is Greek by origin and personifies the Greek dimension in Orual's life.

But Orual is torn between two conflicting worlds. One world comprises the lucid, transparent and well ordered metaphorical Greeklands. It is there that the Fox nourishes her with knowledge, feeds her on words, teaches her how to make trim sentences and speaks of the lies of poets. The other world is her native kingdom of Glome, the land which comes under the reign of Ungit, the mysterious and powerful goddess without a face that embodies not only primitive belief, but also the supernatural dimension in human life which evades rational qualifications. It stands for all those secret layers which cannot be accommodated within the plain paradigm of natural, verifiable and quantifiable phenomena. And so Orual struggles on the boundary of the two adjacent but at the same time interlocking realms: the transparent profane of the Greek, and the opaque Sacred of Glome.

When she writes her book Orual wants to be honest: "in this book I must hide none of my shames and follies" (189). Consequently, she reveals in writing things which she hides even from her closest friends. For example, she

records in her book what she withholds from Bardia, her faithful servant who leads and accompanies her to the Tree, where Psyche was tied up and left as the Great Offering, namely that she actually got some glimpses of Psyche's invisible palace, in other words that she got some inklings of the truth Psyche was telling. Without doubt Orual is to some extent honest in her narrative. But her scope of vision and her scope of knowledge, also self-knowledge, are limited, and while she wants to be absolutely sincere in her writing, she cannot be completely truthful because she does not see the whole truth, both about the world in which she lives and about herself.

However, the very process of writing begins to work a change in Orual: it opens up her eyes and broadens her understanding. Neither the Fox, with his logic, rationality and Greek learning, nor Bardia, with his crude belief in Ungit and unconditioned acceptance of the obscure realm of the gods of Glome, can assist her in the attainment of understanding. Orual is aware that "[w]hat began the change was the very writing itself" (263). So writing itself, generating the book, mediates between the two worlds which are difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to reconcile. But, Orual soon realises that the change, which the writing of the book has triggered off, is only the beginning of a much profounder and more fundamental process. She sees it in terms of a preparation for "the gods' surgery" (263). Through her book Orual becomes like Psyche, when the latter was tied to the Tree of the Great Offering and entered into the strange intercourse with her lover-god. "And now those divine Surgeons had me tied down and were at work" (276). "They used my own pen to probe my wound" (263).

The divine "surgery" of which Orual speaks is reflected in the structure of the novel that consists of two parts of strikingly unequal length. The first part being much longer than the second represents what Orual intends to be her entire book of complaint against the gods. Significantly, it ends on the note of contemptuous resignation when Orual utters what seems to be a rhetorical question: "they have no answer?" (259). However, Orual is pressed to add a kind of postscript to her book, which she does in the second part, where she continues the motif of the gods' answer. The appendix is different not only in length, but also in character. The border line between evanescent vision and stark reality gets blurred, and Orual frequently "sinks" into deep thought (284) or "walks" into visions (294): "I walked into the vision with my bodily eyes wide open" (296). In the postscript to her book she cannot easily tell waking life from a dream; neither can she say with any certainty which is more revealing. Nevertheless she already knows that "things that are shown only to one may be spears and waterspouts of truth from the very depth of truth" (288-9).

Orual's visions do more than all the sacred stories she has heard. They show things before which the Fox's erudite eloquence appears only as a mere

“prattle of maxims” (306). When Orual, holding her book, confronts the judge and reads her complaint, the convergence of the author with the reader takes place. At the end Orual hears the question: “Are you answered?” to which she responds in the unswerving affirmative “Yes” (304). Subsequently, the last section of the postscript opens with Orual’s clarification: “The complaint was the answer” (305). In the postscript Orual’s thirst for understanding is satisfied. She gets nearer not only to the ultimate closing of her book, which corresponds with her approaching death, but also to grasping truth and reality which she has been seeking all her life. She finishes her book at the moment when she is dying, and her final words represent an epiphany that communicates the fullness of being and the finding of the Divine:

I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice? Only words, words; to be led out to battle against other words. Long did I hate you, long did I fear you. I might (320).

In the closing sentence of her book Orual, at once the author and the reader, no longer speaks of “the gods,” but changes her idiom and refers to “Lord”, a term much more personal and evocative of Judeo-Christian connotations. In the epiphany experienced in the process of writing, Orual not only regains her true naked face, but above all sees another face: the face of the god of the mountain whom Psyche found much earlier. The dash which winds up Orual’s book represents the silence where all meaning gets compressed. It is the silence which conceals Orual’s encounter with the Divine that cannot be easily accommodated in the domain of words, nevertheless can be approached through the medium of the book which epitomizes literary narrative art.

The characters from G.K. Chesterton’s, Muriel Spark’s and C.S. Lewis’s novels have much in common: Syme is a poet, Caroline Rose is a novel writer, Orual is the author of the autobiography spelling out human complaint against the gods. All the three of them grope for meaning and seek understanding. In the course of that process they have to come to grips with the transcendent and as the result get some glimpses of the Divine. The ending of *Till We Have Faces*, where Orual’s writing gets cut in the middle of a sentence, is representative of the artistic design of *The Man Who Was Thursday* and *The Comforters*. None of them cannot be rounded off with an elucidating phrase closed by a full stop because they are like an open bridge that takes the author and the reader to the Sacred space inhabited by the Divine that sustains all the profane spaces of human life.

NOTES

¹ When David Lodge, giving a diagnosis of the state of the English novel, envisages the novel at the "crossroads", thus suggesting a potential of different courses which its development may take, in reality he only confirms the general view that English fiction is heavily inclined to material and psychological realism (Lodge 1971).

² See Mircea Eliade (1957: 14–15): "The reader will very soon realize that *sacred* and *profane* are two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of history. These modes of being in the world are not of concern only to the history of religions or to sociology; they are not the object only of historical, sociological, or ethnological study. In the last analysis, the *sacred* and *profane* modes of being depend upon the different positions that man has conquered in the cosmos; hence they are of concern both to the philosopher and to anyone seeking to discover the possible dimensions of human existence."

³ E.g. C.S. Lewis's *Perelandra* (one of the novels composing the so-called cosmic or interplanetary trilogy) can be treated as a reworking of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Thematically it is a reversal of Milton's epic poem as it represents a poeticised prose narrative of the Fall which on the planet Perelandra, unlike on Earth, gets averted.

⁴ Among the latter we may mention such critical works as: Garry Wills's *Catholic Faith and Fiction* (1972), Thomas Woodman's *Faithful Fictions. The Catholic Novel in British Literature* (1991), or Andrew Greeley's *The Catholic Imagination* (2000).

⁵ See G.K. Chesterton: "A Picture of Tuesday". In: *The Quarto* (An artistic, literary and musical quarterly for 1896, published in London, The Slade School Magazine), 22.

⁶ Such analogies which the novel undoubtedly posits should be taken under critical scrutiny even though G.K. Chesterton in an article published in the *Illustrated London News* (13 June 1936), denies the claim of some critics that Sunday was meant as a serious description of the Deity.

⁷ Muriel Spark was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1954. She acknowledges her conversion to the influence of the writings of John Henry Cardinal Newman.

⁸ For more, see David Lodge's "The Uses and Abuses of Omniscience" (1970), Patricia Stubbs' *Muriel Spark* (1973), and Ruth Whitaker's *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (1982).

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