# "HER LIPS ARE SLIGHTLY PARTED": THE INEFFABILITY OF EROTIC SOCIALITY IN MURIEL SPARK'S *THE DRIVER'S SEAT*

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> There is no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image.
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> —Marquis de Sade, qtd. in Bataille, *Eroticism*
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> Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death.
>
> —Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*
>
> What is at stake here is the priority of rendering oneself vulnerable to the risk of the stranger.
>
> —William Haver, *The Body of this Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS*

In Muriel Spark's short novel *The Driver's Seat*—described on the cover as "a metaphysical shocker"—we are presented with the story of a thirty-four-year-old woman, Lise, who, in the throes of a nervous breakdown, disengaged and prone to manic laughter, flies abroad and orchestrates her own brutal murder at the hands of a

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man who has just emerged from an asylum after six years of treatment for sexually assaulting women. The fact that her murder is foreshadowed at the start of chapter three led Spark to call the book a "Whydunnit?" rather than a "Whodunnit?" This echoes Lise's own description of a book she carries prominently throughout the story and finally gives to a hotel porter, telling him it's a "Whydunnit in q-sharp major" (101).

The style of Spark's prose in this novel is lean and taciturn: we are given very little on which to base any speculation as to Lise's motives, certainly no psychological explanations of her actions are offered in any straightforward manner. Everything is described externally, as if it were being viewed through a camera lens. This narrative device is an example of what we might call subjectivity without psychology, actions and speech offered without any explicit recourse to the inner workings of the mind. The familiar novelistic device of an omniscient narrator with insight into character motivation is replaced by a sequence of snapshots that offer external description without access to the internal state of Lise's psyche. In this respect the narration is almost cinematic in its attention to surface detail and action. The narrator/witness is no wiser as to why Lise does what she does than is the reader. It is, in a very real sense, superficial, all surface, but self-consciously and stylistically so for reasons that will be offered. No attempt is made, in other words, to explain the purpose of the events reported or to speculate on their causes. To put it yet another way, unspeakability and its effects have become part of what the novel might be suggesting, its theme.

In this essay I offer a queer reading of *The Driver's Seat* that focuses on the symbolic meaning of Lise's murder as a kind of existential comportment that gestures toward the ineffability of the death drive's compulsion to transcend the isolating fact of death through the continuity offered by lust. A gesture, that is, toward the unsayability of self-erasure as a limit-experience on which sociality as such is predicated. Developed in dialogue with theorists ranging from Luce Irigiray, Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and David M. Halperin, my reading can be called queer not because it argues for a homoerotic or same-sex desire at work within the text, but because it is pitched against the norm, buckling commonsense notions of the self by excavating all psychology; queer, that is, in that it offers no essence to the self, but rather posits the self as some form of discursive residue devoid of meaning or interpretable content. Queer in the sense offered by William Haver, as a loss or lack of authority: "Here, at the site of a pure interruption, at which we never arrive because it is never outside the here and now, there can be no authority" ("Queer" 292). Spark's use of the present tense

refuses to escape the here and now and as such sustains the text's interruption, its disruptive, queer energy.

## Lise's Parted Lips

I suggest the novel can be read—through the motif of Lise's parted lips and the metaphor of the book—as a presentation of the unpresentable in Jean-François Lyotard's sense; that is, as the inexpressibility of the violent erasure of the self that constitutes the social and/or political. The name Haver gives to this moment or phenomenon, this "thought of that which it is ultimately impossible to think" is "the body of this death." He writes, "Impossibly, but necessarily, the body of this death is at once singular and multiple. In both its singularity and its multiplicity, but above all in the essentially erotic conjunction of its singularity and multiplicity, the body of this death is an impossible object for any apperception, any phenomeno-logical apprehension, any auto-affectivity, any specular capture" (*The Body* xi).

In other words, there is a certain ineffability to the body of this death, a certain unsayability, or unspeakability, something that might not only define its nature (if nature is capable, as a word or concept, of ever naming something truly wild) but also install a resistance to definition within that very move; for it "is the occasion for any possible representation whatever." According to Haver, the body of this death nevertheless eludes capture by any form or system of representation, such as language or thinking. The closest we can come, perhaps, to defining the body of this death is to describe it as "the ultimately unspeakable radical historicity and sociality of erotic existentiality" (xi).

One of the aims of this essay is to elucidate further what is at stake in understanding the social and the political, which requires an engagement with an erotic limit that "exceeds the figure of the particular in any dialectic" (xi). Unpacking this impossible, yet necessary, singular-multiplicity as it appears in Spark's novel, I will explore how this limit contours representation while at the same time resisting it, how it is an unspoken—indeed, unspeakable—predicate of sociality per se. In other words, the socio-political is that unspeakability.

This reading focuses on two tropes or leitmotifs in Spark's novel: first, the book that Lise carries conspicuously with her before handing it to the hotel clerk on finally finding her man, her "type," the one who will murder her (Richard); and, second, as already mentioned, the image of Lise's mouth, lips slightly parted, that recurs throughout the novel. Taken together, these tropes, I will suggest, speak the unspeakability, represent the unrepresentability, of what the novel

is about, that is, what it cannot say but can only gesture toward. This cannot be said, furthermore, not because the words do not exist or because there is not time enough to say it—although both these reasons are, in a very real sense, true —but because that unsayability itself is what structures the fact that we can say anything at all. In effect, it is a discourse about discourse, a language about language, and it contours the social at the same time as it disappears within it. That is, this unsayability, as a socio-political erotic comes out of language and disappears into, moves away from it, eludes it in informing what it might mean to be human. That is why language, or language's failure, is so central here, and that is why Lise's parted lips are such a telling metaphor for it. They represent the unsayable at the same time as they signify the erotic. They recall, inevitably, the other lips, the labia, whose multiplicity, according to Luce Irigaray, refuses and challenges the singular logic of the phallus and whose liminality opposes phallogocentrism, the master discourse that venerates instrumental reason and invests in the consolatory powers of the rational. But whereas Irigaray makes much of the fact that the labia are always touching, creating an erotic circuit, Lise's lips are always parting, suggesting neither reason nor its opposite (whatever that might be).

## Language and/of the Body

Indeed, Spark's prose style in *The Driver's Seat* could not be further from the flowing, elusive, excessive style most often associated with *écriture féminine*, but even this sparse, clipped writing exceeds the void or absence that constitutes its center. It is a deliberate avoidance of the linguistic games and excesses of modernism, yet at the same time indebted to modernism's breakthroughs—in particular, its use of the present tense and prolepsis. Resisting the internal monologues of Woolf and Joyce, however, Spark's prose opts instead for the external fractures and guessing games of the antinovelists such as Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute.

There is, nevertheless, a trope centered on multiple languages or tongues at work in the novel: Lise speaks four languages, and her murder will be reported in four languages. She cries for help in four languages when Bill tries to rape her and commands Richard to murder her in four languages. These four languages are, in other words, employed in very different circumstances, instantiating multiple uses. But if language is incapable, at times, of any meaningful communication, it matters not at all how many languages you speak or comprehend. The ineffable resists or eludes all language systems, including the visual or non-verbal. As Elaine Scarry comments: "Physical pain does

not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). But it is not simply that pain might be the opposite of language, or the cessation of language, or even the active destruction of it—more than this, what Spark's novel seems to offer is a stylistic comment on, or movement toward, thinking the unthinkable. She gives the unbidden thought a voice. In this sense, it is not so much the content of the novel that offers up such a reading but the way that it is written. As Martin McQuillan notes: "As in the case of the *nouveau roman*, Spark's concern is with the forms of thinking sustained by the mode of writing, in order to constitute a political engagement, and not the realm of novelistic content" (13). Archly playful and emotionally disengaged, Spark's prose plays willfully with time. After starting practically midsentence during a scene Lise is having with a shop assistant over a stain-resistant dress, the narrative "rewinds" to the recent events leading up to Lise's eruption of rage: "I won't be insulted!" (9). At the start of chapter three Lise's death is announced in the future perfect tense, a prolepsis that Joseph Hynes reads as "a refashioning of the ancient encounter between foreknowledge and predestination" (80). More than that, however, it is a stylistic device that foregrounds the construction of the story.

Given that the act of writing emerges within *The Driver's Seat*'s temporal games, it is perhaps significant that, throughout the novel, Lise carries a book and constantly draws attention to it.[1] She purchases it at the airport before boarding her flight. She has a brief conversation with another woman, who is looking for books in English with pastel colored covers to match the shades of her home's interior decoration. Lise comments that the books on display are "all very bright-coloured" before selecting one for herself "with bright green lettering on a white background with the author's name printed to look like blue lightning streaks. In the middle of the cover are depicted a brown boy and girl wearing only garlands of sunflowers." Lise then proceeds to hold the book up against her coat, "giggling merrily, and looking up to the woman as if to see if her purchase is admired," but the woman complains "'Those colours are too bright for me. I don't see anything'"—as if the garishness had momentarily blinded her (22). Given that we have already been told that Lise's coat is striped white and red and her dress is yellow, mauve, orange, and blue, this kaleidoscope of color could indeed momentarily blind the woman. Lise is out to be as conspicuous as possible, and she carries the book before her at several points in the novel as a way of drawing attention to herself. During lunch with Mrs. Feike the book is moved by the waiter and Lise returns it to its

prominent position. Lise's outfit is laughed at continuously and she is stared at by strangers because her clothes stand out—on one occasion she is asked if she is going to join a circus, and on another a woman in the street comments: "Dressed for the carnival!" (69). In the scene where Lise buys the dress and coat, she ignores the sales assistant's suggestion that they not be worn together, declaring, on the contrary, that they go very well together. Bizarrely, Lise refers to the colors as very natural: "absolutely right for me" (11). If her desire is to be memorable, then there is a very specific logic at work here, a carnivalesque logic that throws into radical doubt all we think we know. There is a certain abjection at work in the construction of the carnival: Lise's carnival outfit is aimed at making her stand out from the herd, a gesture that also marks her as different and therefore in a liminal position within the social body, constituting an ambiguous opening in the text. As Kristeva points out, "abjection is above all ambiguity" (*Powers* 9).

In this novel, Spark uses clear language to construct a tale riddled with ambiguities. The fact that the novel refuses to offer up any neat meaning for Lise's actions constitutes one of its boldest moves, for it constructs a dynamic of interpretation within the narrative itself. Devoid of an omniscient narrator's commentary, in a very real sense, one constructs this novel through the act of reading: an act of reading that is profoundly de-constructive or dislocatory. Spark's use of the present tense "emphasizes the narrator's detachment as each moment is carefully picked out without comment [offering] no enlightenment" (Sproxton 137). Any commentary is provided by the reader. Or, as Judith Roof puts it, "narrating does not align the story with any definite understanding and thus exposes narrative's failure of insight" (52). I am not concerned here, however, with categorizing the novel as anti-postmodernist or pro-postmodernist, but rather with exploring further what might be achieved by resisting such a move via an appeal to the body's erotic sociality; like Spark's text, the body is a mode of practice that will always resist any easy categorization. In other words, Spark's novel can be said to indict language with a failure to represent the ways in which a certain risk—both erotic and, in a very real sense, deadly—qualifies any relationship we might name the social. Put yet another way, what we call representation is the institutionalization of an experience at once both overwhelmingly complex and astonishingly simple: the experience of the social that, at least potentially, is always already erotic and deadly or destructive of the individual. Accordingly, my next section explores how murder might be understood in this context of the unspeakable as a radical constituent of all language.

## Death as the Failure of Language

Spark's novel certainly confirms Sigmund Freud's conclusion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that, "the pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts" (268). Something Freud doesn't remark on, however, is how death is always already social, as is pleasure. In the act of murder, the two are very clearly and violently brought together. In volume 2 of *The Accursed Share*, Georges Bataille, writing on the prohibition against murder, claims that the origin of our "loathing of decay" is the "loathing of nothingness . . . which is not physical since it is not shared by animals" (79). Animals feel no conscience when they kill; they have no disgust to overcome. There is, then, a certain animality, a certain becoming-animal at the heart of the impulse to murder. Bataille then links the horror of murder with the disgust we tend to have for excrement. When we murder, we produce a corpse that is analogous to shit. There is, in other words, something profoundly excremental, Bataille maintains, about the act of murder. "Life," he writes, "is a product of putrefaction, and it depends on both death and the dungheap" (80).

By restoring us to the "power of nature," which is read as a "*repulsive* sign" of the universal ferment of life" (80), the act of murder retains its status as a taboo through this association of corpse and/as excrement. In *Eroticism*, Bataille associates life and death in the limit-experience that the latter provides, a limit-experience that defies linguistic expression, such that: "In the end the articulate man confesses his own impotence" (276). That is, language fails in the face of the ineffability of erotic sociality. Language is impotent. Or, as Spark's narrator puts it, "As the knife descends to her [Lise's] throat she screams, evidently perceiving how final is finality" (106–07). That scream is language's failure. After instructing Richard on precisely how she wishes to be murdered, Lise is forced to concede to his will as he ignores her instructions: "I don't want any sex,' she shouts. 'You can have it afterwards. Tie my feet and kill, that's all. They will come and sweep it up in the morning.' All the same, he plunges into her, with the knife poised high. 'Kill me,' she says, and repeats it in four languages" (106). After organizing her demise and planning it so precisely, in the final moment her will is thwarted and the sex she has resisted throughout the novel is forced on her. After fending off sexual advances from Bill and Carlo (the mechanic she meets after the student demonstration when she takes cover in a garage), Lise puts herself in a position with Richard where she is defenseless and her own will is subsumed to his. This scene brings to mind Angela Carter's comment in *The Sadeian Woman* that "Flesh has specific orifices to contain the prick that penetrates it but meat's relation to the knife is more random and a thrust anywhere will do" (138).

Richard had thought Lise was afraid of sex, but in a conversation prior to the murder she admits that "'It's all right at the time and it's all right before. . . but the problem is afterwards. That is, if you aren't just an animal. Most of the time, afterwards is pretty sad'" (Spark 103). As Alan Bold remarks, "This shock ending is ironical in the extreme. Lise's dream of manipulating the precise manner of her death is destroyed by her murderer's refusal to accept her every instruction. By choosing, by exercising his free will against her authority, he diminishes her dream, transforms it into a nightmare" (94).

The central relationship in this novel is, after all, that between murderer and murderee, and how the one finds the other; how Lise tracks down the man she instinctively knows harbors the desire to kill a woman is the main narrative thread. Her conspicuousness is therefore doubly significant—not only does it mark her out as different from everyone else, from all the other women in their "dingy" clothes (Spark 21), but it is also the signal to her murderer. She tells Mrs. Fiedke, "The one I'm looking for will recognize me right away for the woman I am" (65); indeed he does, for Richard, her murderer, her "type," recognizes Lise immediately when they are seated next to one another on the plane. So terrified is he that he moves seats, only to encounter her again in the hotel lobby later that night when she instructs him to go with her to the parkland where he kills her. Although he puts up some resistance, he acquiesces up to the point when he thwarts her will by raping her before, not after, her death. When asked by the police after his arrest what had frightened him about Lise on the plane, he replies, "I don't know." He tells them: "She spoke in many languages but she was telling me to kill her all the time," suggesting some kind of psychic transmission from murderee to murderer that the latter finds it impossible to ignore or resist. The police, on the other hand, are closed off to everything, encased in "the upholsters and epaulets and all those trappings devised to protect them from the indecent exposure of fear and pity, pity and fear" (107). These concluding words of the novel echo Aristotle's definition of tragedy in *Poetics,* but given the fact that the police are protected against exposure to these two emotions that constitute the tragic, pity and fear, can it be called a tragedy?

## Becoming-animal

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari develop a radical theory of subjectivity that posits the subject as a residue of the processes of coding and overcoding by which the flows and multiplicities of the social body are mapped and restrained. They call the chaotic unravelling of these restraints decoding. They argue that in advanced

societies such as ours, decoding and coding are almost indistinguishable processes. That is, the high levels of complexity found in modern life necessitate an understanding of the subject as always already fractured, or "schizo." In short, fragmentation at the level of the ego is the inevitable outcome of modern overcoding. Because of this fragmented overcoding, their form of "schizo-analysis" regards the psychotic as having something fundamentally profound to say about the nature of the processes of overcoding by which the body is repressed.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that this privatization, or overcoding, both consolidates the public self and at the same time holds in check the self's desires. Furthermore, this process takes as its model the sublimation of anality. According to this model, learning when to shit and when not to shit are coterminous with learning what to say and what not to say; both are a form of discipline, one corporeal, the other discursive. Bodily regulation of flows and discursive decorum go hand in hand. The animality we are metamorphizes into something we call "human" as this acquisition of language occurs, but it never disappears: it breaks through the limits of language all the time. Becoming-animal is to move away from language as the ego fragments and dissolves: "Her lips are slightly parted and her nostrils and eyes, too, are a fragment more open than usual; she is a stag scenting the breeze, moving step by step. . . she seems . . . to search for a certain air-current, a glimpse and an intimation" (72–73).

What Deleuze and Guattari term "becoming-animal" is essential to the appearance of the body without organs (BwO). This BwO constitutes a different organization of the body, a *dis*organization consisting of several strata where "behind each stratum, encasted in it, there is always another stratum." The BwO is a multiplicity; it constitutes a challenge to the conformity to which bodies are exposed, the command that "You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body—otherwise you're just depraved" (*Thousand* 159). Eroticism dissolves the organization of the body's intensities; depravity is corporeal disorganization. The conflict established between the imperious demands of the self and the need to conform to social regulations can be seen in the character of Richard, who after his years of treatment is confronted with a woman who wants him to murder her, who picks up on his deepest desire and recognizes in it the complement to her own: organization versus depravity.

Like Deleuze and Guattari, Kristeva also argues that "language acquisition implies the suppression of anality" (*Revolution* 152). In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva asserts that this suppressed anality, and the jouissance it harbors, nevertheless find their way into the symbolic order and do so, moreover, by breaking language

much as the roots of a tree might rupture the neat uniformity of paving stones. Poetic formations of language such as those found in Mallarmé and Joyce, serve to disturb the symbolic through their eruption of semiotic flows. Anality, Kristeva argues, both agitates the subject's body and subverts the symbolic function: "The jouissance of destruction (or, if you will, of the 'death drive'), which the text manifests through language, passes through an unburying of repressed, sublimated anality" (150). This jouissance of destruction—which also goes by the names "semiotic" and "genotext" —is none other than the heterogeneous flows of the body. Given that the notion of the abject developed by Kristeva names the process by which the human subject constitutes itself through ejecting the things it does not contain, how are we to understand murder, as outlined by Bataille, as an act intimately bound up with the disgust of excrement?

The things we eject from the psyche in constituting our subjectivity are characterized as waste and include the experience of sensuality or jouissance that attends the process of abjection. The reduction of anxiety that comes from the removal of those things considered horrific or abject come at a price: all sensuality, all "open" corporeality must also be reduced. As such closure is not possible, for what Kristeva calls the semiotic lodges the body/bodily within the symbolic, outlawed by the protocols of representation, though by no means any less real. The unsayable, in other words, always attends this act of annihilation/production of waste.

## Narrative Noncommitment

It is Lise's reasoning that is the unsayable in Spark's novel. At one point in the narrative, the narrator breaks off and declares: "Who knows her thoughts? Who can tell?" (50). A page earlier, a similar question arises: "Lise is lifting the corners of her carefully packed things, as if in absent-minded accompaniment to some thought, who knows what?"(49). Furthermore, it emerges that on most of the occasions that Lise actually speaks, she is telling lies. Are we to assume that what lies unsaid/unsayable is close to the truth? By offering subjectivity without psychology, Spark refuses to answer that question.

As Joseph Hynes argues: "The effect of such narrative noncommitment is of course to suggest that this is the universal human condition and not merely Lise's here-and-now" (86). Her lips part, as if she is about to speak, but the thought is not given a voice, it slips away from speech. The parting lips signify here not only desire but the unsayability of desire. The ambiguity of Lise's reasoning—we are given fragments or clues to piece together, not an obvious trajectory

of facts—lies beneath the ambiguity of the text. Is Spark arguing for the existence of the death drive? Is she accusing modern culture of being a suicide cult? Is she defending the right to desire your own slaughter? Assuming she is saying something more profound than sex and death are somehow connected, I would like to read this short novel as one that "denies itself the solace of good forms," that "puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself" (Lyotard 81).

There are thirteen instances when we are told that Lise's lips are parted, and in a novel of only 107 pages, that means, on average, she is parting her lips once every ten pages. Furthermore, this parting of the lips occurs in one "whose lips are usually pressed together with the daily disapprovals of the accountants' office where she has worked continually, except for the months of illness, since she was eighteen, that is to say, for sixteen years and some months" (Spark 9). Elsewhere, the narrator informs us "her lips are a straight line" (18); they are linked to textuality and silence, both the line of text and its erasure or inability to stand for something. Her lips provide both a word or statement's emphasis and its erasure. When Lise's colleagues insist that she take a holiday, she looks at them "one by one, with her lips straight as a line which could cancel them all out completely" (10).

The fact that this trope of the parted lips appears three times at the very opening of the novel would indicate that we are to make something of this—that it is significant (though of what we are never told). Spark is drawing attention to Lise's parted lips. It is not usual behavior for Lise: we are told that her lips are usually closed. She parts them, as if she is about to speak, but thinks better of it. From the unknown title and contents of the book Lise carries to the unspoken thoughts of all the novel's characters, unspeakability is expressed not only though the novel's form but also its content. Unspeakability becomes, in other words, a recognizable trope throughout the novel. But rather than being a lack, this unspeakability is a kind of plenitude. An example of this plenitude is found when Mrs. Fiedke asks how Lise will know this man, her "type": "Will you feel a presence? Is that how you'll know?" she asks. "'Not really a presence,' Lise says. 'The lack of an absence, that's what it is'" (71). That, for Lise at least, there can be a distinction between "presence" and "lack of absence" is exemplary of that unspeakability. But what form is that unspeakability taking on here? How does it conjure and connect with the erotic?

If Irigaray's touching lips create a self-sufficient libidinal economy, Lise's parted lips would seem to suggest something approaching the opposite, what I am calling erotic sociality. Lise's parted lips convey not merely unspeakability, but are also, importantly, a sign

to the other, a gesture of what Bataille calls continuity, that erasure of the self that occurs not only through pleasure but also through pain. Lise's parted lips would seem to signify, in other words, a form of erotic comportment. They are a signifier of that compulsion toward the other that grounds sociality within an "originary ontological promiscuity" (*The Body* 192). This erotic sociality is constituted by a space devoid of language, lacking expression not because we have yet to find the methods with which to express it, but because its inexpressibility is what remains when language meets a limit, or when the body collides with its material inescapability. Furthermore, and crucial for this reading of Spark's novel, a certain anonymity is required for this inexpressibility to reveal itself —what Haver calls "the priority of a rendering oneself vulnerable to the risk of the stranger over any structure of intersubjective recognition in the quite literal multiplicity of 'the body'" (*The Body* xiv), a priority that is the grounding for any sociality, any ethico-political being, whatsoever.

How else are we to understand Lise's claim to Richard that young women are murdered because "'they look for it'" (Spark 104)? Perhaps Spark left enough clues in the form of her "post-modern poesis" (McQuillan 11) to read it as a ridiculous satire? How else to read the novel but as a satirical comment on what Spark calls—in an essay written the same year as *The Driver's Seat*—the "desegregation of art"? In that essay, Spark advocates "the arts of satire and of ridicule. And I see no other living art form for the future. Ridicule is the only honourable weapon we have left" (qtd. in McQuillan 13). Furthermore, she argues that, "we should all be conditioned and educated to regard violence in any form as something to be ruthlessly mocked" (13). The novel does, after all, violently parody both the girl-seeks-boy holiday romance and the Whodunnit thriller. Its style is arch and disengaged, and the world it presents "is filled with creatures whose mindlessness is just short of Lise's disaster" (Richmond 117). If it is "a study, in a way, of self-destruction," as Spark herself has remarked (qtd. in Richmond 111), then Lise's is not the only self that destructs. Rather, it is the impossible multiplicity of the social body itself that disintegrates or dislocates at that moment when full continuity and full discontinuity, both life and death, unite in the pleasurable and murderous erasure of the self.

## Determining the Queerness of the Text

In this respect, we can see *The Driver's Seat* as exemplifying Leo Bersani's notion of the queer as something anti-social, or against the social, or as something that is, as Lee Edelman has suggested, opposed to futurity. If, as David M. Halperin claims, "'queer' does

not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object," but is "an identity without an essence," then Spark's novel is indeed queer, and its refusal to traffic in commonsense notions of character psychology is a major factor in determining the text's queerness (62). Spark refuses, or challenges, what constitutes a sense of self: "The self is a new strategic possibility, finally, not because it is the seat of our personality but because it is *the point of entry of the personal into history*, because it is the place where the personal encounters its own history—both past and future" (106).

When Lise meets Bill at his hotel in the late evening, before finding Richard, Bill tells her: "I was nearly giving you up. . . I was just about to go out and look for another girl. I'm queer for girls. It has to be a girl" (92). How else are we to understand, as queer, a man's heterosexual desire? To be "queer for girls" is an oxymoron that renders the notion of a normal self problematic. Likewise, Mrs. Fiedke's comment, "Look at the noise" (56) queers the senses, queers sense, and queers logic beyond recognition. These examples make "strange, queer or even cruel what we had thought to be the world;" this queer experience forces thought to "confront its own essential, and enabling, insufficiency" (*Queer 291*). The novel could be said to scramble meaning and refuse easy interpretation by disrupting both identity and representation. It disturbs our understanding of the modern subject by suggesting that we need to account for the queer interplay of pain and pleasure, death and the social, in order to have a fuller understanding of what is at stake in talking about the socio-political or ethical subject. For there is, ultimately, no one, no self, that could be said to be in the driver's seat.

## Note

1. Lise writes "Papa" and "Olga" on the packages she buys, names that are either, in the first case, too generic to carry much meaning or, in the second, do not name any character in the novel (Spark 85). Writing, in this instance, has ceased to offer meaning. Furthermore, she writes in lipstick, drawing a connection between speech and writing that scrambles meaning, drawing attention once again to her parted lips. If those names are significant—if they signify at all— within the novel we are not privy to that meaning. Writing with lipstick, with something aimed at drawing attention to the lips, brings together speech and writing, overlays the two concepts without suggesting how meaning might be carried by the signifiers *Papa* and *Olga*.

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