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**Enacting Hallucinatory Experience in Fiction: Metalepsis, Agency, and the  
Phenomenology of Reading in Muriel Spark's *The Comforters***

“[T]he mechanics of the hallucinations are well managed” – so said Evelyn Waugh in his reply to Alan Barnsely, Spark's literary agent, upon reading proofs of *The Comforters* prior to its publication in 1957 (qtd. in Spark, *CV* 207). The comment is intriguing, particularly in light of the fact that Waugh, like Spark, had suffered from hallucinations which led him to write a novel on the same subject, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, published in the same year. Yet Waugh's novel – certainly not one of his most celebrated – engages with the issue in a very different fashion to Spark's. There are no metafictional “mechanics” brought into play, and instead the book reads rather like a slow-paced thriller in which it eventually becomes apparent that the only logical explanation for the “ordeal” is that the Pinfold is hallucinating. Not so in *The Comforters*, in which the protagonist, Caroline, hears the voice of the narrator telling the very story in which she is a character. This metaleptic intrusion into a character's consciousness, quite apart from its attendant metafictional implications, appears to have captured something of the phenomenological quality of auditory verbal hallucinations (AVHs) which *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* did not, and Waugh himself admitted that he was “struck by how much more ambitious was Miss Spark's essay, and how much better she had accomplished it” (E. Waugh).<sup>1</sup> This seems, indeed, to have been a part of Spark's aim, for although she states in her autobiography *Curriculum Vitae* that she intended to write a novel about her experience of hallucinations – which, unlike Waugh's, were visual rather than auditory (Spark, *CV* 206) – within the novel itself she has Caroline feel “a suffocating sense that she might never communicate the reality of what she had heard” directly after she has ‘explained her distress’ in straightforward terms (Spark, *TC* 55).

Previous criticism on *The Comforters* has tended to focus heavily on what might be called the novel's metafictional elements. On the one hand, critics such as McQuillan have argued that the novel's metafictional play allows for a “redistribution of novelistic possibilities”, which functions with “a view to bringing the reader to an awareness of their own ‘construction’” (McQuillan 10,12; see also P. Waugh, 18-19). On the other hand, some critics have focused less on what these metafictional elements entail and more on the dynamics of the “curious, uncanny, ‘battle’ between [the] author and her fictional creation,

the character, for control of the novel” (Nicol 112). Questions of free will, autonomy and control are, as Stevenson points out, “central issues” in *The Comforters* (99), as they are in several of Spark’s other novels, and in this regard the novel has an interesting relationship with James Hogg’s *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. As Herman has noted, Hogg’s novel had a formative influence on Spark’s writing, and indeed *Confessions* and *The Comforters* share certain similarities. Above all, both novels feature protagonists who may or may not be hallucinating, and in both it is unclear whether these protagonists have the capacity for genuine autonomy. In many respects, therefore, *The Comforters* is a novel about control, agency and autonomy, as much as it is a novel “about” fictionality.

Yet *The Comforters* can also be read as a novel “about” hallucinations. As Evelyn Waugh observes in his 1957 review, the novel attempts “to combine two distinct themes, each with its own leading character. The first theme is the mechanics of story-telling, the second a case-history of insanity” (E. Waugh). Since the former of these two themes has already been thoroughly researched, I engage instead with the latter, exploring how Spark uses the creative space which fiction provides to model a form of hallucinatory experience in a fashion that conveys aspects of that experience to the reader. Therefore, rather than viewing Caroline’s hallucinations as being primarily representative of something else, or as providing a sort of vehicle for introducing the novel’s metafictional play, I view hallucinatory experience itself as the object of representation. In this light the novel’s metafictional elements function as part of that representation, simultaneously eliciting a specific type of readerly response which mimics the experientiality of AVHs while also signifying the destabilization of Caroline’s sense of self which results from her hallucinations.

The present article therefore examines *The Comforters* in the context of voice-hearing, in part as a way of exploring how Spark attempts to communicate the phenomenological “reality” of abnormal psychological experience, and in part as a way of engaging with Spark’s ideas surrounding thought, agency and the self which she expounds in relation to auditory verbal hallucinations. In the first section I draw on research in cognitive literary studies and audionarratology in order to show how Spark’s novel plays with discourse conventions in a way that lends the representation of Caroline’s hallucinations a distinctive phenomenology, thus evoking several of the experiential aspects of AVHs. In this regard, rather than attempting to put forward a model of normative reading experiences, I am examining how those norms are subverted by Spark’s use of experimental metafictional techniques. Furthermore, I suggest that the necessity of using such techniques to create a

feeling of phenomenological difference seems to point to a pre-existent similarity between the experiences of reading and voice-hearing.

The second section then examines how the metafictional devices which Spark uses to convey the experientiality of AVHs also serve to represent the psychological effects of hallucinatory experience on the experiencing subject. Basing my approach in recent insights from psychology and philosophy of mind, I examine how the novel suggests that hallucinations undermine Caroline's sense of self by compromising her sense of agency, and how Spark thus uses the context of AVHs to explore the relationship between the capacity to perform agentic or self-directed action and the sense of having a real and persistent identity. It is worth noting that here I deal primarily with the "higher-order" cognitive concepts of agency and self, such as the "sense of oneself as an agent apart from any particular action" (Pacherie, "Sense of Control"), rather than the pre-reflective, embodied experiences which inform the development of such concepts over time. Although, as Malafouris points out, the subject's "*conscious agency judgement*" might not be identical with the "proper origin" of an action (26), such judgements are still important heuristics which we use constantly to navigate our environment. Hallucinations, I argue, undermine these heuristics in a manner which suggests that while we might be able to theoretically dismiss concepts such as self-world dualism and the sense of the self-as-agent, it is another thing altogether to have these concepts radically destabilized by lived experience.

### **Reading the Voice: The Phenomenology of Hallucinatory Experience**

While *The Comforters* does have an ostensive "plot" – a somewhat trite and overly coincidental narrative about a diamond-smuggling grandmother and her family's attempts to interfere in her affairs – in many respects it serves only as a kind of self-consciously fictional backdrop for the far more unusual, and hence more interesting, experiences of the young literary critic Caroline Rose. At approximately a quarter of the way through the novel, Caroline begins to hear the clicking of a disembodied typewriter, followed by a chorus of voices narrating her actions after she has performed them (as a result, the reader encounters certain sentences and paragraphs twice: first as narration, and then as the sounds which Caroline hears in the storyworld). To Caroline's distress the voices quickly prove themselves able to access her thoughts as well as her actions, and eventually Caroline becomes

convinced that they are in fact from one person, ““a writer on another plane of existence”” (64) writing a story about the characters in the novel. The voice confirms this, and Caroline subsequently attempts to prove her independence by thwarting one of its proleptic assertions regarding her future actions. When the attempt fails Caroline even becomes able to ‘overhear’ portions of the text which relate to characters distant from her in space and time, which appears to impede the narrator’s ability to narrate the story. Finally, once the diamond smuggling plot has been resolved, Caroline decides to write a novel about ““Characters in a novel”” (213), and the novel ends with the implication that another of the characters, Laurence Manders, has read “the book” and discovered within it a facsimile of a letter which he wrote and promptly destroyed. The exact dimensions of Caroline’s experiences in *The Comforters* are thus difficult to establish, primarily because the set of “rules” governing the relationship between the novel and the fictional world it creates are subject to numerous changes. Yet rather than attempt to explain the novel’s disparate and contradictory elements according to the logic of the storyworld, this section instead draws on ideas from text world theory (and related frameworks for inquiry) to explore how such features contribute to an overall aesthetic effect which is representative of various aspects of hallucinatory experience.

According to text world theory, the act of reading involves at least two levels or “worlds” with which the reader is in some sense engaged: the discourse world, which Gavins defines as “the immediate situation surrounding one speaker or writer and one or more listeners or readers, participating in a joint language venture”; and the text world, or rather, “text worlds”, the “mental representations” created by the participants of the discourse world (19). Various “world-building elements”, constituted by “deictic and referential elements contained within the text”, cue construction of the basic features of the text world, while “function-advancing propositions”, which relate to “the actions, events or arguments involving the entities present in the text world” (20), serve to advance the plot. Furthermore, various types of “sub-world” can exist within the text world, including those initiated by the characters. Such sub-worlds can arise from “any shift in the tense in the main text world, as well as instances of Direct Speech” (21).

The language which constitutes the world-building elements and function-advancing propositions of the literary narrative text thus predominantly functions – or more precisely, is predominantly cognized by the reader – as a set of instructions guiding the imagination in the construction of a mental representation (i.e. the text world). While it is being read such language is unlikely to be at the center of the reader’s attention, or at least, its linguistic aspect is unlikely to be the object of conscious scrutiny. As Ingarden suggests,

During reading, we are usually absorbed in apprehending the objectivities portrayed in the work, which then seem to occupy the foreground of the concretization. The details of the semantic stratum [...] will then hardly be grasped for themselves because, in reading, one generally only passes through them to reach the portrayed objects. (91)

Similarly, Birkerts observes that “we generally don’t remember the language at all, unless it’s dialogue. For reading is a conversion, a turning of codes into contents” (87). The reason Birkerts makes an exception for dialogue appears to be that there is a distinction between the language which is cognized primarily as instructions for the construction of the text world (i.e. “code”), and the language which has existence *as language* within the text world, and is thus one of the “portrayed objects” (i.e. “content”). Language as content will thus primarily exist as an imagined entity, an “auditory imagery experience” (AIE) as Kurby et al. put it (457), in much the same way as any other kind of entity – a physical object, for instance – is also part of the imagined content of the mental representation of the text world. Therefore, direct thought and speech are predominantly content rather than code, and while language as content has the potential to provide further code for the building of sub-worlds, these sub-worlds tend to be regarded peripherally (if at all) while such language is being cognized as an auditory utterance in the primary text world.

Recent research in cognitive neuroscience and audionarratology has further served to emphasize the difference between language as code and language as content. The results of the lexical decision experiments of Abramson and Goldinger suggest that “acoustic representations activated in silent reading are best characterized as inner speech rather than abstract phonological codes” (1065). Moreover, research conducted by Yao et al. points to a distinction between how direct speech and indirect speech are experienced by the reader, since “silent reading of direct versus indirect speech engenders differential brain activation in voice-selective areas of the auditory cortex” (3146). This finding in turn “suggests that, even during silent reading of text, direct speech may be more likely to activate ‘audible speech’-like representations than indirect speech” – or, as they later put it, “mental simulations of voice” (3151). Such evidence suggests, at least preliminarily, that language as code and language as content are cognized differently, and are the focus of different kinds of readerly attention.

This research suggests how Spark’s use of metalepsis enables her to portray a voice that feels to the reader as if it does not “belong”, and which is perceived as an experience phenomenologically distinct from that of overhearing the discourse of other characters. That Spark considered this a necessary quality for the voice to possess is suggested by her

description of her own experience of (visual) hallucinations, in which she states that “as long as this sensation lasted, I knew they were hallucinations” (Spark, *CV* 204). According to Ratcliffe, such awareness is common amongst people who experience hallucinations, in that “[t]he hallucinated contents are somehow ‘not quite real’, ‘not fully present’, and therefore phenomenologically distinguishable from other ‘perceptions’”, thus exhibiting “a distinctive kind of intentionality” (105, 106). By having Caroline hear the narrative itself as a hallucination, Spark causes the reader to encounter certain stretches of narration twice, the first time as code, and the second time as content. While the two passages are, in most cases, linguistically identical, the text cues the reader to cognize the repetition as an auditory imagery experience by presenting it as a sound which Caroline hears, just as dialogue is also cued to be heard as content rather than code. Since the two passages are linguistically identical, their juxtaposition foregrounds the phenomenological difference associated with the two nonconscious modes of cognizing language in a way that normal instances of direct speech and thought do not. Of course, the reader may not be specifically aware of what has changed – i.e. that their intentional stance to the language has shifted – but they will nonetheless be aware that *something* has changed, and that this something is tied to the fact that the voice’s utterance possesses a felt quality that is phenomenologically distinct from the rest of the text. This strategy is notably different from Waugh’s presentation of Pinfold’s hallucinations, which are not depicted as distinct from any other dialogic exchanges in the novel and which subsequently do not elicit the sense of phenomenological strangeness which Spark attempts to evoke through verbal doubling in *The Comforters*.

Yet Spark also captures something of the intrusive and uncontrollable quality of voice-hearing in that the voice feels as if it does not belong in the text world. In its first iteration, the stretch of narration that is later repeated functions as code in that it constitutes Caroline’s being, directing the reader to construct the mental representation of Caroline and her thoughts and actions. Its reappearance as content, as something that Caroline herself experiences, is from the reader’s perspective paradoxical and impossible, and is therefore disturbingly intrusive. Since up until this point (approximately a quarter of the way through *The Comforters*), the novel has kept within the bounds of realism, the metaleptic intrusion of the voice is still more shocking to the reader in that it violates those expectations which the novel itself has already established. Indeed, it is likely that for those readers who first encountered *The Comforters* in 1957 this effect would have been even more pronounced, given that Spark was a new writer (and was yet to establish her distinctive oeuvre in which

such metafictional play is fairly commonplace), and that the novel was published before the advent of postmodernism proper.

Yet part of the brilliance of Spark's technique is that the voice's appearance *continues* to be intrusive to the reader. As Fludernik (via Culler) points out, "[i]f readers encounter initially odd, inexplicable elements, they will attempt to recuperate these items by taking recourse to available interpretative patterns", ultimately naturalizing such items "within a frame that re-familiarizes the initial oddity" (23). However, as noted above, the "rules" governing the nature of the passages which Caroline is able to overhear keep changing, so that while the voice initially confines itself to "remarking her own thoughts" (Spark *TC* 43) – quite literally "re-marking" them as opposed to remarking *on* them (and Spark's omission of the preposition here is telling) – it quickly begins to broaden its range, commenting on Caroline's mental states (45), the things which she has "*failed to register*" (47), her status as a fictional character (70), and even her future actions (95). As a result each occurrence of the voice disrupts the reader's interpretative frame, so that he or she must continuously apply different frames or schemas to the voice in order to make sense of its presence in a manner that is analogous to Caroline's varying attempts to make sense of her experience. Therefore, not only are readers forced to grapple with a phenomenon which violates the text-world they are immersed in, but their attempts to control it by naturalizing it comprehensively within a sensible schema or frame are continuously thwarted. The voice thus remains intrusive for the reader precisely because the rules governing its appearance remain unfixed – unlike, say, the voices in Waugh's novel, which remain disturbing for Pinfold but not for the reader, who is able to naturalize them without much difficulty by using the explanatory frame of AVHs to account for his experiences.

Yet the very fact that Spark needed to use such metafictional mechanics to achieve a mimesis of AVHs which was more 'successful' than Waugh's more straightforward approach is in itself indicative of an already-present isomorphism between the phenomenologies of reading and voice-hearing. As Stonebridge notes, "[I]terature [...], it is often claimed, is one place where you can hear the voices of others without actually going mad: in some ways it is the consciousness of this fact that makes fiction fiction" (453). However, since the phenomenology of reading is already so natural to us as readers that it passes unnoticed, it follows logically that defamiliarizing and experimental metafictional devices, such as Spark's use of metalepsis, have the potential to reacquaint us with the strangeness of this experience in a way that can imitate the experience of hearing voices.



It appears that Spark herself suggests this relationship between reading and voice-hearing within *The Comforters*. On the one hand, her reflections in *Curriculum Vitae* on why she tried to represent auditory rather than visual hallucinations – despite the fact that she herself had only experienced the latter – reveal a keen awareness of the dynamics of reading. She acknowledges, for instance, that “[f]rom the aspect of method, I could see that to create a character who suffered from verbal illusions on the printed page would be clumsy. So I made my main character ‘hear’ a typewriter with voices composing the novel itself” (Spark, *CV* 207). This comment suggests that Spark gave some thought to how readers encounter literary texts, and her use of metafiction in *The Comforters* – quite apart from producing the phenomenological effects already described – provided her with a means of examining certain aspects of the experience of reading in more detail.

On the other hand, Spark’s use of metalepsis means that Caroline not only hears a voice but also engages with a text – the very same text, in fact, with which the reader is also engaged. In this sense, Caroline is also another reader (or hearer, to be more precise), of the novel. Although at first she encounters the text a few moments after readers do, as time goes by she begins to ‘hear’ almost simultaneously with them – or rather, the narrator refers analeptically to which passages Caroline has or has not “‘picked up’” rather than embedding her experiences within a scene (146). Furthermore, she begins to comment on the text itself, for instance stating that she finds one passage in “‘Bad taste’” (146). In so doing, she places herself in a relationship to the text which is analogous to that enjoyed by the reader, since making aesthetic judgements of the text itself is an activity which is usually confined to discourse-world rather than text-world participants. Indeed, Spark’s particular choice of verb here – or rather, her avoidance of the verb “hear” in this instance – is also indicative of the analogy she is pursuing, that of Caroline as reader as well as voice-hearer.

As mentioned previously, Abramson and Goldinger’s experiments suggest that the “acoustic representations activated in silent reading are best characterized as inner speech rather than abstract phonological codes” (1059). This finding implies that, while reading, the reader’s capacity for inner speech is already in use in a way that precludes the simultaneous generation of self-authored inner speech. As Poulet describes it, the reader thus becomes “the prey of language. There is no escaping this take-over” (58). And in a sense it *is* a “take-over”, a “hijacking” of inner speech and, along with it, the reader’s capacity for introspective thought. Therefore while reading the reader is made to think thoughts that are not self-authored, so that his or her “‘mind is working under the pressure of someone else’s necessity, and under the suggestive power of some irresponsible writer’” (Spark, *TC* 107). Of course,

the reader can always restore a sense of being in control by simply shutting the book, but while engaged in the text world the exploration of that world, and what happens within it, the reader remains subject to the control of the author. In being absorbed in the text world and allowing their imagination to be guided by the code of the discourse world, readers are thus, in a sense, robbed of their capacity for agency. Like the reader Caroline is incapable of holding out “for what she wanted and what she didn’t want in the way of a plot” (109), even though normally in narrative fiction the author sustains the illusion that the characters, as participants in the text world, *do* have an influence on the plot. However, as a “reader” Caroline loses her capacity for agency, or rather, becomes aware of her incapacity for agency.

Because of the metaphorical connection which the novel establishes between reading and voice-hearing, Caroline’s loss of a sense of agency as a reader thus also suggests that a loss of a sense of agency is attendant upon the experience of hearing voices. Indeed, as discussed in the next section, Caroline’s growing sense of distress upon hearing the voice narrating her thoughts is in part tied to her awareness that such an occurrence also implies that her thoughts might not be her own – or, rather, that they are beyond her control. Therefore, one similarity between reading and voice-hearing which *The Comforters* suggests is that in both types of experience one “hears” the words of another which are not self-authored, yet which are nonetheless self-generated (regardless of the fact that they might not necessarily *feel* self-generated). Furthermore, the presence of this “Other” who features in both types of experience and who is simultaneously a part of and yet distinct from the self, might well produce the feeling of the self being “split” – although how this feeling will be interpreted and emotionally experienced will depend heavily on context (since the activity of reading establishes a context in which such a split is to be expected).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, during reading, as Poulet observes, this splitting of self results from the feeling that “this *thought* which is alien to me and yet in me, must also have in me a *subject* which is alien to me. It all happens, then, as though reading were the act by which a thought managed to bestow itself within me with a subject not myself” (60). Yet since this “schizoid distinction” ultimately delivers the reader from “egocentricity” (63, 67), Poulet implies that it is an effect to be desired. The all-important difference between reading and voice-hearing, however, is that the reader at some point makes the conscious decision to “deliver” themselves, “bound hand and foot, to the omnipotence of fiction” (58), and can ultimately designate the novel itself as the source of this alien subject. As I go on to discuss in the next section, Spark’s novel explores how and why this splitting of self which results from the experience of hearing voices can produce distress outside the context of reading.

Since the reader is still peripherally or at least marginally aware of the text's existence, the experiences of reading and voice-hearing remain phenomenologically distinct. Yet it is their underlying similarity which posed such a challenge to Spark's attempt to convey the experientiality of AVHs, since the activity of reading is already imitative of voice-hearing in a way which is so familiar to us that it passes unnoticed. Her use of metalepsis thus serves to defamiliarize the reader from the usual experience of reading – in a manner that can be interpreted, in turn, as an attempt to convey the phenomenology of AVHs. However, the way in which Spark uses metafictional play in order to represent (or enact) hallucinatory experience also has further implications regarding how such experiences affect the experiencing subject. For while the metaleptic intrusions of the narrative voice perhaps make Caroline seem a more overtly *fictional* character than fictional characters tend to be, the novel still nonetheless cues the reader to construct Caroline as an individual feeling and experiencing certain mental states. In the following section I thus examine how Spark uses a specific form of metafictional play in order to model Caroline's experience of AVHs, and explore how Spark's techniques reflect her sophisticated understanding of the relationship between agency and the individual's sense of self.

### **Voices, Agency, and the Sense of Self**

“‘But this is intolerable.’ ‘Doesn't it depend on how you take it?’” (Spark, *TC* 63). This exchange, between Caroline and her spiritual mentor Father Jerome, occurs at a major turning point in the novel, since it is here that Caroline “realizes” that she is hearing the narrative of “‘a writer on another plane of existence’” (64). Caroline's interpretation is, of course, one way of “taking it”, and the content of the voice's utterances changes accordingly, announcing the fictitiousness of all of the characters when it next appears. Yet perhaps more significantly, Father Jerome's response suggests that what is primarily important is not the experience itself, but rather what it signifies to the experiencer, i.e. Caroline. In turn, what is distressing about Caroline's experience – what makes it intolerable to her – is not just the content of her hallucinations but what their occurrence suggests to her, and the way in which the fact of their presence troubles the foundations of her sense of self. Spark thus uses the framework of AVHs to explore those foundations, and in this regard the particular content of Caroline's hallucinations, although not falling within the bounds of realism *per se*, can be viewed as part

of Spark's overall attempt to articulate her views on real-world selves and their relationship to questions of agency. Therefore, while in one sense Spark's portrayal of AVHs is perhaps not realistically representative of the actual experience of voice-hearing, in another sense it serves to represent the potential effects of such an experience on the individual.

When she decides that the voices she hears are the utterances of an "irresponsible writer" from another dimension (107), what appears to trouble Caroline above all – and what she protests against most strongly – is the possibility that she is *being narrated*, and that not only are her "thoughts and actions [being] controlled by some unknown, possibly sinister being" (108), but that her own existence is open to question. The one appears to imply the other, for it is only after she has interpreted the voices as the transdimensional utterances of an author writing about her life that she hears the narrator claim that "the characters in this novel are all fictitious, and do not refer to any living persons whatsoever" (70). Her subsequent attempt to thwart the voice's proleptic assertion that she and Laurence are to travel by car to Smuggler's Retreat is thus a fairly logical attempt to prove her own existence: if she can act contrary to the narrator's story, she cannot be a fictional character in his work. Of course, when her attempt fails she begins to cast about for other ways of proving her own existence, claiming, for instance, that "this physical pain convinces me that I'm not a wholly fictional character. I have independent life" (168). Yet even here she is conceding that she feels herself not to be a wholly "real" person either, and evidently her inability to exercise free will has led her to doubt her ontological purchase as an actual being in the world. While she might be convinced that she has the capacity to experience sensations, this capacity is not in itself enough to convince her that she is wholly "real", since it is evident that the ability to perform conscious acts – an ability which she feels divested of because of the controlling power of the narrator – constitutes an intrinsic part of her sense of self, or, to be more precise, her sense of being a self. The particular dynamics of Caroline's delusion and the metafictional quandaries it raises thus allow Spark to explore exactly why the senses of self and agency are connected in this fashion.

Aside from creating situations which directly challenge Caroline's capacity for agency, the conceit of the author narrating a character into existence is also suggestive of why the capacity for agency is essential to the internal construction of the sense of self. As Pacherie observes:

What we do tells us, and others, a lot about who we are. On the one hand, who we are determines what we do. On the other hand, acting is also a process of self-discovery and self-shaping. Pivotal to this

mutual shaping of self and agency is the sense of agency, or agentic self-awareness, that is, the sense that one is the agent of an action. (“Self-Agency” 442)

On becoming aware of the narrative voice, however, Caroline can no longer be sure whether her actions have their point of origin in her self, or whether they are dictated to her in order that they might fit with the narrator’s “slick plot” (107). While this does not mean that she feels as if her actions are not her own (as is the case in certain delusions such as alien hand syndrome), it does mean that she cannot partake in the bi-directional process of self-discovery and self-shaping because she cannot know whether her “mind is working under the pressure of someone else’s necessity” (107), which, as a result of her delusion, is how she begins to view the minds of others. While usually “[a]gents are seen as first causes or uncaused causes, origins of actions to which authorship can be ascribed” (Wegner and Sparrow, 1202), Caroline’s belief in the power of the transdimensional author means that she cannot trust that she is really the first, uncaused cause of her own actions. For this reason, her actions can no longer serve as reliable indications of the network of beliefs, desires and goals which is essential to her sense of who she is.

Yet Spark’s representation of Caroline’s initial experience of hearing the voice is also indicative of the connection between self and agency, in that it shows how hallucinations disrupt and problematize that connection. Above all, Caroline fears that the voices are “hallucinations sent forth from her own mind” (42), and thus tellingly locates the distinction between sanity and madness in the sphere of action by deciding that it is a question of whether she is “being haunted” or “haunting herself” (45). As Wegner observes, the self is “the picture of a virtual agent, a mind that is apparently guiding the action”, and this picture is a construction based on an accumulation of “causal inferences about how our minds seem to be involved in producing our behaviours” (30). Caroline, however, is faced with the possibility that ‘her own mind’ is producing behaviors over which she has no control, and this opens up the further possibility that what she considers as her self is actually “split”. Indeed, even in thinking about her own mind as a result of her experiences she necessarily conceptualizes her mind as being somehow distinct from herself, as one of her self’s properties or constituent parts rather than actually *being* the self itself. Her delusion, by attributing the voice’s utterances to an external agent, can thus be seen as an attempt to resist the splitting or bifurcation of self which would be suggested by the presence of another internal agent.

In locating her sanity along the axis of agency, Caroline also displays a hyper-awareness of her own impact on the world around her. Because she fears that without her

conscious control her mind has projected sounds into her environment, she also begins to fear any unintentional changes to her environment which her body produces. After accidentally knocking over a glass dish, she subsequently feels a need “[t]o protect herself from the noises of her movements” (37), since such unintentional noises further serve to exacerbate her sense of being unable to control her effects on her environment. As she escapes the flat she therefore attempts to reassert this sense of control by performing intentional acts which produce noise:

Coat – hat – handbag – suitcase; Caroline grabbed them and hustled out of the door, *slamming* it to. She rattled downstairs and out of the front door, which she *slammed* behind her. At the top of Queen’s Gate, turning in from Old Brompton Road, she got a taxi and secured herself inside it with a *slam* of the door. (38, my italics)

By slamming every door between herself and her flat, Caroline repeats her actions in a way that forcefully demonstrates her ability to create deliberate aural change in her environment. As a result, she feels she has “secured herself”, just as she felt a need to “protect herself” from creating unintentional changes to her environment. The use of such verbs in this context implies not only that Caroline feels herself to be under threat, but also that she feels able to alleviate this threat through action, by re-establishing her sense of being in control of how she affects the world around her. Furthermore, by deliberately affecting her environment in this way she also attempts to re-establish what Russell terms the “‘theoretical’ notion” of self-world dualism, which is “an awareness of one’s place in the physical universe as at once an object within it and an experiencer of it” (72). While Russell argues that the experience of agency is necessary for the development of the conception of self-world dualism, it would also appear that the notion of self-world dualism is necessary for the “higher-order” conception of ourselves as agents. If, as Malafouris suggests, agency is in reality the “emergent product of material engagement” which “constantly violates and transgresses the physical boundaries of the elements that constitute it” (34, 35), both future action-planning and retrospective action-recognition (outside of the immediate embodied action) require us to have a conception of ourselves as being distinct from our environment. However, Caroline’s hallucinatory experiences undermine her conceptual notion of self-world dualism because they demonstrate that the mind has the capacity to produce sensations which feel as if they have come from the world “outside”, thus destabilizing the boundary between self and world. In this regard, Caroline’s repetitive actions can be seen as part of an attempt to preserve her notion of self-world dualism by reinforcing her sense of being an agent deliberately altering her environment. Her delusion of the transdimensional author can also be understood as

performing a similar function, for in attributing the voices she hears to an external agent she is able to retain her sense of self-world dualism and her sense of the controlling self. Ironically, of course, this delusion eventually undermines her sense of ontological being altogether, since she feels divested of her capacity for genuine agency.

On several levels, therefore, *The Comforters* suggests that hallucinatory experiences cast the sense of self into doubt because their presence troubles the conceptual foundations upon which the sense of self resides. In particular, the novel shows how Caroline's sense of agency is compromised by her AVHs, since their presence implies that her mind is capable of acting outside of her conscious control. This implication arises from the fact that the presence of the voice not only suggests the presence of another internal agent – thus producing the sense of the self being split – but also demonstrates to the experiencing subject that the mind takes an active part in constructing the “external” world, thus radically destabilizing the “theoretical” notion of self-world dualism which agency reciprocally reinforces and relies upon. While Caroline attempts to avoid countenancing these possibilities by attributing the voice to an external agent (the transdimensional author), this interpretation ultimately leads her to doubt her capacity for agency altogether, and subsequently her sense of being an ontologically real entity. Through Caroline's “delusion” of being a fictional character Spark is thus able to explore exactly why self and agency are connected in this fashion, showing how the performance of agentive, self-directed action informs the sense of possessing and inhabiting a persistent identity with a set of beliefs, desires and goals. Therefore, while the specifics of Caroline's hallucinatory experiences are not typical of AVHs in general, Spark's portrayal of those experiences supports the emerging hypothesis that part of what is distressing about hallucinatory experiences is that their presence destabilizes the foundational assumptions upon which the sense of agency – and selfhood – are based.

The experimental metafictional devices which feature in *The Comforters* can thus be viewed as carrying out two distinct yet integrated functions. On the one hand such devices convey the experientiality of AVHs by evoking certain types of readerly response. The metaleptic intrusion of the narrative voice into the text world serves to imitate the disturbing, reality-altering quality of hallucinatory experiences, while the different intentional aspect which is common to such experiences is mimicked by the phenomenological difference attendant on the repetition of ‘code’ passages as identical ‘content’ passages. Furthermore, the novel's

metafictional play works to defamiliarize the reader from those already familiar and thus unnoticed aspects of the phenomenology of reading which are akin to the phenomenology AVHs, such as the sense of the split self and the loss of agency.

On the other hand, the dynamics of the relationship which Spark creates between Caroline and the narrative voice are also representative of how hallucinatory experience affects the experiencing subject. By toying with conventions regarding the autonomy and ontology of fictional characters, Spark shows how AVHs have the potential to destabilize one's sense of self by damaging some of the foundations upon which the self is based. In particular, their occurrence implies that the mind is capable of acting independently of the controlling self, thus threatening the agentive nexus which is shown throughout the novel to be crucial to the construction and maintenance of the sense of self.

In this way Spark attempts to allow the reader to inhabit Caroline's hallucinatory experiences through their interaction with the structure or "format" of the narrative, as well as through the kind of empathetic identification which readers normally feel for characters. However, rather than being the kind of emotional engagement with experiences of suffering which Spark disparages in "The Desegregation of Art", this is a form of empathy which is designed to be distinctly troubling. For even as the novel plays with the reader, self-consciously demonstrating that the reader's mind is also "under the suggestive power of some irresponsible writer" (107), it also seeks to emphasize that the foundations that underlie the senses of self and agency are not as reassuringly stable as we might otherwise think them to be.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of the phenomenology of AVHs, see: Angela Woods et al. "Experiences of Hearing Voices: Analysis of a Novel Phenomenological Survey." *The Lancet Psychiatry* 2.4 (2015): 323-331. Web. 3 Nov. 2015.

<sup>2</sup> The remark by Stonebridge quoted above suggests that reading establishes a context in which we expect to hear the voices of others, and that it is our consciousness of this context which prevents the experience from being disturbing.



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