



Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark: Freedom and Constraint in *The Bell* and *Robinson*

Michael Giffin

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While it is no longer fashionable to speak of a secular canon, or of a great tradition, it is still possible to notice a progression of literary genres in neoclassicism, romanticism, realism, naturalism, modernism, post-modernism, and now post-postmodernism, which combine to form what some regard as a series of continuities and others regard as a series of discontinuities. It is also noticeable that these continuities or discontinuities revolve around the nature of our being, and the world our being inhabits, with particular reference to our freedom and our constraint. What is unique about these literary genres is the way they either represent or critique classical metaphysics, and, unique to classical metaphysics is an influential model of mind inherited from ancient Greece. Some critics call this the literature of the Enlightenment and the post-Enlightenment; others call it the literature that critiques reason as a verifying calculus; others call it the literature that explores the human condition and its existential dilemma. Regardless of what we call it, this is the literature that explores the ways in which the western mind has traditionally understood self, world, and other.

Murdoch and Spark are often compared but while they are similar they critique classical metaphysics from different perspectives and for different purposes. Murdoch is a philosophical author who treats classical metaphysics as a canon of influential myth while Spark is a theological author whose Catholicism, as Michael Giffin argues, has always given her an ideological and aesthetic edge over Murdoch. Through a reading of "The Bell" (1958) and "Robinson" (1958), both published in the same year, this article describes the ways in which the young Murdoch and the young Spark did what emerging literary authors of the 1950s were expected to do: Frame the human condition and reflect on its existential dilemma. With their different perspectives they both wrote within the same paradigm, and they made use of similar tropes. Against symbolic backgrounds, and among significant dialogues, they critiqued classical metaphysics; however, they arrived at opposite positions on the relationship between imagination and reality, between reason and feeling, and ultimately, between freedom and constraint (15,600 words).

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