Angels, Dancers, Mermaids: The Hidden History of Peckham in Muriel Spark's *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*

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Abstract

What led Muriel Spark, who is generally regarded as an author alive to the imaginative possibilities of milieu, to set *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* in a drab south London suburb? This essay examines Spark's acerbic representation of suburban modernity through the lenses of urban, cultural, and folk history. Viewed through these multiple prisms, the homogenized space of Spark's novel reveals a latent disruptive reserve that unexpectedly aligns it with some of the most dynamic aspects of Scottish tradition.

Sandwiched between two of Muriel Spark's major Catholic works, *Memento Mori* (1959) and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960) has attracted considerable critical commentary but little agreement about why Spark foregrounds such an insipid milieu. Edinburgh's dual legacy as scientific centre and site of theological conflict shapes Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, while Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net* shakes philosophical capital from the bohemian mobility of West London. But what imaginative possibilities does a drab South London dormitory suburb offer Spark? With its interchangeable coffee bars, dance halls, and burger joints, Peckham seems to be the quintessential mid-century anonymous place. As Joyce Willis, the pretentious wife of a leading industrialist in the suburb, exasperatedly observes, 'Our friends always get lost finding the way here'.[1] One of the famous urban historians of Spark's day, Sir John Summerson, cited Peckham and the parish of Camberwell to which it belongs as examples of London's endless suburban sprawl: 'Sixty or eighty years ago, it stood for the uttermost depths of mediocrity. More recently it has stood not even for that; it has stood for absolutely nothing, a forgotten shapeless tract of London – from the air, just a part of the interminable London carpet and a part with no decipherable pattern'.[2]

The colourlessness of Peckham has carried over into critical responses to Spark's narrative. Allan Massie (1979) dismissed the novel as 'a relative failure', while as late as 2000, Bryan Cheyette spoke of 'the largely unsung *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*'.[3] Many critics judge the book's characters to be as indistinguishably grey as the suburb they inhabit, although they exempt the central protagonist, the unruly Scottish visitor Dougal Douglas, from such strictures.[4] Indeed, Dougal has proved a bountiful source of interpretations for critics and characters alike. Frank Baldanza (1965) deems him 'reminiscent of the angry-young-man school', while Gerard Carruthers (2008) describes him as 'a Jock on the make'.[5] The allure of Dougal stems in part from the novel itself, where other characters see him as magically responsible for their misfortunes – feuds, broken marriage pledges, murders – all things that 'wouldn't have happened if Dougal Douglas hadn't come here' (7). Yet Spark plants evidence that his internal reputation overrates Dougal's powers. Indeed, no sooner has he taken up residence in the suburb than Dougal acknowledges it as the source of mysterious influences over his own conduct. 'Already it seemed', we read, 'that Peckham brought out something in him that Earl's Court had overlooked' (23).

Few commentators have paid much attention to this crucial sentence, which offers the first sliver of evidence that the space of Peckham, bland as it may appear, contains a latent disruptive reserve. In fact, the more we know about the buried layers of Peckham history, the easier we shall find it to view Spark's Peckham as a paradigmatically modern space. As Michel Foucault points out, such spaces frequently disclose 'in a single real place several sites that are themselves incompatible'.[6] The works of Foucault and Henri Lefebvre, among others, have taught us to attend to such spaces as the source of semi-magical enclaves, known as *heterotopias*, that counter the rationalising momentum of modernity. Set loose on a modernising, mid-century suburb, Dougal, I shall argue, is not so much an organic, internally consistent character as a device for prising open heterotopic space.

As Alan Bold (1986) points out, the novel displays 'the twin influence of tradition and modernism'.[7] We can certainly connect Dougal with a Scottish rural ballad tradition hospitable to devils, shape changers, ruined romances, ritual contests, and mysterious dancers. And undoubtedly, modernism, with its revulsion from suburbia, has left its mark on Spark's presentation of the social mythology of the middle class. Mr Druce, managing director of the firm that employs Dougal as a brainstorming 'arts man',

is a figure cast in the same mould as Eliot's house agent's clerk from 'The Waste Land', on whom 'assurance sits / As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire', while the young clerical worker Dixie Morse is a cousin of the typist who 'lays out food in tins'.[8] Granted, Spark follows the great modernists in presenting occult tradition as a weapon against the homogenising force of modernity. But many critics have rendered unto Dougal what more properly belongs to Peckham, and this is the emphasis I wish to dispute.

For instance, Peter Kemp's *Muriel Spark* (1974) argues that Dougal acts 'like a novelist . . . pushing people into situations where, pressured, their real nature must emerge'.[9] Kemp argues that Dougal's counter-narrative of derision and deception functions as a critique of the ready-made fictions that quasi-scientific managers provide for Peckham's working class. It is certainly possible to follow Kemp in presenting Dougal as a dramaturge, manipulating the other characters as his puppets. But it would be a confident critic today who could detect behind Dougal's scenarios an authorial 'plea for truth and honesty' (121). Rather than pitting a web of self-deluding fictions against some central truth disclosed by an authorial surrogate, I will suggest a different approach. There are two markers that will help in constructing it. In calling her book a *ballad*, Spark aligns it with a genre remote from the bourgeois world of the novel, but hospitable to a stranger universe of unchallengeable requests and inexplicable journeys, where the distinctions between life and death have narrowed and unpredictable violence perpetually invades. The second marker is space. By situating her book in Peckham, and by returning continually to the Rye, a radically open space descended from ancient common land, Spark sets her novel in a suburb that fulfils the demands of the capital, while still retaining some traces of an earlier 'green' world. Like the world of the ballad, Peckham once held uncanny spaces and weird customs that were never subordinated to the demands of industry and the market. Space and genre combine in a movement, I am arguing, that wrenches the narrative away from its mimetic surface, to make Spark's novel into a more disruptive vehicle than it first appears. The hidden spaces of forgotten Peckham and the adaptations Spark makes to the genre of the ballad have the effect of unravelling the anonymous surface of a forgotten suburb. They are Spark's agents of retribution on a society fixated on tools and status.

In tagging her book as a *ballad*, Spark gestures to the plural worlds inhabited by a form that moves fluidly and impartially between court and

country, land and sea, past, present, and future. As we shall see, Victorian and Edwardian histories that celebrated the rise of London as the hub of a commercial Britain tended to limit these lateral possibilities in favour of a linear narrative of progress. For a long time, interpretations of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* have seen the novel as a flawed chronicle of the estrangement that overwhelms the 'affluent' workforce in postwar Britain. What happens to our understanding of this novel if we approach it in terms of these hidden historical spaces and the genre of the ballad?

II

Many students know the suburbanising process by anecdote – the comic testimony of the Grossmiths' Mr Pooter in *Diary of a Nobody* (1892), or the uneasy, rumbling apocalypses in John Davidson's *Ballads and Songs* (1894). We tend to forget how the mind of the countryman could still coexist within the industrial worker, even in the case of a full-blooded *lumpen-proletarian* like Alan Sillitoe's Arthur Seaton, who, in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), operates a lathe from Monday to Friday but casts a fishing rod every Sunday morning. George Orwell's travelling salesman George Bowling in *Coming up for Air* (1939) is another keen fisherman, whose past in Oxfordshire is close enough to the country to make his present in suburban West Bletchley seem unbearable. A year after the appearance of Spark's *Ballad*, H. J. Dyos's pioneering monograph *Victorian Suburb: A Study in the Growth of Camberwell* (1961) takes us into a significantly different world from the colourless suburb described by Summerson. Dyos finds evidence of 'a little eighteenth-century village community of probably about two thousand men, women, and children' inside the parish of Camberwell. However, the agricultural produce that initially allowed the members of that community to earn an independent living spelt the end of the village as an autonomous unit. Soon Peckham became enlisted into the army that supplied the growing market for food in an expanding London, 'the all-consuming star which had begun to devour all their holdings'.[10]

In 1762 Peckham and Camberwell had fields, streams, and windmills, as well as footpaths and roads traversed by stagecoaches. Walter Harrison's famous *History of London* (1775) speaks of 'a very pleasant village' whose 'handsome houses [were] the country seat of wealthy citizens of London, or

. . . those who have retired from business'.[11] Harrison points out the view of the masts on the river Thames that could be glimpsed from Lord Trevor's house. This was Peckham viewed from above. But Peckham was also the hub of an annual fair that sprawled across the Rye and the major village streets. In 1809, Priscilla Wakefield described the fair as 'affording a holiday for a vast number of the lower classes of Londoners'.[12] A well-known tavern, the Kentish Drovers – possibly the origin of Spark's firm Drover Willis – stood on the Peckham Road. The adolescent gangs that cause so much petty damage in Spark's novel may descend from this wilder, preindustrial Peckham. As early as 1788, though, preindustrial leisure patterns were losing ground to a more regulated economy and culture. In that year the London *Times* published an indignant letter about the old Peckham fair, regretting 'the usual assemblage of blackguard pick-pockets, mountebanks, truant apprentices, and the drunken order of lower mechanics' that attended it. In 1802, another letter writer complained that, if 'Custom has long sanctioned fairs of this kind . . . a bad custom, like a bad promise, ought to be "more honoured in the breach than the observance."' By 1827, even the provincial press felt it merited announcement that 'Peckham fair is about to be suppressed forever' and that its 'booths, stalls, whirligigs, roundabouts',[13] muggings, drunkenness, and public lewdness had become a casualty in the commercial upsurge that was irradiating from London across the globe. Camberwell Fair followed suit in 1855.

James Elmes proclaimed the arrival of this entrepreneurial global space in *Metropolitan Improvements or London in the Nineteenth Century* (1827):

> Industry and a daring spirit of commercial enterprise have characterised the British nation from the time of Tacitus to the present day; when the influence of our princely merchants, and the spirit of nautical discovery . . . have extended the forstering influence of our laws, customs, and language, and planted the British standard from the icy regions of the Polar Seas to the verge of the *terra incognita* of Australasia.[14]

With the discipline of commerce and industry serving as a universal mythology of improvement, an unruly agrarian holdover like Peckham fair was an obvious anomaly. Neither the centralisation that enlisted Peckham as one of the peripheries serving a resurgent city nor the globalising move-

ment by which enterprise irradiated from a pivotal capital around the world had room for the disruptive countercurrents exemplified by the Camberwell and Peckham fairs.

First recruited to assist in the work of contributing to the capital's food supply, Peckham was soon enlisted in the demand for a workforce that could be delivered rapidly and reliably to the city and the docks. Where eighteenth-century Peckham obeyed the logic of the food market, its nineteenth-century development was shaped by a society in which the need to transport labour cheaply, rapidly, and regularly became paramount. The arrival of a canal in 1826, omnibus companies in 1851, and a commuter railway line in 1856 meant that Peckham began to share an identity with Camberwell as a lower middle-class suburb housing the white collar and artisanal workers who commuted to the city and its docklands. By the mid-nineteenth century, street lighting and church building guided residents of Peckham to improving and industrious lifestyles at home. These developments made for better living conditions, but they also, as Dyos notes, left most of the area 'denuded of all its leafy features save some bits of sickly grass and bottle-green poplars' (33). Rye Lane, down which Dougal treks with any number of potential stooges, became one of the most famous Victorian shopping streets.

The demand for a cohesive, disciplined, regulated 'greenness' was met by Peckham Rye, a triangular open space that today is divided into two areas, Peckham Rye Common and Peckham Rye Park. Responding to campaigns for fresh air and green space, the vestry of Camberwell St Giles purchased Rye Common in 1868 and protected it henceforth as public land. London County Council bought the second space, Peckham Rye Park, which at that time amounted to fifty-four acres, and opened it to the public in 1894. Today, several cemeteries flank these areas and isolate them from commercial pursuits. Spark enlists these cemeteries in her spatial assault on Peckham suburban values. The New Cemetery is the site for Dougal's first assault on Merle Coverdale's workplace pretentions, while Nelly Mahone voices her prophecies of collective retribution around the Quaker Cemetery.

The competing interests that had settled around the suburb by the time of Spark's *Ballad* belong to the larger contradictions of the new class societies built in the nineteenth century. Among these, we can include the paternalist impulse to help the poor, the complementary impulse not to help them too

much, and, strongest of all, not to live anywhere near them. Peckham had to grow in tandem with the city it served, but it also had to grow in an orderly way, in conformity with the ideological requirements of the burgeoning middle class. An early demand was to move the poor, with their unhygienic and disruptive habits, to the rim of any respectable London district. Leisure itself had to be streamlined and fitted to the image of a wholesome, virile world-wide empire. Periodicals such as George Newnes's *The Strand* (1891–1950) and Douglas Goldring's *The Tramp* (1910–1911) present the suburbs as restorative places that bring fresh air and organised outdoor sports to the workforce. 'Green' space came to mean regulated space, administered by committees of reliable middle-class persons. At a time when the supply of national mythologies ran high, Sidney Low raised the hopes of *Contemporary Review* readers for 'an army of Englishmen, recruited, not from . . . the back streets of Glasgow or Dublin, but from the larger Wimbledons and wider Batterseas'.[15] Low's hopes that the suburbs might be used as a recruitment zone for a purely English imperial fighting force, as well as his fears of the large cities with rising proletarian populations in Ireland and Scotland, may explain some of the hostility to Dougal in Spark's novel.

As this discussion shows, the docile, manageable residents described in Spark's *Ballad* have not emerged by accident, but are a result of over two hundred years of trimming the periphery to the capital's need for labour and consumption. With the arrival of the postwar 'affluent society', central planning and science refined these needs even further, as an early scene establishes. Meadows, Meade, and Grindley and Drover Willis, Peckham's two leading firms, both appear to have attended the same cutting-edge industrial seminar that recommends employing an 'arts man' in the workplace. Mr Druce, Managing Director of the first, decides to take on Edinburgh graduate Dougal Douglas:

> We feel there's a place for an Arts man to bring vision into the lives of the workers. Wonderful people. But they need vision, we feel. Motion study did marvels in the factory. We had a man from Cambridge advising on motion study. It speeded up our output thirty per cent. Movements required to do any given task were studied in detail and he worked out the simplest pattern of movement involving the least loss of energy and time (16).

It is clear that this exchange establishes not some deep insights into the psychologies of Druce and Douglas, but rather a preliminary report on the structures of order regnant in Peckham. An *Arts man* is needed to cap two hundred years of rationalisation in industrial production and transportation systems that have installed, almost as a by-product, standardised patterns of work and leisure. For all the talk of vision, what Druce wants is uniformity. Once he hears Dougal singing the same words from the same song sheet, he thinks he has his man.

The same pressure to conform nudges Dougal into lodgings at a neat house 'on the Rye' owned by landlady Miss Belle Frierne. Everyone in Peckham thinks Dougal should lodge with Miss Frierne, who has 'lived up there all her life. Her father left her the house. Big furniture removers they used to be' (19). At first, the news that 'The linoleum in [Dougal's] room was imitation parquetry and shone with polish' suggests the pride in appearance that put suburbs like Peckham at the vanguard of middle-class respectability.[16] However, the interior of Miss Frierne's house takes the association with *moving* in an unexpected direction. Dougal enters the house correctly enough via 'Miss Frierne's wood-panelled entrance hall', but soon finds himself 'holding on and looking around him' (20). In his bed-sitting room, Dougal, who arrives in Peckham as a folklore hunchback and National Service reject, looks around him for ballast: 'Two small patterned mats and one larger one made islands on the wide floor. Dougal placed a pile of clothes on each island, then hauled it over the polished floor' (22). The floor turns into a glassy ocean, while the cupboard Dougal discovers at its other shore magically transforms into a version of Davy Jones's locker. First seen as a 'fairly useless cave' (22), the cupboard, the stock property of any number of British comedies from Ben Jonson to Brian Rix, connects Dougal's room with the space occupied by the drifting bachelor Humphrey Place, whose on-and-off engagement to Dixie Morse disrupts the courtship narrative of bourgeois romance. For all its façade of propriety, Miss Frierne's house is a labyrinth. This is also true of Peckham itself, where an underground tunnel that begins outside the police station leads to the neighbouring settlement of Nunhead and to an allegedly Catholic past.

These hidden spaces draw us into a chthonic Peckham that holds connections and transgressions undetectable on the surface. The recesses of Miss Frierne's house prepare us for the optical illusions that pervade 'the great sunny common of the Rye' (29). When Humphrey and Trevor Lomas,

Humphrey's rival for Dixie's affections, fight at the start of the novel, 'Two courting couples, returning from the dusky scope of the Rye's broad lyrical acres, stepped to the opposite pavement, leant on the railings by the swimming baths, and watched' (9). The Rye's open-ended spaces correct the shortcuts of perception practised in a society bewitched by 'time and motion' economics.[17] Striding to another sunset show-down with Trevor, Dougal struggles with his own faulty perceptions: 'Between two distant lamp-posts, in their vague oblique light . . . [Dougal] discerned Humphrey and Trevor with a strange youth called Collie. . . . apparently molesting three further figures who turned out to be Elaine, Dixie, and Beauty, who were screaming'. The traditional associations of Peckham fair with disorder and crime unleash themselves all over again. Except that this too is an illusion: 'Soon it appeared that the men were not molesting the women but restraining them' (46). A page later, Spark compels the reader to follow Dougal in recorrecting his corrected perceptions, as the sudden appearance of the police turns a pitched battle into an outdoor song-and-dance rendition of Harry Belafonte's hit, the sad sailing song 'Jamaica Farewell'. Repeatedly in the novel, the Rye takes the protagonists out of their accepted identities and propels them into an expanded space and time.

As a space, the Rye is not just a municipal amenity, but a magic carpet, a Mediterranean boulevard, a ship and a sea. In the excavations that uncover a tunnel beneath the police station, Dougal finds not only 'evidence of Thames silt in the top soil' but a pointer to a time when 'the Thames was five miles wide, and it covered all Peckham' (115). The present settlement, filed down into a dormitory suburb, is a fragment from a prehistoric sea. Care-laden Merle Coverdale 'drifted along with the others' (99) through a street on the Rye that is 'flowing with shopping women and prams' (101). Where the factory hems them in, the Rye sets people on the move, letting them shift weightlessly into the space of the imaginary. In a narrative where perpetual motion and kaleidoscopic transformations resist economy and rationality, an ancient, quasi-magical Rye dissolves the distinctions between past and present, sea and land to assume the properties of a South London *fata morgana*.

Spark repeatedly plunders the history of Peckham and Camberwell as counters to the sterile space of modern suburbia. Gradually, the present-day occupants, so obsessed by *position* and job classification, are swept up into a larger history of a Peckham where Boadicea lost a battle and Oliver Gold-

smith, whose novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* found plenty of room for ballads, resided, taught, and flirted. John Ruskin, Dougal's precursor as an 'arts man' in South London, lived on nearby Denmark Hill.

In Spark's book-within-a book, one of chief textual sources for Peckham's literary legacy is Coulburn's *Kalendar of Amusements in Town and Country for 1840*. Dougal consults this three-hundred-and-fifty page reference work in the local library, a space that complements the Rye in its provision of expansive alternative scenarios. Coulburn tells of an unending cycle of festivals celebrated in an England where every day was still potentially a holiday, and of midsummer evenings in which the young were not trapped indoors to backbite and to compare job classifications, but were free to 'leap, and play at various games such as running, wrestling, and dancing'.[18] An entry devoted to Camberwell fair describes a mermaid routine in which audience and performer enter a zone of shared fantasy. (If Dougal's research stretched to etymology, a suggested derivation for Camberwell as 'the well of the crippled or crooked' might have appealed to him.)

Dougal's function as a reader of Coulburn is to use this legendary past to hack apart a time-and-motion limited present. Dancing away from his own disability, Dougal interrupts the soulless vigil of sampling from a menu of television programmes at a typical suburban home: 'Mavis [Crewe] came back and switched on the television to a cabaret. Her husband returned to find Dougal keeping the cabaret company with a dance of his own in the middle of their carpet. Mavis was shrieking with joy' (38). Having injected these unruly movements into domestic space, Dougal's next assault is on the industrial space of Meadows, Meade, and Grindley. This is a Monday, the day Dougal earmarks for the revival of the traditional custom of Saint Monday, the preindustrial forerunner of postwar absenteeism. Soon, not only has Dougal invaded the sacred space that separates factory from office, he has disturbed the rhythm of *the simplest pattern of movement* installed by his Cambridge predecessor, the time and motion expert: 'Dawn patted his poor shoulder. He slightly raised his head and shook it sadly from side to side. A woman came round from the canteen bar with a clean-folded oven cloth which she held out to him' (41).

In other words, Dougal impersonates Coulburn's mermaid, a revealing choice in a world where young males all seem to impersonate Robert Mitchum's sleepy masculinity. But his more important function is to turn Coulburn's *Kalendar* into a script for community performance: 'The two

other canteen women came round to Dougal, and he was now surrounded by women. Elaine Kent opened her bag and took out a comb. With it she combed Dougal's hair as it moved with his head slowly from side to side' (42). As Dougal draws the women into the scene, he creates a tableau that displaces the factory temporally and spatially in a recreation of Peckham fair, so that the unruly space of an idle past returns from the dead and temporarily vanquishes the disciplined scientific present.

A similar dynamic is unleashed at Findlater's dance hall, a place where sleepwalking couples take the same steps as those prescribed in programmes all over the country. Shifting abruptly from the cha-cha to the Highland fling, Dougal elicits raucous running commentaries that break up the sedate scene: 'Everyone was talking or laughing. Those who were talking were all saying the same thing. They either said, "Tell him to take more water in it", or "Shouldn't be allowed", or "He's all right. Leave him alone"' (59). The intervention of the dance-hall manager prompts Dougal to leave the ballroom, only to see him return with a dustbin lid to act out a one-man performance as a multicultural community. Dougal imitates, in turn, a man in a rowing boat, a Zulu dancer, 'a Chinese coolie eating melancholy rice . . . an ardent cyclist, an old woman with an umbrella' (60). For a community as cramped and cabined as modern suburban Peckham, this is indeed a breakthrough in time and space.

A meeting in the last pages of the novel between Dougal and Nelly Mahone, a drunken tramp lifted in from Samuel Beckett, pulls these threads together. Their rendezvous takes place in a scrap merchants' yard, an emblem of the abandoned Peckham that the novel appears intent on restoring. Any vagrant who invades Peckham's closed spaces invites intervention, Nelly tells Dougal, 'Stand up in the open, they can only tell you to move on. But go inside a place, and they can call the cops' (113). Nellie's experience conforms to the logic of a narrative in which open space offers a partial emancipation from the patrolled zones of home, dance hall, and factory. Dougal's response continues his assault on those zones. He pulls Nelly into a vacant houseboat that hangs in the yard and adds another performance to his repertoire: 'Dougal stood up and found that by standing astride in the middle of the boat he could make it rock. So he rocked it for a while and sang a sailor's song to Nelly' (114–15). Once again, Dougal throws himself into an imaginary sea and reemerges as sailor, spy, and, in a daring usurpation, the policeman Nellie just invoked.

By the end of the novel, Spark has recaptured Peckham from suburban dreariness, a dreariness she undoubtedly views through the prism of the great moderns. She recaptures her test-case suburb on two fronts. First, by returning to the Rye, she taps the hidden history of an unruly village that reclaims homogenised space for festive space. Second, through the diegetic space that materialises in community stories and performances, we see the logic behind Spark's designation of her book as a 'ballad'. The ballad as a genre has always exposed communities to mysterious strangers and alien spaces. The ballad disturbs the accepted relations between ranks and even narrows the boundaries between life and death. It sends its protagonists on journeys whose outcomes can never be predicted. For Spark, the ballad is an indispensable tool in the imaginative corrective she presents to her readers.

Viewed this way, a 'ballad' about Peckham Rye will voice sentiments that a community disciplined to the demands of global industry cannot begin to voice for itself. The ballad can only voice these sentiments in a way that cannot be sustained very long – ballads are usually brief – and in a voice the modern reader might not be able to take seriously – ballads are not one of the authoritative literary genres. *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* is arguably a preliminary comic sounding of the protests against scientific industrial societies that subsequently, in Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) and Marshall McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride* (1967), for instance, would be voiced more expansively and stridently.

III

The Ballad of Peckham Rye is a novel intimately connected with the imbalance of power between capital and suburb, centre and periphery. The long-standing practice, dating back to the eighteenth century, of rebuilding the suburb in accordance with the needs of the centre, appears to have squeezed the life out of many of the residents. Spark's novel offers a near perfect instance of the *anomie* that postwar sociologists saw as endemic among the working- and lower-middle class.

However, to speak in these secular terms is by no means to move against the grain of Spark's creative identity as readers have generally understood it. Malcolm Bradbury's Spark refines the methods of Joyce, Mann, and Musil, while ensuring popular acclaim by streamlining their sprawling

structures.[19] Building on Bradbury's work, Ruth Whittaker shows how Spark's ironic play with the conventions of formal realism is the strategy of an author deeply estranged from the world of middle-class materialism. Behind Spark's acerbic commentary on modernity, Whittaker detects a transcendent core of values. Her Spark is an artist for whom 'mimesis has a kind of triviality, almost an immorality, since her real concern is with the immutable'.[20] In the last few years Marina MacKay, Rod Mengham, and Lindsey Stonebridge[21] have complicated our understanding of Spark's theological investment by foregrounding her alienated relationship with postwar intellectual trends and media technologies. Where Spark herself often spoke as if Newman, Eliot, and Proust were her primary reference points, recent criticism emphasises her concern with the Nuremburg trials, psychological research, postwar inflation, and liberation theology.

Yet perhaps, as Bold and Carruthers have argued, the most important point about Spark is still her Scottishness. For Bold, this meant a Spark ready to exploit the uncanny machinery of Scottish fiction – doubles and wraiths, multiple narrators, and dark conceits. Carruthers has taken a different approach, connecting Spark to the countercultural world of Alexander Trocchi and R. D. Laing. In *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, Scottishness itself has a dual legacy. Wraiths and seers are significant to the novel, but Spark also follows the links between Scottishness and modern industrial society by threading into a quintessential modern suburb the spiritual anomie that, two hundred years before, Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, and David Millar predicted would be an unexpected byproduct of industrial development.

In recruiting an 'arts man' to the world of mass-market production, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* reconnects with the strain of industrious Scottishness analyzed by Spark's Enlightenment predecessors. Ferguson and Smith anatomised the social roles required of citizens in modern, capital-centred societies. Even more important, they scripted the myth of the industrious Scotsman, steady and industrious in his habits, slowly ascending the social ladder. Karl Marx saw Scottish thought of this period as the foundation for the subsequent 'industrial takeoff' in nineteenth-century Britain.

In *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, Spark explores some of the more deleterious effects of the division of labour that Smith and Ferguson expected to prove as estranging for the labourer as it would be advantageous to the capitalist system. Her novel appeared in 1960, between Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958) and E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English*

Working Class (1963). Both those writers grappled with the enthusiasm of postwar workers for consumer appliances and Americanised leisure. Both tried to reconnect with the 'vision' of earlier working-class generations, whom they saw as more independent of the homogenising forces of centre and capital and more willing to maintain local or trade-specific practices in an era of poorly regulated competition.

Spark's *Ballad* makes her own distinct contribution to this postwar critique. At Drover Willis, Mr Willis welcomes Dougal as the steady, industrious Scot that Ferguson helped to create. On the other side of the management-labour divide, union man Humphrey Place has allowed the complexities of industrial law and nuances of trade nomenclature to colonise his imagination. 'I don't trouble myself about that' (26), he replies when Dougal appeals to 'lyricism' as a yardstick for industrial mores.

Opening a second front, however, Spark attaches her drab, denuded south London Rye to the preindustrial version of Scottishness that Burns enacted in his 'Comin' through the Rye' (1796).[22] This song has a protagonist called Jenny, who is as 'wet' as Dougal or Miss Frierne:

> Comin' thro' the rye, poor body,
> Comin' thro' the rye,
> She draigl't a' her petticoatie,
> Comin' thro' the rye.
>
> [Refrain]:
> Oh Jenny's a' weet, poor body,
> Jenny's seldom dry:
> She draigl't a' her petticoatie,
> Comin thro' the rye!
>
> Gin a body meet a body
> Comin' thro' the rye,
> Gin a body kiss a body
> Need a body cry.

Although the refrain refers to Jenny's 'weet, poor body', this is not the poem's overall drift. A counter movement turns from the crying body to the people freely coming and going, crossing and recrossing the untrammelled space of

their own experience, willing to take pain or pleasure, neat, undiluted, just as it comes.

Spark's novel opens by dramatising the alienation and inhibition of poor bodies like Mr Druce and Miss Coverdale, Arthur and Mavis Crewe, Dixie Morse and Humphrey Place, not to speak of the crippled Dougal. But if the novel, like Burns's poem, unlocks the floodgates of the protagonists' despair for their wasted emotional lives, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* also revives Burns's view that suffering need not be bolstered by suffering and can be relieved by movement, by *Comin' thro' the rye* or *Comin' thro' the glen*. Spark draws on Burns to ask whether life needs to be as miserable as many Peckham residents have made it. In a way, the entire novel is a prolonged inquiry into Burns's question *Need a body cry*? If Spark's final answer is negative, this is achieved only by returning to the hidden history of Peckham and turning it loose on the dance halls and shop floors of suburban Britain.

As Miss Frierne's lodger, Dougal appears to be entering a bulwark of solid stability and continuity. But instead he enters a kind of floating island, where he must 'hold on' in a space that Spark will present as perpetually transforming. His wager, as Lefebvre might put it, is that Peckham is not as drab as it looks, and that it hosts the same visionary potential in 1960 that it did for William Blake in 1767, when a walk across Rye Common famously yielded a vision of 'A tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars'.[23]

This visionary possibility is glimpsed only intermittently in a novel that, as Bryan Cheyette remarks, is largely a 'mixture of social realism and surreal mythology' (46). As a 'social researcher' whose laboratory is Peckham, Spark offers us persons and settings that could have stepped from the pages of such canonical works of British empirical sociology as Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) or Peter Wilmott and Michael Young's *Family and Class in a London Suburb* (1960). From this school, Spark borrows not just a sharpness of observed detail and dialogue, but also a sense that suburban societies homogenise where they should open up, infantilise the aged, and breed a youth culture of violence and acquisitiveness. The vivid particulars of 'personnel' – and personal – relations in Spark's representation of south London accentuate her despair about modern social mythology.

Even so, for Spark, a joyless, self-estranged modernity is not the only world available. She makes this clear in the final pages of her novel, when a newly-wedded Humphrey and Dixie drive out of Peckham to start their

long-delayed honeymoon. This ending replicates the beginning, as it picks its way impartially through a maze of community stories that, in ballad fashion, have gathered about their stalled marriage. Some of these stories are romantic, some vindictive, while others narrate their future with spectacular inaccuracy. Even so, this is far from a triumphant moment for either party. Dixie announces that 'I feel as if I've been twenty years married instead of two hours' (143), while a restrained, uncommunicative Humphrey 'thought this a pity for a girl of eighteen'.

At this point, however, Spark's narration mysteriously steps out of realism: 'It was a sunny day for November, and as [Humphrey] drove swiftly past the Rye, he saw the children playing there and the women coming home from work with their shopping-bags, the Rye for an instant looking like a cloud of green and gold, the people seeming to ride upon it, as you might say there was another world than this' (143). One would be hard put to detect any narrative significance in this episode, which, like Auden's renowned aphorism about poetry, 'makes nothing happen'.[24] Yet even if the Rye's 'cloud of green and gold' lasts only 'for an instant', it still has value in a world where a newly-wedded bride can extend two actual hours of married life into twenty years of pure duration, unrelieved by any intimation of 'another world than this'.

This episode caps a series of encounters on the Rye in which ordinary perceptions turn out to be faulty. Even fleeting heterotopias are inaccessible to most of the residents of Peckham. Certainly Dougal moves across the glass-partitioned 'plastic inlay flooring' of Willis, Meade, and Grindley as if it were Blake's 'green and paradisal turf' (71). Dougal excepted, only Nelly Mahone, a derelict tramp who sports a 'green-seeming scarf', seems able to perceive the Rye's *green and gold*. At one point, in 'the darkness of the Rye', Dougal catches 'the sound of a drunken woman approaching'. Close to the Rye, vision often has to be corrected: 'And yet as it came nearer, it turned out not to be a drunken woman, but Nelly proclaiming' (107). The *drunken woman* turns into the seer *proclaiming*. In a novel where the flat 'said' is a typical way of tagging a character's speech, Nelly habitually *proclaims* or *cries*. Her proclamation from the Quaker cemetery that 'The meadows are open and the green herbs have appeared, and the hay is gathered out of the mountain' (48) supplies both a warning, and a remedial space, from the wanton outlay of bricks and cement poured into Peckham during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Notes

1 Muriel Spark, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (New York: New Directions, 1999), p. 118. Subsequent references are to this edition.
2 Sir John Summerson, 'Urban Forms', in *The Historian and the City*, ed. Oscar Handlin and John E. Burchard (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1963), pp. 165–76 (170).
3 Brian Cheyette, *Muriel Spark* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 2000), p. 52.
4 See, for instance, Alan Massie, *Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Ramsey Head, 1979), p. 31.
5 Gerard Carruthers, '"Fully to Savor Her Position": Muriel Spark and Scottish Identity', *Modern Fiction Studies* 53 (2008), pp. 487–504; Frank Baldanza, 'Muriel Spark and the Occult', *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 6 (1965), pp. 190–203.
6 Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics* 16 (1986), pp. 22–27. See also Henri Lefebvre, *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*, ed. Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) and Michael Frank, 'Imaginative Geography as a Traveling Concept: Foucault, Said, and the Spatial Turn', *European Journal of English Studies* 13 (2009), pp. 61–77.
7 Alan Bold, *Muriel Spark* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 56.
8 T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 60, p. 59.
9 See Peter Kemp, 'On *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*', in Joseph Hynes, ed., *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992), pp. 114–22.
10 H. J. Dyos, *Victorian Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1966), p. 31.
11 Walter Harrison, *A New and Universal History of London* (London: Cooke, 1775), p. 572.
12 Priscilla Wakefield, *Perambulations in London and its Environs* (London: Darton and Harvey, 1809), p. 272.
13 'Peckham Fair', *London Times* 27 August 1788, p. 2; 'Peckham Fair', *London Times* 26 Aug. 1802, p. 3; 'Suppression of Peckham Fair', *Hull Packet and Weekly Commercial, Literary and General Advertiser*, 21 August 1827, n.p.
14 See Thomas H. Shepherd and James Elmes, *Metropolitan Improvements or London in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Jones, 1827), p. v.
15 Sidney Low, 'The Rise of the Suburbs: A Lesson of the Census', *Contemporary Review* 60 (1891), pp. 545–58.
16 Francis M. Jones discusses polished and gleaming surfaces in 'The Aesthetic of the Nineteenth-Century Industrial Town' in H. J. Dyos, ed., *The Study of Urban History* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1968), pp. 171–82.
17 Frederick Winslow Taylor and Frank Gilbreth were the American pioneers of time and motion study, which involved monitoring the movements of workers and timing their tasks. An Edinburgh graduate, J. A. C. Brown, offered a widely read account of their experiments in a 'Pelican Original', *The Social Psychology of Industry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954).
18 Boleyne Reeves, *Coulburn's Kalendar of Popular Amusements in Town and Country for 1840* (London: Henry Coulburn, 1840), p. 177.

19 Malcolm Bradbury, 'Muriel Spark's Fingernails', in *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 247–55.
20 Ruth Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 3.
21 See Marina MacKay, 'Muriel Spark and the Meaning of Treason', *Modern Fiction Studies* 53:3 Fall (2008), pp. 505–22; Rod Mengham, 'The Cold War Way of Death: Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*', in *British Fiction after Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century*, ed. Marina MacKay and Lindsey Stonebridge (New York: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 157–65; Lindsey Stonebridge, 'Hearing Them Speak: Voices in Wilfred Bion, Muriel Spark, and Penelope Fitzgerald', *Textual Practice* 19 (2005), pp. 445–65. See also *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, ed. Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).
22 Robert Burns, *Poems and Songs*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 664–65.
23 See G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 10.
24 W. H. Auden, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats (d. Jan.1939)', in *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 50.

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